

## Unfinished business

When I started my PhD, my advisor told me in hushed, conspiratorial terms that one of the things I would need to do to be successful would be to tap into what he described as a network of ‘underground literature’, papers on topics that were still in formation, but which contained the latest and most exciting ideas in economic geography and cognate fields. I interpreted this as some kind of challenge or initiation process, a code that it was important to crack if one truly wanted to undertake worthwhile research and obtain my doctorate. Unfortunately, my advisor didn’t really give me many clues as to how I should tap into such networks. Nor, having told me about this literature, do I ever remember him passing anything my way that might qualify, which made me suspect that gaining access to such sources was an aspiration for him too.

That a network of underground literature existed at the time I have no doubt; the circulation of ideas in quasi-samizdat form has been regularly described by historians of academic disciplines, including economic geography (Barnes, 1996), and can be pivotal in formenting new intellectual movements and transformational research programmes. Perhaps I was just at the wrong end of the network, or insufficiently confident to barge my way in, but during my doctoral research I searched in vain for anything that might have been part of this underground corpus. Over time, and as I came into contact with people working in similar areas, I’d get the occasional paper sent to me by authors for comments or who merely thought I might be interested. Sometimes I got the sense of buzz around a set of papers, but they didn’t actually seem that difficult to track down. Now, in a world of social media, electronic repositories and other platforms, it’s even easier to find most things with a few mouse clicks so the idea of a hard-to-access underground literature is difficult to imagine within the contemporary academic world.

Yet, as the editor of this journal once remarked in the preface to a talk at the 2016 AAG (Peck and Barnes, 2016), just as musical taste appears to get locked down in one’s early 20s, so the theories, concepts and ideas that graduate students absorb during their formative years of study and training tend to stick with them. Therefore, it was with considerable interest that some 30 years later I got the distinct sense of an underground project in process that some other people certainly seemed to be aware of, but which for me seemed inaccessible and just out of reach. This was the research project undertaken by Al James and his colleagues reported in this Exchanges debate (James, et al, 2018a; 2018b).

My initiation to this research was courtesy of an economic geography colleague who told me excitedly that there were as many as 50 economic geographers working in business and

management (B&M) schools – which we now know to have been an underestimation – a hidden migration that us poor saps working diligently away in geography had failed to notice. Yes, we knew of the odd case here and there, but were unaware of the true scale of the shift. As would soon become clear, the excitement expressed by my informant contained no little self-interest and an eye for an opportunity; shortly afterwards they too joined the exodus to B&M in return for a salary that was well in excess of what they were earning in geography. But even when I learned the provenance of the research, I still failed to get access to it and seemed to be absent at all the occasions at conferences and other meetings when the provisional findings were presented and discussed.

However, as the work developed, I eventually became directly enrolled, as I was one of the interview subjects recruited by the research team. Despite my interest, my initial response was cool and measured, even as the numbers moving to B&M rose towards 100. My view was that it was probably good that economic geographers were in demand, that they would help the sub-discipline travel further, and that economic geography would co-mingle with ideas within B&M, which is itself something of a hybrid discipline.

In retrospect, my relaxed attitude to the migration was no doubt also influenced by being located in what James et al (2018a; 2018b) reveal to be one of just five UK geography departments with a critical mass of economic geographers. Since the 1990s Nottingham has built a cluster of economic geographers that, until recently at least, has remained pretty stable, managed to attract large numbers of undergraduates to our modules and has maintained an active postgraduate research community, although recruitment has become more difficult in a more constrained funding environment. When a senior economic geography colleague left about four years ago, we were able to attract a stellar field of applicants for an entry-level economic geography job, from whom I would have been delighted to have appointed at least four candidates if funds had allowed.

My ambivalent attitude to the movement of colleagues to B&M was also influenced by my long collaborative history with colleagues in Nottingham University Business School (NUBS), which began as soon as I joined the university in 1999. I have been responsible for running a joint undergraduate degree programme, collaborated on various funded research projects, and served as Deputy Director of NUBS' Financial Services Research Forum, and was even appointed as Associate Faculty in order to qualify for funding schemes available only to academics based in departments of economics and business. More recently, in my (50%) role as Associate Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange in the Faculty of Social Sciences I have worked with the Business School in developing their Research Excellence Framework (REF) outputs profile and impact case studies. In all this time no-one has ever encouraged me to cross the floor, so to speak. Of course, this lack of interest may reveal more about me and my research interests, and my perceived academic transfer

value; indeed, the one approach I did get from a leading business school began with a casual request to send through a CV after which I heard only a resolute silence. But it is important to note that not all B&M schools have divisions into which economic geographers can be easily located, so while there is a demand it is not unlimited or universal.

However, over time, and in part from now having read the full report and its summary, I am certainly less sanguine than I was, for many of the reasons outlined. Despite Nottingham being a hold out for economic geography, our most recent round of recruitment proved problematic. After an open competition across the discipline as a whole, we made an offer to an outstanding economic geography candidate. But such is the value of economic geographers that their employer immediately made a counter offer which ended their interest in us. At the time of writing we are re-advertising in another open, discipline-wide competition. The economic geographers are hopeful, but this is a more difficult recruitment market than it was even five years ago. In addition to the new opportunities afforded by B&M, there may also be a pipeline problem with the supply of early-career economic geographers, as is suggested in the reports. This then exacerbates the problems of recruitment in open positions. The reason why UK geography departments choose to advertise through broadly open positions is not hard to fathom. The influence of the REF means that, other things being equal, units of assessment will seek the best prospects for REF if they can be accommodated within its research groups and provide appropriate teaching for both undergraduate and graduate students. If the supply of economic geographers is thinning, then perhaps it is no surprise that departments are stocking up in other areas.

Another reason for me being less ambivalent about the diaspora than previously is the seemingly unstoppable, unfinished momentum of business schools, which are financially critical to the revenue base of most UK universities. The problems that many business schools face is controlling growth, not generating it. The global appetite for a business education seems insatiable. The precarious financial position of many UK universities would be much worse if it were not for the flows of cash that pass through the accounts of business schools before being redistributed to other parts of the organization, particularly as central government funding has been withdrawn. Those that work in business schools are all too aware of their pivotal financial role within their universities, which is why they have managed to negotiate higher levels of remuneration than colleagues elsewhere, as well as perquisites unknown to other academics (such as the very generous overseas conference budgets). And here we must acknowledge that economic geography is not the only discipline being denuded by the force of attraction that is the modern business school: economists, educationalists, sociologists, and even engineers are increasingly being brought within its gravitational orbit.

So, what to do? Short of universities acting on Martin Parker's impassioned injunction to *Shut Down the Business School* (2018) – which, for the avoidance of any doubt, I can assure you UK universities will not be acting upon – then economic geographers need a few strategies to keep the sub-discipline going. The suggestions forwarded by Al James and his colleagues are useful, and worthy of further debate and consideration. The proposition that a network be founded on the five remaining clusters of economic geography – but crucially, not limited to them – is worth exploring. Of course, raising the funds needed to support such a venture will not be easy, even in these core departments: special pleading tends to fall on deaf ears among university leaders of all stripes, so a convincing case will need to be made. Perhaps one opportunity is to draw attention to the ways in which the UK's Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund white paper (HM Government, 2017) has recognised the importance of uneven development and the role of economic geography in the competitiveness of the wider economy through its Strength in Places Initiative. This is a funding competition for big stakes, with equally large awards, and will involve all kinds of awkward political compromises; universities will have to act as partners with external organisations who will lead the bids. Moreover, economic geographers will necessarily have to work with academics from a wide range of backgrounds who have successfully delivered the requisite knowledge co-production in various technical and technological fields. But at least here economic geographers have a repository of knowledge that is valuable and crucial: we do know something about place and uneven development. If we are not once more to be crowded out of our own field by academics from other disciplines, then we need to demonstrate critical mass and a capacity to draw on the skills and expertise from the wider economic geography sub-discipline that demonstrates why the geography of economies matters. Surely no geography Head of Department would be so short-sighted as to turn down a request for funds to build a network that seeks to develop such capacity, would they?

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