

## **Geopolitics and economic geography: A commentary on Andy Pike's geographical political economy**

Jung Won Sonn\* and Lin-Fang Hsu\*

\*Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

### **Abstract:**

The geographical political economy (GPE) proposed by Andy Pike (2020) and his colleagues offers room for better understanding of the interaction between politics and industrialization of a region. In this commentary, we argue that the political dimension of GPE should be further emphasized and geopolitics should be taken more seriously. Incorporation of geopolitics can improve GPE in two ways: First, it will help GPE capture variegated pathways and institutions of regional economies, which in turn can help reduce the Anglo-American bias in GPE and economic geography. Secondly, attention to geopolitics is a way to achieve a multi-scalar understanding of the regional economy. With examples from East Asia, where the effects of geopolitics is highly visible, we claim there are at least three ways how geopolitics influence regional industrialization. First, geopolitics change the global economy which can subsequently condition regional industrialization; second, a superpower's geopolitical strategy influence its international economic policy which can afterwards condition regional industrialization in others' territories; lastly, a national state sets a geopolitical strategy which then determines regional policy.

**KEY WORDS:** geographical political economy; geopolitics; industrialization; deindustrialization; East Asia

### **Reinstating the Political in Economic Geography**

Andy Pike (2020) brings together a wide range of theories in economic geography and its cognate disciplines and proposes geographical political economy (GPE) as a “framework” for research on deindustrialization. In previous works, he and his colleagues have argued that GPE should be used to study industrialization (MacKinnon et al., 2019; Pike, 2005). Given that deindustrialization is part of the overall industrialization process, Pike (2020) is a natural extension and application of their earlier works. As researchers who are greatly interested in the political aspects of regional development, we welcome Pike (2020) and other works of geographical political economy. For us, these works have a great potential to restore study of political dimensions in economic geography that faded with the decline of Marxist economic geography two decades ago.

In the 1980s and 1990s, inspired by Harvey (1982) and others, Marxist economic geography experienced an extremely productive period (Dunford & Perrons, 1983; Massey, 1984; Soja et al., 1983; Walker & Storper, 1981, among many others). The transition from

orthodox Marxism to French Regulation Theory (Dunford, 1990; Goodwin et al., 1993; Tickell & Peck, 1992), and the incorporation of non-Marxist theories such as transaction-cost economics (Scott, 1988) and institutionalist economic history (Piore & Sabel, 1984) seemed to enrich, rather than undermine, Marxist economic geography. Within the Marxist framework, the political aspects of spatial economy were well-integrated into economic geography, as exemplified by the Regulation theory.

The decline of Marxist economic geography seems, at least to us, to have been instigated by research on industrial districts. In research on structural transformation from Fordism and post-Fordism to Regulationism and other theoretical perspectives, many economic geographers have argued that the revival of industrial districts was the geographical manifestation of post-Fordism (Christopherson & Storper, 1989; Saxenian, 1994; Storper, 1993). The increased focus on the internal dynamics of industrial districts eventually severed the link between industrial district case studies and the grand theory of the structural transformation of capitalism. By the turn of the millennium, the industrial cluster, a term imported from management literature (Porter, 1990, 1998) replaced the industrial district, making it even clearer that the industrial district and industrial cluster studies were not necessarily related to Post Fordism research program in Marxist economic geography. The industrial cluster studies were, by this point, merely reports on best practices in regional economic development, which were perceived as useful by policy makers.

In such case studies, the theoretical vacuum left by Marxist economic geography was filled by apolitical social economics, which is well-illustrated by numerous case studies of regional innovation systems (Braczyk et al., 1998; Sonn & Kang, 2016; Stuck et al., 2016). Although Marxist approaches continue to influence urban geography, political geography, and political ecology (Castree, 2002; Katz, 2004; Slater, 2017; Sonn & Shin, 2020; Swyngedouw et al., 2002, to list a few among hundreds), they are much less visible in economic geography. For us, the most problematic aspect of the decline of Marxist economic geography has not been the loss of one theoretical trend, but the waning view that politics and regional economy are intertwined. Even the few remaining Marxist economic-geography studies focus on purely economic aspects of the capitalist economic landscape, paying little attention to political aspects. (e.g. Webber & Rigby, 1999; Webber & Rigby, 1996).

Under these circumstances, we welcome two theoretical movements that seem likely to bring the politics back into economic geography. The first is a return to Marxist geography of the 1980s and early 1990s. Sheppard (2011, 2018) appears to advocate for such a return. Although he pleads for more flexible approaches, his theoretical propositions in Sheppard (2018) and his illustration of the GPE approach to regional development in Sheppard (2011) suggest that his version of GPE resembles the Marxist economic geography of the 1990s. Although considerations of gender, environment, culture, and other factors have been added, they seem to play supporting roles.

The second movement promotes inclusive and pluralistic approaches, which Pike (2020) and his colleagues seem to prefer, writing that GPE is a “pluralistic perspective in urban and regional studies” (Pike, 2020, p. 4). Their version of GPE is open not only to non-Marxist critical theories, such as feminism and environmentalism, but also to non-leftist economic geographical theories. They incorporate evolutionary economic geography and the global-production-networks approach, both of which are moving away from their origins in critical economic geography (MacKinnon et al., 2019). Although such inclusiveness and plurality make it difficult to formulate a coherent framework for research, this may not be a problem, especially in early stage of developing the theory. For now, we agree with Pike (2020) that GPE should expand its theoretical coverage. In its current incarnation, GPE is a group of theories

that complement each other.

As researchers interested in the political dimensions of the industrialization process, we would like to see theories of politics better situated and reflected in GPE. The importance of politics in regional industrialization has been emphasized on many occasions (Hsu, 2011; Park, 2005; Shin et al., 2015; Sonn, 2019). Although such emphasis did not make enough impact on GPE and other bodies of economic geography literature, we will not revisit this much-discussed problem at a general level. Instead, we will focus on a less frequently addressed issue in that problem: the interaction between geopolitics and regional industrialization.

## Geopolitical forces in regional industrialization

As Massey (1979) and other contributors to the locality debate argued, in the late 1980s, the region is the arena where economic, political, and other forces interact. It should therefore not be surprising when we argue that geopolitics is a force that influences regional industrialization. (Cooke, 1989; Cox & Mair, 1989; Duncan & Savage, 1989). Beyond its general importance, however, there are two specific reasons we believe, considerations of geopolitics will help proponents of GPE fulfill their own promises.

First, consideration of geopolitics will be helpful for GPE to capture “geographically differentiated pathways and institutions” (Pike, 2020: 15) and to have a wider view on the variegated landscape of capitalism. In some parts of the world, geopolitics is one of the key determining factors within, rather than an influence on, the industrialization and deindustrialization of regions. We suspect the neglect of geopolitics and the Anglo-American bias in GPE and economic geography reinforce each other (Barnes, 2019; Hassink et al., 2019; Sonn et al., 2019; van Meeteren, 2019; Zhu & He, 2019). Geopolitical elements are less salient in UK and US industrialization, so GPE offers better explanatory power on Anglo-American cases, which makes researchers apply GPE to Anglo-American regions, which in turn, allows GPE continue to downplay geopolitics. More attention to geopolitical factors will help GPE cover East Asia and other parts of the world where geopolitics is a critical factor.

Second, geopolitics is an effective way to achieve a multi-scalar understanding of the regional economy, which Pike (2020) and others in GPE advocate. We argue so because key actors often operate at multiple scales. Their geopolitical intentions often materialize as economic actions on a smaller (e.g., urban or regional) scale, which was shown empirically and theoretically in the works of geopolitical economy researchers (Doucette & Park, 2019; Glassman, 2018b; Hsu et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2015; Sonn et al., 2017). The opposite way is also true. The economic goals of elites at regional or national scales can also influence the nation state's geopolitical agenda (Sparke, 1998). These inter-scalar movements of key actors of regional economy cannot be understood without understanding of geopolitical moments of their actions.

In the following pages, we describe the three types of cases where geopolitics influences, conditions, or even determines the industrialization and deindustrialization of regions. Our examples are drawn mainly from East Asia because such cases clearly demonstrate the relevance of geopolitics. We also hope that further understanding of East Asia will partly counterbalance the Anglo-American bias in both GPE and economic geography.

Firstly, geopolitics changes the global economy, and the global economy conditions regional industrialization. Economic theories, from Adam Smith's theory of market size and division of labor (Smith, 1937) to Paul Krugman's new economic geography (Krugman, 1991), predict that specialization among people, firms, and regions can be caused by the integration

of markets. Peace is a necessary condition for market integration, as we learned from the sudden drop in international trade after the two world wars. A good example is the decline and partial recovery of the textile industry in South Korea after South Korea and China normalized diplomatic relations in the late 1980s. Many Daegu textile firms moved to Qingdao and other cities in China to access cheaper land and labor; Daegu suffered from the partial loss of textile industry until the city finally achieved partial recovery by upgrading to high-value-added products in the 2010s (Jeon & Phelps, 2018). Taiwanese examples are even more conspicuous. After the end of the Cold War, the cross-strait travel ban was lifted, the cross-strait war was declared over, and China further opened its economy. These geopolitical changes made Chinese cities and regions favorable locations for labor-intensive, low-skilled manufacturing, including the simple assembly of electronic goods and IT products (Chuang, 2015; Fuller, 2008). Between 1987 and 2000, the share of Taiwanese manufacturing, in terms of total national output and employment, declined markedly. Although this deindustrialization was island-wide, it was more conspicuous in industrial regions such as Taipei City, Yilan County, Chiayi City, and Keelung City.

Secondly, a superpower's geopolitical strategy influences its international economic policy, and the international economic policy conditions regional industrialization in others' territories. Many examples of this phenomenon can be found in regions in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. In the 1950s, the U.S. saw these three territories as a defense against the communist bloc and assisted them with favorable trade policies and military aid (Harlen, 1999; Berger, 2001; Cummings, 1987) Stubbs, 2017). The U.S. consciously supported the economic recovery and development of these three , while helping their right-wing governments suppress left-wing political forces. The U.S. offered amnesty to Japanese war criminals and business opportunities to Japanese firms during the Korean War. It also extended massive amounts of financial aid and military procurement opportunities to South Korea and Japan during the Vietnam War. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan enjoyed preferential status in the U.S. market (Glassman, 2018a). These three states are known to have made economically sound decisions; the concept of a developmental state accounts for this pattern well (Amsden, 1992; Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990). For example, these governments rational decisions to industrialize cities on the west coast of Japan, the southeast coast of South Korea, and Kaoshung in Taiwan (Hsu et al., 2018; Sonn, 2007) have all been praised. However, it is impossible to know whether the industrialization of these designated regions would have succeeded without the U.S. government's preferential trade policies.

Third, a national state sets in place a geopolitical strategy and that geopolitical strategy determines regional policy. For example, South Korean industrialization, at least during the 1970s, cannot be explained without considering the widespread fear of a second Korean war. The heavy and chemical industries that eventually led to South Korea's success in the 1980s were established during the 1970s, in part because President Park wanted to create industries that could produce weaponry. Cities on Korea's southeast coast were industrialized to host these industries (Sonn, 2019; Sonn & Kim, 2020). The same fear of war led to the non-industrialization of Fujian Province, China, prior to the economic reforms. The military conflict over Jinmen Island in the 1950s and other incidents made the Chinese government question Fujian Province's stability; as a result, the region was considered unworthy of investment. A lack of infrastructure investment left the region poorly connected to the rest of the country, hindering regional industrialization. After relations between Taiwan and Mainland China became nearly normalized, the province quickly took off (Chen & Sonn, 2019). Outside East Asia, one of the works that deserve recognition is Markusen et al. (1991) They explain geopolitical reasons for the rise of high-tech industries in sunbelt regions, including Silicon

Valley. During the peak of the Cold War, the Pentagon subcontracted R&D and military procurement was given to Silicon Valley firms because the traditional core of high-tech industries in the northeast was considered more susceptible to information leaks.

## Final words

We are glad to see Pike (2020) and others taking on the daunting task of building a new version of GPE. We also admire the inclusiveness and flexibility of their approach. In their applaudable accomplishment, we would like to see a more explicit investigation of the interaction between geopolitics and industrialization. Many researchers have noted the lack of political research since the heyday of New Regionalism and cluster research in the 1990s, and efforts are still needed to tackle this problem. In this commentary, which echoes the arguments of the geopolitical economy group, we called for more explicit consideration of geopolitical factors in studies of regional industrialization.

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