

The Economic Geography of the UK

Neil M Coe and Andrew Jones (eds.)

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The current economic crisis casts a shadow over this engaging edited volume which provides a multi-dimensional set of accounts of the contemporary economic geography of the UK. Through the 16 chapters and two contributions by the editors which introduce and conclude the collection, readers are offered a series of thematic windows that can be read in order or alternatively treated as discrete papers. The book is written in an accessible form both organisationally and stylistically. Individual chapters, while offering the intellectual depth of an academic journal article, are careful to explain terminology and benefit from bulleted aims at the start of each contribution allowing readers to gain a quick grasp of its focus. Such thoughtful presentation eases undergraduate students into serious academic engagement and potentially provides a springboard for further exploration into the recommended reading at the end of each chapter.

The editors opt for a division of the volume into four sections. The first part - *Setting the Scene: Uneven Economic Geographies* – starts with a thoughtful and reflective introduction to the volume by Neil Coe and Andrew Jones who set the book within a historical context and identify thematic foci for the volume including globalisation; financialisation; tertiarisation; flexibilisation; immigration and neoliberalisation. There then follows two chapters likely to be extensively used in introducing undergraduate students to the uneven geography of UK economic wealth and activity. First, Danny Dorling explores the north-south divide in terms of life expectancy, poverty, education, wealth and employment in a highly graphical and digestible manner. Such findings obviously have considerable implications for social justice and government policy and should therefore engage readers across the social sciences. Second, Ron Martin's analysis of the unevenness of regional growth under New Labour complements Dorling's contribution, noting that despite suggestions to the contrary, there has been 'no marked closing of the growth gaps between the regions' (page 44) as the nature of the so-called 'long boom' over the lifetime of the Labour administration has been manifestly spatially uneven.

The second section of the collection offers a series of six chapters under the broad remit of *Landscapes of Power, Inequality and Finance*. John Allen provides a theoretical interpretation of the dominant role that the City of London has enjoyed in the UK economy, conceptualising how this has sustained and reproduced over time. Shaun French, Karen Lai and Andrew Leyshon analyse the uneven geography of financial services across the UK and neatly - by compensating for centre size - determine the relative success of attracting such employment. Steve Musson's chapter effectively moves the focus away from private sector concerns to interrogate the geography of the public finances - in particular analysing government taxation and spending across space. In a persistent theme throughout the book, he notes the primacy of London which received 'around three times as much [government] spending as the North-east of England' (page 84) and also the capital city's disproportionate use of PFI investment. Andy Pike and John Tomaney continue to examine the relationships between the state and the economy in their analysis of uneven development within the UK. Emphasising the role of government intervention through Keynesian regional policy and then Thatcherist de-regulation, the authors also chart the shifts of power that accompany devolution within the kingdom. Chris Hamnett's highly accessible paper demonstrates the role that housing and housing finance has on the economy, further noting the linkages between this sector and the vitality of the wider economy. This chapter is also valuable from a pedagogic perspective in framing the role of the sub-prime mortgage crisis in a way in which undergraduate students will grasp in a straight forward fashion – something that will be sure to assist academics across business & management as well as economic geography. This section of the book concludes with Kendra Strauss and Gordon Clark's examination of the UK pension market which uncovers the unequal geographies that arise from highly differentiated levels of pension investment, life expectancy and earnings. They conclude that the spatial patterns of pension exclusion persist both at the macro scale where policy is formulated and financial institutions operate, but also at the micro scale where the individual makes decisions in the context of the family and community.

The third section contains five chapters that are identified under the *Landscapes of Production and Circulation* theme with a slight shift in focus to investigate the changing geography of manufacturing, business services, agriculture and retailing as well as

confronting the challenges presented by UK energy futures. Further developing the theme of spatial inequality, Ray Hudson provides an insightful critique of the role of government policy in affecting the geography of manufacturing, detailing how the UK finds itself in an international division of labour. The primacy of the south-east and particularly London is emphasised in James Faulconbridge's assessment of the changing nature of business services. Focusing on legal business services, he notes how the capital 'acts as a vortex, sucking in the best graduates and qualified lawyers who, just like clients, tend to believe that the only place to work if you want to engage in cutting-edge legal work is London' (page 163). These self-reinforcing inequalities clearly have far-reaching consequences for those cities and towns left in the shadow of London. Evidently understanding the nature of such agglomeration are multi-disciplinary concerns that extend throughout the social sciences (cf. Martin and Sunley, 2003), underlining the potential multi-disciplinary appeal of the volume. Brian Ilbery and Damian Maye focuses the reader's attention on the restructuring of agriculture and the expanding geography of so-called 'alternative' food networks (e.g. local, regional, organic, fair trade, speciality foods) noting how there is co-existence alongside (and at times a degree of integration with) supermarket's more price-led supply chains. This logically leads into Neil Wrigley's chapter which focuses on those major supermarket retailers, noting how they have weathered government competition inquiries and been forced into innovative strategies in the face of tightened UK planning regulations. In the process, these large firms are presented as more nimble and responsive than one may initially assume – something that will no doubt be of interest to a management readership which retains a focus on retail innovation and the linkages with productivity (Higón et al., 2009). Michael Bradshaw's analysis of UK energy dilemmas clearly maps out the challenges of securing a sustainable and reliable energy future. While the chapter notes the government's preference for investment in greater numbers of nuclear power stations, one wonders whether in the light of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster (clearly having occurred since the writing of the chapter) predictable local geographies of NIMBYISM will emerge or, more fundamentally, a further marked shift in government policy.

The final section - *Landscapes of Social Change* - contains three chapters and a short conclusion by the editors. Kevin Ward frames his analysis of the restructuring of UK labour markets in a highly personal fashion that makes for an engaging account of increased

flexibility, yet ultimately greater insecurity for workers. Such instability and a sense of social injustice carries through to Jane Wills' (and co-authors') investigation into what they frame as 'new migrant divisions of labour' that are disproportionately low paid and potentially vulnerable. In the final substantive chapter of the volume, Alison Stenning assesses how the arrival of a post-socialist era in East Central Europe (ECE) has led to considerable implications for the economic geography of the UK as well as more obviously within the ECE countries themselves. In particular, she identifies reciprocal flows of FDI and migration that serve to affect regional economies and communities within the UK providing entrepreneurial opportunities but also potential tensions.

Inevitably this edited collection raises a wide range of questions relating to the driving forces underpinning the spatial patterns it identifies while also providing insightful analysis and explanation. In addition, there are inevitable gaps that a reviewer can readily identify such as minimal focus on a key engine of economic growth: the geography of small firm entry and expiration, venture capital and wider firm funding. In addition, while the changing geographies of retailing, manufacturing and businesses services are considered, creative industries - something increasingly the focus in the social sciences (Sapsed et al., 2007) - are less explicitly explored. Similarly, the changing economics and spatial expression of transportation networks and how these are related to the economic geography of the UK are not directly addressed. However, such a cherry-picking critique is a little unfair: the book does not claim to be fully comprehensive - instead it offers a 'series of thematic windows onto the geography of the UK economy' (page 8) and to its credit successfully manages to squeeze considerable insight into its 264 pages.

The contribution will most obviously be compulsory reading on under- and post-graduate economic geography modules where it will encourage critical engagement and thinking. However, I believe that it could (and should) gain traction beyond its core discipline. Given the wide ranging multi-disciplinary nature of the themes discussed, it should also provide interest across the social sciences, notably for sociologists and throughout business and management studies. Gaining the attention of these disciplines in a period of intensive REF preparation and likely introspection within one's own specific field is of course a challenge but one that I hope will be taken up.

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References

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