

# Chapter 1

## Why Economic Geography Is Good For You

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### 1.1 Introduction

One of the great, albeit controversial, episodes of the American National Public Radio show *This American Life* was “Mr Daisey and the Apple factory” (first aired January 6, 2012). It was at the time the most downloaded single episode of the show ever with close to 900,000 downloads.<sup>1</sup> Hosted by Ira Glass and produced by WBEZ Chicago, *This American Life* presents each week one or more stories based on some particular theme. Glass did not make explicit the theme for the week of “Mr Daisey and the Apple factory,” but there was absolutely no doubt it was economic geography. The episode demonstrated both the fundamental importance of the subject, and, given the download figures, the potential public interest in the subject. It showed why economic geography was good for you, the theme of this introductory chapter.

Mr Daisey is a self-described technology geek. As he said on the show: “of all the kinds of technology that I love in the world, I love the technology that comes from Apple the most, because I am an Apple aficionado. I’m an Apple partisan. I’m an Apple fanboy. I’m a worshiper in the cult of Mac” (*This American Life* 2012). For fun and relaxation Mr Daisey will strip his MacBook Pro into its 43 component pieces, clean them with compressed air, and put them back together again. One day he was reading a website dedicated to Apple products, and came across a post from someone who, when they turned on their just-bought iPhone, found four pictures on it that had been taken at the factory where it was made. The pictures had obviously been taken to test the device but had not been erased.

Those pictures became for Mr Daisey his economic geographic “aha” moment. As he put it, “until I saw those pictures, it was only then I realized, I had never thought, ever, in a dedicated way, about how [Apple products] were made” (*This American Life* 2012). Mr Daisey did some preliminary inquiries and discovered that the pictures were taken in the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen in Southern China, just outside of Hong Kong. He continues:

the most amazing thing is, almost no one in America knows its name. Isn't that remarkable? That there's a city where almost all of our crap comes from, and no one knows its name? I mean, we think we do know where our crap comes from. We're not ignorant. We think our crap comes from China. Right? Kind of a generalized way. China.

But it doesn't come from China. It comes from Shenzhen. It's a city. It's a place.

(*This American Life* 2012)

In raising these questions, Mr Daisey was beginning to do economic geography. He was asking *where* something was produced, why it was produced *there and not somewhere else*, and how and why it *geographically moved* from that place to Mr Daisey's place, America. All of these issues are fundamentally economic geographic, requiring Mr Daisey to begin to acquire economic geographic knowledge. And like any aspiring economic geographer, after gathering preliminary facts at home, Mr Daisey went on to do fieldwork, to visit China, to go to Shenzhen, to the city, to the place. He began to interview people, visiting the Foxconn factory (or at least standing outside of it).

As he found out more about the lives of the people who made Apple products (which he had originally figured were “made by robots”), Mr Daisey was increasingly unsettled.<sup>2</sup> Economic geography turned out not to be as soothing as stripping down the 43 component parts of his MacBook Pro and cleaning them with compressed air. Still, Mr Daisey came to believe that knowing where all one's “crap” comes from, assembled from across the four corners of the world, and the conditions under which it is produced, was something that as a citizen of the world one ought to know. He began to appreciate why economic geography was good for him. We believe too that the discipline is good for you. Although we are less smitten with our computerized devices than Mr Daisey, we are smitten with economic geography. We are economic geography aficionados, economic geography partisans, and economic geography fanboys. There is no economic geography cult (as far as we know), but if there were, we would worship at its altar.

The purpose of this book is to try to persuade you to join us in our admiration of economic geography. We want to convince you that knowing something about the subject is essential to living in the twenty-first century. Virtually everyone now on the planet, together numbering a total of more than 7 billion people, is a global citizen whether they like it or not. The changes to the economy over the past 40 years, as it has become globalized, affecting so many people in so many different ways, are economic and also fundamentally geographical. Accordingly, economic geography is relevant not just as a background setting, but to understand why economic change occurs at all. It enters into the very frame of that change, its skeletal structure. And what is bred in the bone comes out in the marrow. We don't mean to exaggerate our claim. There are large swathes of life with which economic geography does not deal. But those with which it does are nut and bolt issues; they hold together the scaffolding on which much contemporary social and

cultural life is constructed: from the clothes you wear, to the food you eat, to the music you hear, to the videos you watch, to the schools you attend, and even to the university classes you take. It is our belief that if you fail to understand that scaffolding, you fail to understand one of the bases of contemporary social and cultural life itself. You fail to understand your own life and the lives of others around you both far and near.

The rest of this chapter pursues these larger themes and in doing so introduces our book. The chapter is divided into three unequally sized sections. The first and longest, continuing from Mr Daisey, argues that there is something about the present juncture – right now – that makes the study of economic geography especially important and pressing. We present the argument in two parts. First, we set out the leading features of the present moment, and contend that they uncannily fit with the interests and conceptual framework of economic geography. It is the right discipline for right now and right here. Second, we suggest that suitability is a result of economic geography having remade itself as an intellectual project over the last 40 years. During that period, it has become increasingly open-minded, with an ability to roll with change, yet it still retains a memory of the past, possessing a broad, catholic base of knowledge, as well as an ability to synthesize and link across seemingly yawning subject divides. These qualities, along with its ingrained spatial awareness, have given economic geography enormous purchase in understanding the present.

The second section discusses the meaning and implications of the subtitle of our book, *A Critical Introduction*. We clarify what it means to think critically, and in particular, what it means to think critically about the discipline of economic geography. We adopt two strategies. The first is to try to get behind or beneath the discipline, and not to accept it at face value. It involves asking why things are done as they are, as well as what decisions were taken in the past that now determine the economic geographic knowledge we listen to in lecture halls and read in journals and books like this one. This also frequently necessitates examining internal disciplinary processes and external contextual historical factors. The second is to provide critical evaluations of different types of economic geography. This means *not* sitting on the fence. Instead, we try, where appropriate, to take a position, to say what we think is working well in the discipline (and why) and what is not.

The last section of this chapter sets out the structure and argument of the rest of the book, which is divided into two main parts. The first is concerned with economic geography as a discipline, the second with economic geography's examination of a changing economic geographic world. In both cases, we aspire to live up to our book's subtitle and to be critical in both senses just described.

## 1.2 “May You Live in Interesting Times”: Economic Geography's World

### 1.2.1 Interesting times

“May you live in interesting times” is often termed “the Chinese curse.” There is no evidence that this expression was Chinese, or that it was a curse, however. Contemporary economic geographers certainly live in interesting times, though. Further, those times have been

propitious for the discipline rather than a curse, raising its stature and profile. Here are six features that have made the times interesting for economic geography, bearing on the subject, lending themselves to its disciplinary analysis.

- First, and going directly to Mr Daisey and the Apple factory, is pervasive globalization, a fundamentally economically geographic phenomenon. Economic geography inheres in globalization's very definition; it is part of the term's conceptual furniture. By globalization we mean the ever-increasing economic geographic integration of the world as measured by the movements across national borders of: (i) goods, services, and capital; (ii) labor (people); (iii) knowledge and information (communication); and (iv) cultural goods and activities – sports, cuisines, electronic games, films, music, TV shows, and so on.

Globalization goes back a long way, of course. The Ancient Greek poet Homer (that is, if he ever existed!) was writing about globalization as early as around 800 BCE in his epic poem *The Odyssey*. It featured the soldier and sailor Odysseus and his spectacular global travels (at least global for 800 BCE), involving murderous Cyclops, enchanting and beautiful but deadly temptress Sirens, and evil sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis (Figure 1.1). Globalization is enormously long-standing, but over the last 30 years or so there has been a quantitative shift in its pace and range, and a qualitative shift in its form. Since 1980 there has been a tenfold growth in the value of world trade in goods and services (US\$2.4 trillion in 1980 versus US\$23.3 trillion in 2013 in constant dollars); a more than twenty fold increase in the value of the stock of global foreign direct investment (a little over US\$1 trillion in 1980 and more than US\$22 trillion in 2013); a more than doubling in the



**Figure 1.1** Globalization ancient style? Odysseus is strapped to the mast to prevent him from doing something he shouldn't when hearing the Sirens' bewitching but mortally dangerous songs. By plugging their ears with melted beeswax his crew were protected (from a Greek vase, 500–480 BCE, British Museum).

number of foreign workers now employed across the world (currently about 3% of the entire world's population); a fiftyfold increase between 1980 and 2008 in the number of minutes that US telephone subscribers spend annually making international calls; and a substantial increase in overseas compared to domestic box office receipts for Hollywood films – in 1980 the bulk of box office receipts for Hollywood films came from the US domestic market, whereas in 2014 that had reversed with two thirds of receipts coming from abroad. Things are clearly not the same as they once were. It is not “déjà vu all over again,” and this is what makes times so interesting for economic geographers. In view of its significance, and its inherently economic geographic nature, we devote a whole chapter (Chapter 8) to globalization and the economic geographic study of it.

- A second notable feature of our times is a communications revolution that began in the 1960s. It has been a key factor in remaking contemporary economic geographic relations by permitting almost costless, instantaneous communication, aural and visual, between parties scattered across the four corners of the world. That revolution was inaugurated by combining computerization with existing electronic forms of communication. The origins of the latter went back to the early nineteenth century with the beginning of the telegraph. The computer was much more recent, originally developed to meet military needs during World War II (to decipher Nazi coded messages). Further refined during the Cold War, the computer became a backbone of the US nuclear defense system. By the mid-1950s, it started to move beyond its initial military setting, increasingly used by corporate business, becoming the basis for new forms of communication by voice, text, and image. At first new telecommunication technologies were very expensive, with older forms of communication continuing to exist alongside them. Even in the late 1970s, telegrams – small squares of yellow paper on which were glued ribbons of typed words – were still used to transmit urgent information. In the scheme of things, they were fast and cheap. It wasn't until the mid-1990s, after email became generally available, that the telegram began to become redundant, finally being confined to history a decade or so later with the establishment of text messaging, Skype, and a myriad of social media platforms.
- A third key feature turns on technological improvements in physical transportation, and is bound up with larger, faster, and more efficient vehicles (planes, trucks, boats, and trains). In combination they colossally reduced freight costs, facilitating the current cornucopia of cheap commodities from around the world. Transportation costs have fallen so much that the economists Edward Glaeser and Janet Kohlhase (2004, p.200) write that it is now “better to assume that moving goods is essentially costless [rather] than to assume that moving goods is an important component of the production process.” The lower costs are primarily the result of economies of scale, that is, a declining cost per unit brought about by large-scale transportation utilizing ever-more capacious vehicles. Planes have gotten larger (the triple decker Airbus A380 accommodates 853 passengers); trains have gotten longer (one in Australia stretches 7.3km, consisting of 683 separate rail cars); trucks have gotten bigger (a North American double trailer articulated truck can carry 80,000kg); and cargo boats have gotten lengthier, taller, and vaster (the largest cargo vessel in the world, *CSCL Globe*, is 400m long, 59m high, and carries 19,000 containers, that is, enough room to transport 108 million pairs of sneakers). The rise of containerization has been especially important. Container shipping has become “the great hidden wonder of the world, a vastly underrated business. . . . It has shrunk the

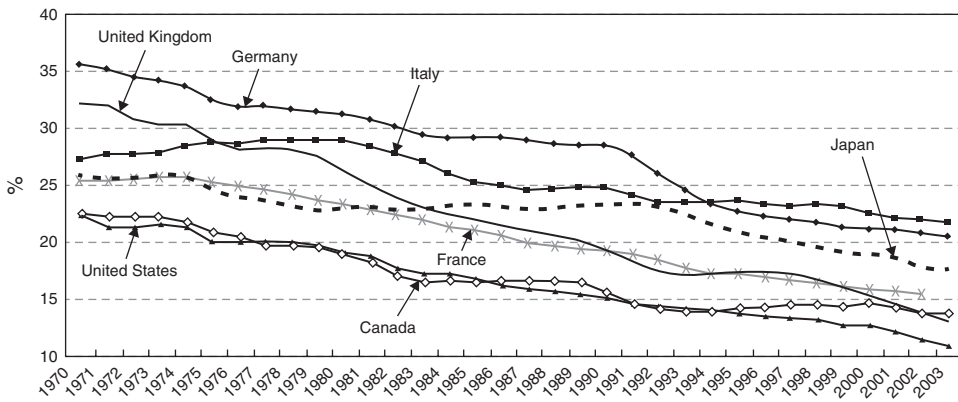


**Figure 1.2** The *Ideal-X* loading the first ever containers (“the box”) at the Newark, NJ, port for their maiden voyage to Houston, Texas, April 26, 1956. Source: The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

planet and brought about a revolution because the cost of shipping boxes is [now] so cheap” (Shah 2000). That revolution can be precisely dated. On April 26, 1956, 58 metal boxes were loaded by crane on to a converted oil tanker, the *Ideal-X*, moored in Newark, New Jersey (Figure 1.2). It arrived in Houston, Texas, five days later. The boxes were taken off the vessel by crane, hitched to waiting truck cabs, and taken to their destinations. This was the beginning of the container revolution, which, as Mark Levinson (2006) writes, “made the world smaller, and the world economy bigger.” By 2002, for example, as a result in large part of “the box,” American consumers had four times the variety of goods to select from compared to 30 years before.

- A fourth feature goes to the break-up sometime during the 1970s and 1980s of the previous socioeconomic system that held in the Global North, called Fordism (Box 1.1: Fordism and the Keynesian Welfare State). Fordism was the manufacturing system of mass production initially pioneered by Henry Ford at his Dearborn, Michigan, automobile plant from the first decade of the twentieth century. The technique of mass production that Ford forged was later transferred to other industrial sectors, and adopted also by other industrial countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy (it was in fact an Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who in 1934 coined the term “Fordism”; Forgacs 2000, pp.275–300).

After World War II, Fordist manufacturing also became linked to a particular form of government in Global Northern manufacturing countries, known as the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS). The KWS ensured that Fordism was provided with everything that it needed for continued production, such as energy, roads, and even labor (“produced” in this case by state-owned schools and colleges). At the same time, the government guaranteed that people had sufficient income to buy the manufactured goods that Fordism was so good at producing (which meant among other things providing income to people who would otherwise not receive it, such as retirees, the unemployed, and those unable to work). The important point for our purposes is that



**Figure 1.3** Deindustrialization in the Global North. The decline in the percentage of employment in manufacturing in G7 countries over the period 1970–2003. Source: Pilat, D. et al. 2006, p.6.

this system of Fordism and the KWS was organized nationally. Each country had its own particular combination of a KWS and a system of Fordist manufacturing, and these combinations produced different levels of success. While Scandinavian countries were generally high-fliers, the United Kingdom was a perennial laggard.

From the early 1970s, however, Fordism and the associated KWS ran into massive difficulties. Industrial productivity fell, labor costs rose precipitously, and consequently profits were squeezed. Something had to give. In this case, a number of manufacturers in the Global North began moving their operations to the Global South, drawn in large part by low wages and the two technological processes of the communications and transportation revolutions already discussed. As this process gained momentum, the former national-based system of Fordism and the KWS was increasingly undone in the Global North. Tens of millions of manufacturing jobs were lost in a process called “deindustrialization,” turning former manufacturing regions into rust belts. The share of manufacturing employment in seven major industrialized countries in the Global North fell sharply over the period 1970–2003 (Figure 1.3). In the United Kingdom, manufacturing employment fell from a third of all jobs to a little over a tenth. Certain regions that had specialized in manufacturing, like the Upper Mid-West and North East of the United States, and the northern part of Britain, were decimated, hollowed out, becoming shadows of their former selves. At the same time, a new global system emerged, involving massive manufacturing investment within the Global South. Newly industrialized countries (NICs) emerged initially in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea, and then later in Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, Malaysia, and, of course, China. None of these places historically had undertaken large-scale industrial manufacturing, but under the new regime of globalization they would.

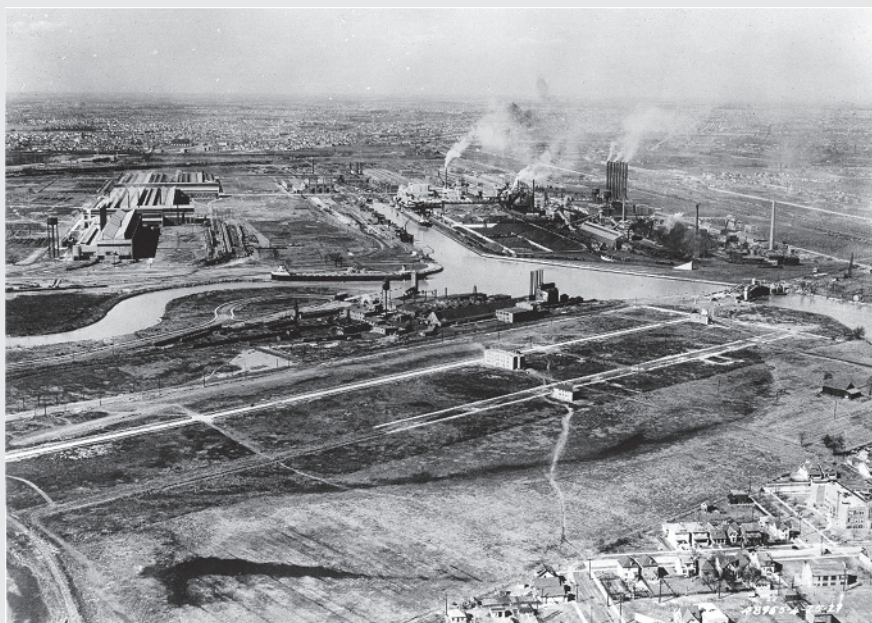
Germane here was that all of these processes – the establishment of different national Fordisms along with associated KWSs, their later decline in the form of industrial restructuring and deindustrialization, and the appearance of their mirror image in the rise of the NICs – were all to their core economic geographic. They were made for economic geography, perfect grist for the disciplinary mill.

**Box 1.1** Fordism and the Keynesian Welfare State

Henry Ford with his Model T. Source: Getty Images.

Henry Ford (1863–1947) got the ideas for production line mass manufacturing from visiting a meat packing plant in Michigan at the beginning of the 20th century. There, live animals would enter the factory at one end and, by means of conveyor belts and hooks moving overhead, they would become progressively “disassembled” as they journeyed through the plant. By the end, they left the factory gates as T-bone steaks, hamburger patties, and breakfast sausages. Ford’s genius was to take that process but reverse it. Instead of disassembling, he assembled. Raw inputs would arrive at one end of his factory – coal, iron ore, rubber, cloth – and over the course of their journey through the plant they would be “assembled,” in this case, put together most famously as a Model T car that would roll off at the other end of the production line. The iconic plant where this happened was the River Rouge Complex on the Detroit Red River (Figure 1.4). The main production plant (NE quadrant in the photo, by the billowing smoke) was over 3km long, 1km wide, and at its height employed 80,000 workers. Production line labor worked robotically, standing in line along a conveyor belt, undertaking the same repetitive task over and over and over again (see Box 12.1: Taylorism).

Ford was notoriously politically conservative. He once said, “people are never so likely to be wrong than as when they are organized.” He wouldn’t have been pleased with the rise of the KWS, which was definitely left wing in its politics. Nonetheless, it joined with Fordism after World War II to produce hitherto unprecedented levels of general economic wealth, “the affluent society” as the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) called it, or, as the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan told his electorate, “most of our people have never had it so good.”



**Figure 1.4** The Ford Rouge Plant, Dearborn, Michigan, 1927.



John Maynard Keynes. Source: Getty Images.

The Keynesian part of the title KWS came from John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) (pronounced Canes), a Cambridge (UK) economist. Keynes was appalled by the devastation of the 1930s Great Depression. His book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), offered a way out. The volume functioned as a how-to manual, identifying various economic levers to be pulled and buttons to be

pushed to prevent the Great Depression occurring again. Keynes's great insight was that for the economy to be sustained, for it not to drop down into the dark pit of recession, general (macro) consumption levels must be maintained. That meant everyone must consume whether they had a job or not. Hence, the rise of the Welfare State. It provided income to people who otherwise would have none, ensuring there were always eager-beaver consumers able to buy goods from Fordism's bounty. Contra Henry Ford, though, Keynes also showed the importance of the role of state intervention in the economy.

- A fifth feature was a critical change in the nature of labor markets and work. Deindustrialization cut a grim swathe across Global Northern manufacturing regions from the 1970s, eliminating an enormous number of relatively high-paying, often unionized manufacturing jobs held typically by men. Such changed work practices became fodder even for popular culture. For example, the 1997 movie *The Full Monty*, later a Broadway and West End musical, featured a group of male Sheffield steel workers who, when they were made redundant, took off their boiler suits and steel-capped boots and entered what was traditionally a female service-sector occupation, exotic dancing. While that film may have been a fantasy, it pointed to a fundamental change around work and its culture. The Global North was moving toward a postindustrial, service-based economy, turning upside down the older Fordist nostrum of mass manufacturing. Employment now came in two main forms. There were McJobs – these were low-paid and required little by way of skills or experience, although there could be variation even in this general category. At the higher end was employment in establishments of conspicuous consumption such as boutique cafes or designer clothing stores. At the lower end was flipping burgers in fast-food restaurants or being an “associate” working the floor of a big-box discount retailer. The other type of service-sector employment was in the creative economy, or new economy, or cultural economy. Workers here were often highly paid, and the work frequently required skills that were formally credentialed. Work could be in existing sectors that had been reconstituted, such as advertising or higher education, or in entirely new sectors, such as video game or web design. Both kinds of service work – the low-end and the high-end – required embodied interactions with customers and with other workers, calling for cultural, social, and even emotional (soft) skills. Unlike in manufacturing, where one worker's body was much like another, simply the repository of brawn to be dispensed in the industrial process, in the service sector the body was often a vital part of the product sold. The kind of body made a difference, and how it was dressed, comported, spoke, and looked could be crucial.
 

Again, in all of this, economic geography mattered: from the global redistribution of employment that produced a new international division of labor (see Chapter 8), to the emergence of specialized high-tech, creative industry regions such as, most famously, Silicon Valley in California (see Box 12.3: Silicon Valley), to the micro-spaces as varied as a derivatives trading room or a Starbucks café where work was actually performed.
- Finally, there is neoliberalism, which from 1980 increasingly replaced the old KWS. Neoliberalism is a form of government that relies on market-based incentives, that is, price signals, to achieve its ends. Its introduction was especially associated with

deregulation, that is, dispensing with government rules and laws around the economy, and denationalization and privatization, that is, selling off government-owned economic assets and sectors to private firms. In both cases, the neoliberal justification was that the free market served the economy better than the central state did. The ground should therefore be cleared of state interference for the market's effective operation. The Chilean military dictator (and embarrassingly a geographer) Augusto Pinochet first systematically tried out neoliberalism in his country in 1973. Neoliberalism as a practice, though, became most associated with the administrations of US President Ronald Reagan (1980–88), and perhaps even more so with the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990). Thatcher was the more zealous. She oversaw an enormous privatization of UK state-owned business (e.g., railways, telecommunications, water, coal, iron and steel, power). And she made it her personal quest to dismantle the KWS, which she called “the nanny state,” and which she believed pampered and coddled rather than exposed people to the necessary tough love of enterprise and the market. For neoliberals like Reagan and Thatcher economic regulations imposed by countries only gummed up and retarded the market. Consequently, not only did individual countries need to be freed up for business, but so did the whole world. To that end, from the late 1980s international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (joined together in the so-called Washington Consensus) imposed neoliberalism particularly on countries of the Global South to ensure they toed the neoliberal line. Such institutions believed that an uncluttered globalization would be the fullest expression of the open market. When the market was found everywhere in the world, when there was a perfect economic geography of globalization, it would be “the end of history,” as the neoliberal apologist Francis Fukuyama (1992) put it. Historical change would stop. Utopia was at hand. Consequently, it also implied the end of geography. Utopia, from the Greek, literally means no place.

It is likely the conceit of every new generation of economic geographers to believe that the period in which they entered the discipline is the most interesting. But it really seems so for economic geographers who have come of age since the 1980s. They – we – have witnessed a series of wrenching and profound geographical transformations in the economy. The results have been variable, from despair and trauma to energetic purposefulness and optimism. But however the changes are described, undeniably they signaled interesting times. Everything the discipline had previously claimed about the importance of geography came home to roost. The present moment is impossible to understand without an economic geographic sensibility. That's why we believe economic geography is good for you.

### 1.2.2 Interesting discipline

While the times may have favored economic geography, that did not necessarily mean the discipline would seize the opportunity. There were also other social sciences keen to conceptualize the present economic geographic moment (see Chapter 4). Would economic geography, always a bit shy and lacking confidence, up its game and assert its special contribution? We suggest it has. It has become an interesting discipline. Elements making up its structure as an academic subject have allowed economic geography to take on and say something important about the present moment.

The first such element is a recognition of, and stress on, geographical difference. That emphasis was there from the discipline's beginning. Doing geography meant understanding how and why one place, or region, or country, was different from another. On first blush, it might appear that recognizing geographical difference would not be so helpful when examining perhaps the most important force now shaping economic geography: globalization. Globalization is often presented as an inexorable, relentless power, leveling, crushing, and pulverizing geographical difference. Thomas Friedman (2005), the well-known *New York Times* columnist, is in that camp. To use his terms, "the world is flat." Globalization for Friedman is like a steamroller creating a smooth, homogeneous surface over any space that it passes. It produces a world like the one depicted in the cartoon in Figure 1.5, where everywhere is the same. Against that interpretation, however, economic geographers have kept to their intellectual roots, and emphasized instead continued geographical difference and variation. Accordingly, they've suggested that as globalization unfolds over space, it rubs up against, abrades, and is in friction with specific places and regions, ones defined by their unique combination of material and institutional forms. Globalization may be a powerful force, but it is never powerful enough to plane down and erase geographical difference altogether. The form that geographical difference takes may be changed in the interaction with globalization, but it is not eradicated. In turn, continuing difference makes a difference, transforming globalization into a patchwork of variegated local forms. The geographical world, rather than becoming one vast monolithic plain – a flatscape – remains spatially dappled and mottled (Chapter 8). As always, geography matters.

The second element is economic geography's open-mindedness toward theory and method, and hence its willingness to remake itself in light of changing circumstances. In contrast, other disciplines, like orthodox economics, for example, appear unchanging, set in aspic jelly, more or less pursuing the same theory and method since their institutionalized beginning. In the case of economics, the constant is the maximizing method based on the mathematical technique of constrained maximization that first entered the discipline nearly 150 years ago (Mirowski 1989). That's not economic geography, which has re-created itself several times over during its history (Chapter 3). In the current version of the last 30 years or so, increasingly anything goes. In particular, the discipline has been unflinching in its inclination to experiment. The nineteenth-century American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1911, p.302) once said, "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better." That's economic geography. Only rarely over the course of its history has it believed that there were any holy cows to violate. You choose the theoretical framework that seems most appropriate for the (shifting) geographical process at hand rather than choosing one because it was always used. As a result, economic geographers might take their theoretical framework from science and technology studies, or from cultural theory, or from feminism, or from Marxism, or from institutionalism, or from orthodox economics (see Chapter 5). It might come in a pure form, drawing on a single tradition. Or it might be a mix and match, an eclectic style of theorization, a bricolage, a DIY approach to theory construction. Likewise, and discussed further in Chapter 6, the methods used to assemble the data to be explained are also increasingly varied and assorted. The data might be a set of statistics requiring numerical presentation and analysis; or they might be a set of interview transcripts to be textually interpreted; or they might be a set of ethnographic field notes literally taken on the job. One never knows until one determines the specific object of inquiry. That is the rub.



**Figure 1.5** The death of geography under the steamroller of globalization? Or a death that is greatly exaggerated? Source: Louis Hellman.

Economic geography, as we show in the next chapter, has become increasingly open about the object it studies; its boundaries are ever-more porous and blurred, and thus requiring receptivity to an expanding range of different theories and methods. Again, there is a stark contrast with orthodox economics, which has a fixed definition of its object of study, circumscribed by a sharp border between what it is and what it isn't. That couldn't be further from contemporary economic geography. Its more open-ended approach, we believe, is better suited to keeping up with the evolving and multifaceted character of economic geography on the ground. The geography of the economy is inconstant, always on the move, morphing, bleeding together new combinations in new spaces: bodily, gendered,

institutional, textual, performative, and virtual. But precisely because contemporary economic geography has no hard and fast confines, it can keep up. It is not fazed by the fact that “we’re not in Kansas anymore.” It is so much more exciting. We’re in the whole world.

The third element, and again another longstanding feature of economic geography, concerns its catholic and synthetic inclinations. By catholic we mean economic geography’s broad inclusiveness of subject matter (again, see Chapter 2). Almost anything can be an object of disciplinary investigation: the tangible and the intangible, the human and the non-human, the living and the dead. Of course, the case for inclusion must be argued, not simply asserted. But the threshold for inclusion is low. It is low in part because historically the disciplinary objective was geographical synthesis. There was an expectation that all the many different things found in a place or region could be brought together, related, linked, synthesized to form a more complex, integrated geographical entity. This synthetic impulse goes back to the very beginnings of geography as a project about describing places and regions.<sup>3</sup> To represent a place or a region meant trying to connect, to synthesize, the many different things, human and non-human, found in that place or region. A place or a region was not just an inventory of everything that was there. They were to be allied, associated, joined, that is, a synthesis made. The catholic and synthetic nature of economic geography is ideal for representing the present in which there is such a collision of so many different things in so many different places; contemporary economic geography is just that mash-up. That is what synthetic economic theory strives to accomplish. Synthesis is in the very marrow of economic geography, perfectly positioning it as an intellectual project to represent the present.

Finally, there is an overwhelming attention to spatial process, that is, an assertion that discussions of spatial process are not mere background atmospherics, simply to add color, but are fundamental, integral to the objects described. Take again the example of globalization. Spatial process, as we argued, inheres in the very term, joined at the hip from the beginning. For example, Erica Schoenberger (2008) argues that economic geographic processes were necessarily involved as first Ancient Athens then later Ancient Rome attempted to globalize their empires through imperial military conquest. Up until about the fifth century BCE, military campaigns were highly restricted, involving sometimes only a single pitched battle. But that changed during the second half of the fifth century BCE when for the first time there were standing armies and navies. However, maintaining a standing military required economic geography. Soldiers and sailors needed to be paid, and they, along with slave rowers (the Athenian navy required as many as 40,000 slave rowers), also needed to be fed and provisioned. When the Athenian or Roman military wanted to expand to new spaces, to globalize, that necessitated transportation, local production, money, exchange, and the organization of markets where none existed before. It meant creating an economic geography. The two went hand in hand. And they have continued to go hand in hand through to the present. Of course, there have been enormous changes in the character of globalization and associated economic geography. For example, the main instruments of globalization are now large multinational corporations (MNCs) and transnational corporations (TNCs) rather than imperial armies and navies. But the link to economic geography is no less strong. MNCs and TNCs are fundamentally economic geographic institutions. Their very definition and rationale is based on the idea of spatially differentiated process, that different kinds of firm operations are located in different places. Their very institutional nucleus is economic geography, inseparable in this case from globalization.

Economic geography has been a discipline in waiting. The various features that characterize it as an intellectual project now appear made for registering, recording, situating, analyzing, and explaining the present. It is an interesting discipline for interesting times.

### 1.3 Being Critical: In What Sense a “Critical” Introduction to Economic Geography?

The word critical derives from the Greek word *kritikos*, meaning judgment or discernment. That makes it different from being simple negation, a knee-jerk contrary view. One of Monty Python’s famous comedy sketches involved Michael Palin paying £1 to have a five-minute argument with a professional arguer played by John Cleese. The argument took the form of alternating contradicting claims: “No, it isn’t!” “Yes, it is!” Michael Palin quickly tired of this game, however. In an exasperated voice he said to John Cleese, sitting across the desk from him, “An argument isn’t just contradiction.” “Well! it CAN be!” said Cleese, and the alternating contradicting statements began all over again until £1’s worth of arguing time ran out.<sup>4</sup> Palin was clearly right. An argument is more than the “automatic gainsaying of anything that the other person says.” It also involves “an intellectual process.” Similarly, being critical means more than saying, “No, it isn’t.” It connotes, as its Greek root suggests, considered assessment and discrimination, that is, hard mental labor.

The purpose of our book is to provide an explicitly critical introduction to the discipline. That is what makes it different from other introductions to the discipline, of which there are several. Other introductions essentially describe the discipline. They tell you what it is and what it does. We do that, too, but we do something more. We critique it, using two separate lines of questioning.

#### 1.3.1 Questioning the status quo

The first entails questioning why things are as they are; that is, not taking them for granted – “that’s just the way it is” – or at face value. *Why* does economic geography today look like it does? Why do economic geographers do things in the particular ways they do? This manner of being critical is partly about exercising a historical imagination (see Chapter 3): What historical developments led to things being the way they are, what intellectual battles were fought, and why did the winners win? But it is not only about history. The present needs to be questioned in and of itself. What assumptions underlie this or that economic geographic study? Why does the author use this method rather than another one? Why is the study of phenomenon X popular and validated, but not the study of phenomenon Y? Who decides what is worthy of economic geographic analysis? Departmental professors? Disciplinary leaders? Funding bodies? Being critical means asking all such questions.

Such critical questioning can be thought of as a form of denaturalization. In the case of a particular text, it is about contesting the text’s seemingly evident (“natural”) meaning, the one that lies on the surface. The text may look straightforward: a set of sturdy words bolted together as an impeccable sentence, or a crisp photograph, or an uncluttered graph. Once subject to critical interpretation, however, each text can reveal a set of hitherto unrecognized social and cultural judgments made in their construction, that seep deeply,

coloring meaning. As a result, the text begins to look less straightforward and sturdy, its meaning no longer so obvious and natural.

Practicing critique in a discipline like economic geography necessarily involves understanding the internal and external processes that bear on it, and which are often bound up with differential power relationships. It is those processes that often shape the real, underlying meanings of the texts that a discipline produces. It is they that need to be uncovered and laid bare.

Take for example the very first text in academic economic geography written in English, George Chisholm's *Handbook of Commercial Geography*, published in 1889 (discussed further in Chapter 3). On the surface, Chisholm's looks like an innocent text, although admittedly a little dull. It contains table after table of numerical statistics relating to the production, price, and trade volumes of innumerable commodities from all over the world, from tons of iron and steel to pounds of tea. There are also several pull-out regional maps of various continents and subcontinents showing areas of production, internal railroad lines, shipping routes, and population densities. The overriding message of the book seems innocuous too, if not a bit naïve. Economic activity is determined by "natural advantages" found in any given place (Chisholm 1889, p.1). Once we begin burrowing into the text, critically interpreting it, it is not so innocent and naïve, however.

As we will suggest in Chapter 3, one of the purposes of Chisholm's book is to establish a new discipline within British universities, economic geography. The intent of the *Handbook* is to mark out academic turf, to claim scholarly space for a new university subject. It is a forceful act, an assertion of power. The *Handbook* as artefact is one of the means to make that assertion. Its very materiality demonstrates that the new field possesses substance. Economic geography must exist because there is now a bulky volume printed by an established publisher, Longman, Green, and Co., printed in its name. Apart from its materiality, there is the text itself that lies between the book's covers as words, as numbers, as maps. They lay out literally what this new discipline will look like, the kinds of practices that must be undertaken to conform to it, and what an economic geographer must do to be an economic geographer. And it pays off. At age 58, Chisholm is offered a job at the University of Edinburgh as an economic geographer. This internal context is not somehow ancillary to understanding the text of the *Handbook*. It forms part of its very meaning, and it is necessary to excavate it when undertaking critical interpretation.

It is the same with the external context, which in this case is the peak of British imperialism (discussed further in Chapter 3). Chisholm, writing the *Handbook* in London, was at the very epicenter of the British Empire, where decisions about the colonies were made, and more broadly, Britain's militant role within the world was determined. That context clearly seeps into the pores of Chisholm's text, determining the statistics he tabulates, the maps he provides (including information written on them as well as the map's legend), the particular commodities described, and the countries represented. There is nothing innocent about colonialism, and there is nothing innocent about the text of Chisholm's *Handbook* that represents it. It is a *Handbook* of the colonial project written at the center of empire, and requiring critical interpretation.

A critical introduction to economic geography necessitates worrying away at the status quo of the discipline, as materialized in institutions, theories, texts, and so on. To worry means dwelling on something, thinking about it one way, then another, not accepting it without providing further thought, scrutiny, and assessment. Our book aims to do exactly that.

### 1.3.2 Critical evaluation

The second of this book's lines of critical questioning involves evaluation. Rather than merely describing economic geography in its various guises, the traditional textbook approach, we endeavor to evaluate them. We put different disciplinary forms under a critical spotlight and ask pointed questions about each. Does this type of economic geography actually serve any useful purpose? Does that economic geographic approach live up to its billing? Are those economic geographers who practice this methodology blazing a trail we should all be following, or are they in fact heading off down a blind alley?

If the rationale for questioning economic geography's status quo is obvious, the rationale for providing a specifically evaluative introduction may be less so. Why take a position? Why offer an opinion, when it is arguably safer merely to describe? The reason is that no textbook is merely descriptive, however hard it tries to be. To the extent that it is read and absorbed and thought about by practitioners and students, any introductory economic geography text necessarily shapes how economic geography develops in the future; it never simply "reflects." And if our book is liable to shape economic geography's future – however minimally or marginally – then we want it to do so positively and productively. For we are not only economic geography "fanboys," we *care*, passionately, about the discipline. If we think false steps are being taken, we feel obliged to say so. If we think other steps look more promising, on the other hand, we say that too.

Recalling the Monty Python sketch, our evaluation is never simply knee-jerk negation. We do not flatly contradict; we endeavor rather to discern and carefully judge. We follow the political theorist Wendy Brown (2005, p.16) in seeing critique as "a process of sifting and distinguishing" and we strive, like her, and however imperfectly, to exercise it as "a practice of affirming the text it contests." As Brown goes on to say, critique "does not, it cannot, reject or demean its object. Rather, as an act of reclamation, critique takes over the object for a different project than that to which it is currently tethered."

In the case of this book that "project" is, quite simply, to provide a lively, relevant, and discriminating introduction to economic geography *from our authorial perspective*. For the critique we offer is, of course, very much *ours*. It comes from somewhere and is necessarily mediated by our particular views and values. Just as our critique is not negation, then, nor is it free-floating, unmoored from its authors. As Richard Bernstein asks, "critique in the name of what? What is it that we are implicitly or explicitly affirming when we engage in critique?" (Bernstein 1992, p.317). So we try to be honest and transparent in this regard: a critical introduction to economic geography should, we think, be clear about the basis for its criticisms. Thus in evaluating different strands of economic geography we explain *how* we are evaluating them and *why* we think this is a fair or useful basis for evaluation.

## 1.4 Outline of the Book

The book is divided into two main parts. The first is about economic geography as a discipline, the second is about some of the pressing substantive subjects that economic geography studies. We bring to both parts a critical sensibility.

Textbooks generally do not focus on the internal workings of a discipline, or reflect systematically on its larger intellectual character. There may be fleeting reference to the subject's history, possibly something on its methods, but likely that's it. The implicit

rationale for ignoring these internal features is that students are not interested. As the British say, the topic attracts only trainspotters: geeks and nerds (as North Americans say) who are obsessed by arcane minutiae. We disagree. Apart from the fact that discussions about the make-up and character of a discipline involve compelling as well as politically and morally charged discussions, knowing about the discipline is absolutely necessary to understand the discipline's knowledge of substantive issues. The discipline does not gain its knowledge by simply holding up a mirror that passively reflects the economic geographic world outside. Rather, the discipline actively produces economic geographic knowledge. Consequently, to be critical one must know something of interior disciplinary imperatives that vigorously shape economic geographic knowledge, and requires knowledge of the subject's local rules, history, internal sociology, even its geography. It is this that the first part of this book provides.

The reference to economic geography's own geography warrants pause. We do not pretend to introduce economic geography in its totality, because we do not know it in anything like its totality. We are painfully aware of our limitations, and especially linguistic ones. This book introduces and assesses economic geography *written in (or translated into) English*. That does not mean it is *only* about Anglo-American economic geography; scholars working in many non-English-speaking parts of the world have in recent decades increasingly chosen – or been institutionally compelled – to publish more of their research in English. But the reality, for better or worse, is that the book is *mainly* about Anglo-North American economic geography.

Chapter 2, the first of Part I, begins by reviewing definitions of the discipline, and critically discussing the intellectual and sociological work that such definitions perform. We provide our own provisional definition of economic geography, although, following Immanuel Wallerstein (2003, p.453), we remain “dubious” about it, believing that such a definition should always remain up for grabs, subject to contestation and criticism. We argue that economic geography is best understood less as a set of disciplinary institutions, or even as the study of tightly specified subject matter, than as something like an intellectual “sensitivity” or perspective. Nevertheless, economic geography's institutions *are* important. By formalizing and institutionalizing economic geography's “sensitivity,” and giving it a home and intellectual visibility and credibility in the way Chisholm's book did, those institutions nourish it and help to keep it alive. Chapter 3 provides a history of the discipline from its first institutionalization as a university subject during the late nineteenth century. We emphasize both internal and external forces, bound up often with asymmetries of power, which shape and direct that history, producing what we call different invented versions of the discipline, with each requiring critical interpretation. Chapter 4 is about the border country of economic geography, that is, the space that it interacts in and shares with adjoining disciplines in the social sciences. We argue in the chapter that this space is potentially productive for critical inquiry, both calling into question taken-for-granted disciplinary truths, and at the same time relaxing disciplinary constraints, allowing people to think thoughts not usually thought. Chapter 5 is a critical review of the changing meaning, role, and use of theory in economic geography. We are concerned especially to check the vital signs of theoretical practice in economic geography, which we conclude for the most part show robust good health. Chapter 6 is about a topic that is often hidden in one of the discipline's dark corners: methodology. We are concerned to shine a bright light on it in this chapter to reveal the range, diversity, and critical potential of the various methods available. Finally, Chapter 7 takes the lid off the black box of economic geography as a lived,

performed discipline to reveal what actually goes on. It is not always a pretty sight, involving messy entanglements of material things, immaterial ideas, human bodies, and social institutions, but it usually gets the job done, except of course when it doesn't.

The second part of the book is more like the standard fare of economic geographic textbooks. It is a review of a set of core substantive topics to which economic geographers have contributed both theoretically and empirically. The five topics we have selected all meet two key criteria. First, they are important topics, ones central to the economy of the twenty-first century; and second, they are fundamentally economic geographic topics, which is to say topics that require an economic geographic sensibility being brought to bear to adequately unravel them. But what is not standard fare, we believe, is the consistent critical perspective that we apply to each of those topics and the analysis of them.

Chapter 8 is about globalization and uneven economic development more generally. We examine conventional representations of globalization – including the Friedmanite flat-earth geographies mentioned earlier – and contrast these with the altogether more imbalanced and uneven geography of the global economy as depicted by economic geographers. Chapter 9 considers a crucial infrastructure of the global economy: modern money and finance. We live not only in interesting but also in financial (or “financialized”) times; the chapter explains why and how, showing the indispensability of a geographical sensibility to any understanding of monetary and financial phenomena. In Chapter 10 we examine in turn the phenomena viewed by many as the very motors of today's economy: cities. Given the importance of cities, individually and collectively, to the economy, we argue that economic geography provides unique insights into contemporary economic processes and outcomes. Chapter 11 shifts focus to what has traditionally been seen as the city's “other” – nature – but continues with the same theme, namely the centrality of geography (here, the environment) to the economy. Just as capitalism today would look markedly different if it were not a predominantly and increasingly urban capitalism, it would also look markedly different if it adopted an alternative relation to nature from the processes of privatization and commodification that presently prevail. The last chapter of Part II, Chapter 12, assesses technological and industrial change, and posits these processes of transformation as fundamentally geographical, demanding an economic geographic analysis.

Chapter 13, the concluding chapter, emphasizes two themes that run throughout the book. The first is economic geography's ability to accommodate, and to find germane relationships among, an inordinately wide range of different phenomena. Rather than a discipline that has become narrower and narrower, it has become wider and wider, recording an ever-expanding web of synthetic connections. The second is the hope of economic geography and is bound to the disciplinary critical practices we highlight throughout the volume. Those critical practices are not undertaken for their own sake, but in the audacious hope of making a better world.

## 1.5 Conclusion

We have tried to write a different kind of textbook for economic geography. Not that we are casting aspersions on other existing textbooks in the field. They are generally excellent. The discipline absolutely needs them. Without them, there would be no discipline. But it doesn't mean that they all need to be the same.

The distinctiveness of our book is given by the subtitle of our volume. We provide a critical introduction to the field. Critical does not mean just being negative. Being critical is in fact a necessary step to learning, to becoming edified. By contesting, by excavating, by prodding and questioning, by exposing one's values, by trying things out, by experimenting, by registering reactions and push-back, one learns, one becomes educated. That is what Mr Daisey was trying to do when he began his work in economic geography. And you can do so too.

## Notes

- 1 The transcript is available at: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/454/transcript> (accessed July 7, 2017).
- 2 Exactly what Daisey found out when he visited Shenzhen is disputed. *This American Life* later retracted the Daisey story because of concerns he had fabricated some of his experiences in China, concluding that his account comprised “a mix of things that actually happened when he visited China and things that he just heard about or researched, which he then pretends that he witnessed first hand” (see [http://podcast.thisamericanlife.org/special/TAL\\_460\\_Retraction\\_Transcript.pdf](http://podcast.thisamericanlife.org/special/TAL_460_Retraction_Transcript.pdf); accessed July 7, 2017). Daisey's reporting of his economic geographic fieldwork, in short, was flawed.
- 3 The word geography comes from two Greek words *geo*, meaning earth, and *graphein*, meaning to write. Geography therefore means literally “earth writing,” that is, using words to describe the world.
- 4 [www.montypython.net/scripts/argument.php](http://www.montypython.net/scripts/argument.php) (accessed July 7, 2017).

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