

COMMENTARY

(Re)centring the geopolitical: A response to Henry Yeung's intervention on 'troubling economic geography'

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Abstract

In his thought-provoking commentary on the future of economic geography, Henry Yeung considers recent global economic transformations and their implications for 'troubling' the discipline of economic geography. He identifies four particular areas for further attention: (1) (geo)political dynamics; (2) new risks and uncertainties; (3) new geographies of labour; and (4) global environmental change. In this brief response, I focus on the first and fourth, which I see as closely connected. Specifically, I use Yeung's call as a launching point from which to elaborate on three potentially fruitful avenues for recentring geopolitics in economic geography, by: (1) focusing on not only new but also previous and ongoing geopolitical economic dynamics; (2) incorporating not only national and supra-national, but also transnational economic governance; and (3) foregrounding the intersection of geopolitics and environmental change. I conclude by considering why and how an economic geographic approach remains important to pursuing all three research directions, even as the current conjuncture demands that economic geography open itself further to new methods, topics and inter- and intra-disciplinary research collaborations.

KEYWORDS

economic geography, environmental change, geopolitics, political economy, transnational governance

In his thought-provoking intervention on the future of economic geography, Henry Yeung (2023) considers recent transformations in the field, with a focus on the ways (post)pandemic disruptions and related challenges are reshaping the global economy. He identifies four particular areas for further attention: (1) (geo)political dynamics; (2) new risks and uncertainties; (3) new geographies of labour; and (4) global environmental change. All four themes raise important questions for the shape of the world and the discipline. In this brief response, I focus on the first and fourth, which I see as closely connected.

Yeung argues that political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating tensions between the USA and China have made (geo)political dynamics increasingly central to the spatial reorganisation of the global economy. This is most evident in the growing push for state-sponsored reshoring, decoupling and 'deglobalisation', all justified largely in terms of national security and 'techno-nationalist' logics. Suggesting that (geo)political dynamics have now 'become the

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primordial driving force in the global economy’, Yeung calls on economic geographers to ‘theorise more robustly such inter- and intra-national politics of economic processes and demonstrate empirically their consequential effects on people, places and economies’ (Yeung, 2023, p. 3). He identifies recent work on state capitalism in China, the Global South, and the Global North as an important step in this direction.

By way of response to Yeung’s call, I elaborate on three ways in which I believe geopolitical dynamics specifically might usefully be recentred across many areas of economic geography, by: (1) focusing more on not only new but also previous and ongoing geopolitical economic dynamics; (2) incorporating not only national and supra-national, but also transnational economic governance; and (3) foregrounding the intersection of geopolitics and environmental change. I conclude by considering why and how an economic geographic approach remains important to pursuing all three research directions.

1 | ALWAYS GEOPOLITICAL

It is not only recent, dramatic shifts in the global economy that are ripe for more sustained geopolitical analysis, but rather that economic geography would benefit from incorporating the geopolitical more fully into all its analyses, including of more traditional topics and previous periods. While the changes Yeung emphasises have indeed been transformative, the centrality of the (geo)political in shaping global economic geographies is not new. As recent work in and beyond economic geography has in fact emphasised, the globalising capitalism of the past several decades has been a product of dialectically entangled geopolitical and geoeconomic relations, which in turn have been inseparable from underlying dynamics of capitalist uneven development and from various projects of ‘state’-led (re)territorialisation (Lee et al., 2018; Sparke, 2018).

The *apparent* disentangling of the economic from the geopolitical in the age of unquestioned US hegemony and globalisation was itself a thoroughly (geo)political process. It was only made possible by the development of technocratic international institutions for economic governance and the spread of de-politicising but still politically powerful ideologies of economic growth, which themselves served strategic US interests in multiple ways (see, e.g., Mitchell, 2002; Peck, 2010; Peet, 2003). Also crucial was the relative stability of US power, which ensured that, once established in such a way that they served US interests above all others, the rules of the (neo)liberal international order could be left more or less alone. While these rules did not *always* work to the advantage of the United States, this was the broad framework supporting US economic power and shaping the major economic geographic transformations of the past 50 years, including the shift to post-Fordism in the North, the outsourcing of manufacturing to the South, the rise of the BRICs, and other critical developments.

Conversely, it is the relative decline of US power and the reshuffling of national economic goals and opportunities this has enabled that have now made the geopolitical so visible. In particular, it is not only the threat of China, rising populism, pandemic disruptions, or the Russian invasion of Ukraine that have provoked the USA into embracing the kinds of active industrial and protectionist policies it has long denounced. Rather, this shift must be seen in relation to the declining utility of the post-war international economic order *to the United States itself*. This order was designed to benefit the world’s dominant economic power. As the US hold on that position has slipped, its rules no longer serve US interests as clearly as they once did. Meanwhile, China’s growing economic strength makes its relationship to these same rules and institutions ambivalent. On the one hand, for instance, neoliberal trade rules have become increasingly useful to Chinese manufacturers, while, on the other, China’s reliance on many hybrid state–private enterprises is at odds with aspects of the reigning system (Hopewell, 2016; Potts, 2023).

2 | TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE

The question of economic rules and institutions brings us to another of Yeung’s points about the future of economic geography: that, in engaging recent (geo)political changes, the discipline must ‘neither eschew individual actors and firms nor blindly bring the state back in’, but should also focus more on international governance and supra-national institutions (Yeung, 2023, p. 3). I pick up on this important point to add that economic geographers should also pay more attention to *transnational* economic relations and governance.

Whether focusing on global supply chains (Yeung, 2022; Yeung & Coe, 2015), transnational contracts (Appel, 2019; Potts, 2016) or cross-border financial transactions (Haberly & Wójcik, 2017; Wójcik, 2013), it is important to avoid the tendency to assume that such transnational processes either ‘escape’ national governance altogether or simply ‘hop’ from one national regulatory container to another. Rather, they are governed by a variety of overlapping rules and institutions,

some of whose authority extends across borders. This includes the inter- and supra-national rules Yeung emphasises. But it also includes the transnational extension of certain national and even subnational legal regimes (especially England's and New York's) (Pistor, 2019; Potts, 2016, 2020), as well as of less formalised rules and institutions, from the legal technologies of contracts to the industry standards formulated and enacted by the Institute of International Finance or the big credit rating agencies (Agnew, 2022).

Examining this variety of 'regulators' shows that transnational economic processes are governed not by a quilt of national regulatory spaces laying side-by-side, nor even by a neatly nested hierarchy of local, national and international regulatory spaces, but rather by a much messier series of overlapping and sometimes contradictory formal and informal rules and institutions. Furthermore, it is not always clear which has the most authority, and struggles over such authority are only likely to intensify as the hegemonic (neo)liberal logics of the past few decades increasingly rub up against very different views about how to structure state-market relations. Grappling with these complex and layered governance arrangements is critical to understanding how exactly global economic geographies are being reconstituted today, and where the most likely points of tension, conflict and possible push-back might be.

3 | GEOPOLITICAL ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Finally, Yeung makes the critical point that economic geographers must engage more with global environmental change. While he addresses this separately from (geo)politics, his piece also hints towards the significance of connecting these domains. Here, I pick up on this thread to suggest that economic geographers must analyse the ways in which environmental change is inseparable from today's most important geopolitical economic changes.

This is partly, of course, because of the need to de-carbonise production and restructure supply chains if we are to mitigate global warming. Here, I am perhaps less sceptical than Yeung of the possible benefits of re-shoring. Beyond this, however, climate change is simply central to the ways governments are rewriting and justifying new industrial policies now. National views on economic 'security' and encouraging domestic manufacturing are inseparable from expectations about how climate change and the green transition will radically reshape the global economy (see, e.g., The White House, 2021). Concerns about securing access to critical minerals for that transition are also changing calculations about which countries count as strategic partners, as evidenced by the recent surge in high level US officials' attempts to promote 'economic diplomacy' in Africa. Meanwhile, the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on global food markets have been compounded by the already devastating impacts of climate change and landscape transformations on food production around the world, while concerns about energy independence in the context of the invasion have led both to accelerated efforts to incentivise renewables and to windfall profits and further investment for oil and gas manufacturers. Given these and other fundamental interconnections, the geopolitical transformations reshaping the global economy cannot be fully understood without tying these to the socio-ecological transformations reshaping the planet.

4 | CONCLUSION

As Yeung notes, in the past decade there has been a vibrant debate about the identity and future of economic geography, with some worried about the status of this subfield within human geography (see, for a variety of views, Barnes & Sheppard, 2010; Rosenman et al., 2020; Yeung, 2019). Here I suggest, in line with some of these assessments and in view of the urgent transformations Yeung highlights, that the current conjuncture makes broadening our understanding of what conversations are relevant to economic geography increasingly important. Yet, this need not imply losing sight of the specificity of economic geography altogether. As someone who sees myself as working firmly at the intersection of economic, political and legal geography, as well as international political economy and legal studies, I am not especially concerned with how particular scholars define their own disciplinary location at any given moment. I do, however, think an economic geographic *approach* remains a crucial component of our collective effort to make sense of the economic, political, social and environmental changes affecting us all.

Of course, views on what exactly defines that approach differ, and I make no attempt to define the 'outer' boundaries of economic geography here. However, adapting insights from Barnes and Christophers (2018), along with a passing comment of Yeung's own in his piece for this exchange (Yeung, 2023, p. 3), we might venture to define the 'centre' of an economic geographic approach as one that includes: (1) foregrounding what are widely understood to be key 'economic' objects, including consumption, production, distribution, money and finance, innovation, and work, while

(2) asking where each of these processes takes place, why there and not somewhere else, and how and why does this move resources, things and people from one location to another. Other axes of analysis, of course, including gender, race and nature, cut through all these dimensions, while various disciplinary (sub)fields engage many overlapping themes and questions. Yet, keeping this two-part definition in the foreground ensures that uneven development and the broader spatial organisation of capitalism remain central to our analyses.

At the same time, acting on some of the avenues for future research identified here suggests expanding traditional methodological approaches to economic geography in certain ways. Most simply, (re)centring the geopolitical as well as supra- and transnational economic governance requires broadening our sense of who can count as an 'economic' actor (e.g., to include government agencies and policymakers, jurists and lawyers) and, concomitantly, of what we identify as 'economic' logics and motivations. This in turn implies expanding the range of sources commonly used in economic geography, to include more focus on interviews or ethnographic research with such actors, as well as more attention to government hearings and reports, laws, contracts and so on. All these methods, moreover, should be brought to bear on scrutinising the intersection of (geo)political economy and environmental change. Taking these practical steps while still foregrounding the types of economic objects and spatial questions identified above will, I think, enable economic geographers both to benefit from and continue to make significant contributions to broader inter- and intra-disciplinary conversations about the hugely significant changes in the global economy that Yeung has identified.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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