

COMMENTARY

‘Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’: And what’s economic geography going to do about it?

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Ever since COVID and lockdown, I’ve begun my first-year introduction to Human Geography class at the University of British Columbia, ‘Geography, Modernity and Globalization’, by reading aloud William Butler Yeats’ 1919 apocalyptic poem, *The Second Coming*.¹ The students are a bit nonplussed, but it seems to resonate. There was even sporadic clapping last time. I tell them that like never before in my lifetime—I recently crossed the threshold into the twilight of senior citizenship—things feel as if they are falling apart, the centre not holding. Apart from COVID, clearly not done yet despite the brave use of ‘post-pandemic’ in Henry Yeung’s (2023) title—only this afternoon I received my fifth jab of the Pfizer bivalent—there is a long litany of other crises that only lengthens. There is the existential dread of global warming and its multiplicitous tragic and financially exorbitant effects. In only British Columbia, in November 2021, Vancouver was cut off from the rest of Canada (or was Canada cut off from Vancouver?) following a biblical rainstorm (an ‘atmospheric river’) and Great Flood. And six months before, the entire town of Lytton turned to cinders when temperatures reached 49.6°C (breaking Canada’s old temperature record by 5°). There is the assault on democracy most immediately exemplified by the 6 January 2021, Capitol Insurrection—just yesterday, Trump was criminally indicted on four counts of conspiring to overthrow the Federal election result that he lost. Then shortly over a year later, there was the month-long trucker convoy blockade of Ottawa, the capital of Canada, the country of ‘peace, order and good government’.² There’s the war in Europe that with one stray Russian missile has the potential to expand and to turn nuclear, with the prospect of the end of the world as we knew it. And there is continual economic buffeting including inflation rates not seen for almost two generations, especially with respect to food; labour shortages; and the returning spectre of financial Armageddon as most recently Credit Suisse and Silicon Valley Bank deep-sixed.

The economic historian, and other things too, Adam Tooze (2022) in a *Financial Times* (28 October 2022) opinion piece provides a non-poetic version of *The Second Coming*, ‘the world of polycrisis’. Although not his term, Tooze (2022) means by polycrisis how ‘disparate shocks’ pile up at pell-mell pace and, moreover, ‘interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts’. It’s what Yeats means by ‘the widening gyre’. ‘Pandemic, drought, floods, mega storms and wildfires, threats of a third world war’ (Tooze, 2022). There is no ‘single cause’ and hence, ‘no single fix’ (Tooze, 2022).

It is against this looming future that Henry Yeung (2023) has written ‘Troubling economic geography’ about the discipline’s looming future. While I appreciated Yeung’s useful speculations about the potential prospective topics of research that economic geographers might pursue, I never thought he gave sufficient attention to the potentially sweeping, radical changes to economic geography that the Troubles ‘with a capital T’ might portend, causing fundamental change.³ The last paragraph of Yeung’s (2023, p. 13) paper implied that the troubles he describes—Tooze’s polycrisis?—become merely scholarly opportunities for the discipline to investigate, in effect providing renewed energy and direction to the subject. That reminded me of that old Marxist saw that capitalism never lets a good crisis go to waste. But if we take Tooze (and Yeats) seriously, the consequence of the Troubles is fundamental transformation, in this case, of economic geography. But in Yeung’s review, economic geography never seemed profoundly changed and made different by its troubling encounters. Instead, it was the same discipline except tackling a set of new substantive issues. I would have liked Yeung to

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have reflected more deeply and explored the potentially more fundamental transformation of the discipline. And here I think he might have benefited by ruminating on economic geography's history and past transformations.

Yeung (2023, p. 1) recognises that 'the field underwent tremendous transformation throughout the 2010s'. But that wasn't in response to current troubles. Rather, it was more like catch-up as economic geography began to recognise, first, the crucial role and effects of money, and spawning of finance geography; and second, the ubiquity of the digital along with the concomitant corporate platformisation of everything. In this mix was also Yeung's own justly celebrated body of research often with Neil Coe on global production chains (Coe & Yeung, 2015). Again, though, that work was not a response to recent troubles but had its roots in the 1980s and represented by Dicken's (1986) pioneering book *Global shift*, with its key message for economic geographers to get serious about studying and explaining globalisation and its whole-sale effects (Yeung was a student of Dicken).

The bulk of Yeung's (2023, p. 13) paper is about anticipating the 'new horizons for economic geography research in the 2020s and beyond' (Abstract) and provoked by the 'very troubling kinds of economic disruptions and (geo)political shifts taking place worldwide in the past several years'. By new horizons, Yeung means future topics of research of which he identifies four. They are: '(geo)politics, economies and space'; 'remaking the global economy'; 'worlds of work'; and '(un)sustainable global economic/environmental change'. Each of these new topics, he suggests, are brought about by the troubles. While each of them is interesting on its own terms, I did not think any provide a clear sense of a resulting transformed economic geography. The discipline appears as more of the same, or in some cases, as the same but more—I will explain.

Taking each of the four in turn, first, because of rising non-economic international tensions, for example, between China and the United States, Yeung believes economic geography needs to add to its wheelhouse '(geo)politics' to understand changing global economic geographies. Yeung (2023, p. 5), though, provides little sense of how conceptually to add '(inter-) state politics' to 'economic-geographical processes' and so transform economic geography. My sense is that (geo) politics becomes yet another variable to tag on to others that are already part of Yeung's own economic geography Global Production Network 2.0 frame. In which case, how is economic geography any different? Second, because of various kinds of uncertainties produced by 'the troubles'—COVID, the Ukraine–Russia War, assorted climate calamities—the global economy has been remade. Yeung, therefore, wants to add risk and uncertainty to economic geography so it can account better for changing global economic geographical relations. I wasn't clear how that will be done, however, and therefore how economic geography will change. As far as I know, the last systematic and comprehensive attempt to grapple with spatial uncertainty was Michael Webber's (1972) *Impact of uncertainty on location* written more than 50 years ago. Is this the new shape of economic geography—back to the future? Third, Yeung's future 'worlds of work' looks very much like the present 'worlds of work'. It is defined by precarity, gig working, flexibility, zero-hour contracts that, in turn, are tangled up with race, gender and identity. If contemporary economic geography already lives in this world of labour precarity and its other features, presumably it will not change. Finally, the area of research within economic geography around which one might expect the greatest transformation, on the '(un)sustainable environment', Yeung says little other than we should continue what was done previously, except more so. So not much disciplinary change here either.

The larger point is that while Yeung's future economic geography may have some different substantive emphases, it looks like business as usual, with the discipline not fundamentally disturbed. The end of the world might be nigh but disciplinary life appears to continue as before, that is, until it presumably does not.

For this reason, I think Yeung's review is too conservative, hankering more than it should for past disciplinary certitudes. Of course, Yeung brings to his task a deep knowledge of the field, an unbridled disciplinary enthusiasm—he is likely economic geography's most important and effervescent champion—and long-standing, prodigious, blue-chip scholarly contributions. His jointly authored textbook *Economic geography: A contemporary introduction* (Coe et al., 2019), now in its third edition, has become the Samuelson of economic geography, shaping the disciplinary perception of a generation of undergraduates around the world. Despite this, but also possibly because of this, I did not think Yeung appreciated sufficiently the full extent and power of the existential threatening changes that are unfolding, that are propelling the world's polycrisis. Or, in Yeats' chilling imagery, as that '... rough beast, its hour come round at last/Slouches towards Bethlehem ...'.

I think Yeung might have done better had he reflected on the history of Anglo-American economic geography and especially during periods of crisis. It would have shown him a disciplinary inclination to radical change, but which is strangely missing in his own prognostications. At least the Anglo-American version of economic geography has never respected its own past. Unlike its seeming intellectual social science soulmate, economics, Anglo-American economic geographers have never stuck with a single methodology, set of techniques, list of venerated luminaries, disciplinary problematic, or a definitive definition of the subject. That has made for an exciting, dynamic, open

subject, one that almost never looks back. It's like Penelope's shroud: spun during the day but unravelled the same night. For this reason, if ever there was a discipline ready and disposed to change, and to change fundamentally because of the kinds of pressing propulsive external forces that exist right now—Yeats' 'widening gyre', Toozee's 'poly-crisis'—it is economic geography.

That disciplinary disposition has made the history of economic geography one of radical disjuncture, with it markedly shifting in response to a rupturing external context. Useful here is the work of Backhouse and Fontaine (2010), who write about the histories of different social sciences since 1945. They usefully draw on the idea of 'the degree of [disciplinary] permeability to social change' (Backhouse & Fontaine, 2010, p. 11). They categorise academic disciplines according to their differential porosity, that is, their internal responsiveness to events, movements, and interests that lay outside the academy. They argue that permeability is highly variable by discipline. Some subjects, such as economics, for much of their history seemingly hermetically seal themselves from outside change. The world may turn, but they do not. Other subjects, however, and here economic geography is a paragon case, act more like sponges, absorbing and sopping up outside spillage that then shapes the discipline's internal structure and intellectual agenda.

Let me provide two brief examples. The first is Anglo-American economic geography after the Second World War, a crisis if ever there was one. Change did not happen immediately after the war ended, but nevertheless, gradually, ineluctably economic geography was transformed, moving from a staid, conservative describer and map-maker of commercial geographical facts—think George Chisholm's 1889 *Handbook of commercial geography* that in 1937 became Dudley Stamp's *Chisholm's handbook of commercial geography*—to a modern, mathematical, theoretical, and intellectually fluid and vibrant discipline. In the UK, the crises inciting change were as much political and cultural and embedded within British society. A cohort of overwhelmingly young men committed to post-war social and intellectual transformation—'modernisation'—took on a hide-bound, anti-modernist older male establishment (perhaps best personified by the London School of Economics' Sir Dudley Stamp; Barnes, forthcoming). In the United States, there was also generational conflict, but more important was the larger troubling context of the Cold War that caused much of America, including its social sciences, to become war-ready. Catherine Lutz (2001, p. 3) said during the Cold War the country was turned into a giant 'army camp'. From the mid-1950s, the social sciences, including economic geography, were weaponised by becoming abstract, mathematical, predictive and instrumental (Barnes & Farish, 2006). Once the post-war transformation of economic geography occurred, there was, in Kuhn's (1970) well known terms, a *gestalt* shift. In Kuhn's example, one now saw only bunnies, whereas before it was only ducks.⁴ Or, in the case of economic geography, as John Hudson said, he saw now only 'points and lines', whereas before he saw regions and Hartshornian element complexes.⁵

The second is economic geography after the 1970s crisis of deindustrialisation and Fordism. Here disciplinary change came quickly and comprehensively, undergoing a root and branch makeover. Like the earlier period there were different UK and North American variants (although linked). The prior 'points and lines' version of economic geography drew on classical location theories such as Von Thünen's, Weber's, Christaller's and Lösch's, along with several strands of neoclassical regional science. The world it depicted was ordered, predictable and mostly harmonious. The 1970s global economic crises turned that world upside down and inside out. Instead, it became lumpy, chaotic, on the brink of careening out of control, punctuated by abrupt dislocations, and skewered by pervasive conflict and acute spatial inequality. An entirely different economic geography emerged, drawing on radical political economic analyses best systematised in the UK by Doreen Massey (1984) under *Spatial divisions of labour* and in the United States by Storper and Walker (1989) under *The capitalist imperative*. It brought another *gestalt* shift. Economic geographers saw now only creative destruction, deindustrialisation, restructuring, and uneven development whereas before they saw partial equilibrium von Thünen bid-rent curves, Weberian optimal cost-minimisation isodapanes, and Christallerian and Löschian infinitely extended landscapes of hierarchically nested hexagonal market areas.

There is a caveat here that goes to more recent external crises faced by economic geography, which might be a warning sign for the discipline, explaining why, as Yeung notes, economic geography has not made it recently on to the pages of the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.⁶ The 2008 financial crisis produced a response by economic geographers, the burgeoning body of literature that is finance geography. Increasingly, though, finance geography is decoupling from the larger discipline becoming an autonomous inquiry with its own journals, conferences, specialised lexicon and internal pecking order of practitioners. In that light, it is perhaps symptomatic that Yeung does not include it within his four new horizons. The other crisis, which goes back at least two decades, likely longer, is global warming. Here, as Yeung says, economic geographers have made few contributions. The larger point is that the discipline is perhaps not as responsive, not as accommodating, to outside crises as it was in the past. That maybe as a discipline it is becoming more like economics, more insular.

All this is speculation. We can never know the future. But this most recent track record does seem a bit worrying. If the discipline is going to survive and prosper, which both Henry Yeung and I fervently hope, then it must continue to be porous and open, to be willing to change radically, to be prepared for mere anarchy to be loosed upon the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Colin McFarlane for the invitation to write this commentary, as well as the two referees who provided generous and useful comments that improved the paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data was used in this paper.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming> (last accessed 14 April 2023).
- ² The phrase comes from the 1867 British North American Act that created the federal dominion and set the framework for the government of Canada.
- ³ From 'Ya got trouble' by Meredith Wilson from *The Music Man* (1957); <https://genius.com/Meredith-wilson-ya-got-trouble-lyrics> (last accessed 14 April 2023).
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit%E2%80%93duck_illusion.
- ⁵ Interview with John Hudson by the author, Evanston, Illinois, November 1997.
- ⁶ I am very grateful to one of the reviewers for raising this point and providing the examples.

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How to cite this article: Barnes, T. (2023) 'Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world': And what's economic geography going to do about it? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 48, 686–689. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12644>