

Recovering the social in evolutionary economic geography: alternative pathways for regional development

‘Globalisation in Crisis? The Urban and Regional Challenges of the Great Instability’, Cambridge, July 2017

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Next stage in collective project...



Evolution in Economic Geography: Institutions, Political Economy, and Adaptation

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abstract

Economic geography has, over the past decade or so, drawn upon ideas from evolutionary economics in trying to understand processes of regional growth and change. Recently, some researchers have sought to delimit and develop an "evolutionary economic geography" (EEG), aiming to create a more systematic theoretical framework for research. This article provides a sympathetic critique and elaboration of this emergent EEG but takes issue with some aspects of its characterization in recent programmatic statements. While acknowledging that EEG is an evolving and pluralist project, we are concerned that the reliance on certain theoretical frameworks that are imported from evolutionary economics and complexity science threatens to isolate it from other approaches in economic geography, limiting the opportunities for cross-fertilization. In response, the article seeks to develop a social and pluralist conception of institutions and social agency in EEG, drawing upon the writings of leading institutional economists, and to link evolutionary concepts to political economy approaches, arguing that the evolution of the economic landscape must be related to processes of capital accumulation and uneven development. As such, we favor the use of evolutionary and institutional concepts within a geographical political economy approach, rather than the construction of some kind of theoretically separate EEG—evolution in economic geography, not an evolutionary economic geography.

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Doing Evolution in Economic Geography

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abstract

Evolutionary approaches in economic geography face questions about the relationships between their concepts, theories, methods, politics, and policy implications. Amidst the growing but unsettled consensus that evolutionary approaches should employ plural methodologies, the aims here are, first, to identify some of the difficult issues confronting those working with different frameworks. The concerns comprise specifying and connecting research objects, subjects, and levels; handling agency and context; engaging and integrating the quantitative and the qualitative; comparing cases; and, considering politics, policy, and praxis. Second, the purpose is to articulate a distinctive geographical political economy approach, methods, and illustrative examples in addressing these issues. Bringing different views of evolution in economic geography into dialogue and disagreement renders methodological pluralism a means toward improved understanding and explanation rather than an end in itself. Confronting such thorny matters needs to be embedded in our research practices and supported by greater openness; more and better substantiation of our conceptual, theoretical, and empirical claims; enhanced critical reflection; and deeper engagement with politics, policy, and praxis.

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Outline

- Revisiting the regional problem amidst the current post-crisis conjuncture
- The impasse of existing regional concepts and theories
- The contributions of evolutionary geographical political economy
- Evolutionary geographical political economy and alternative pathways for regional development
- Conclusions

Revisiting the regional problem I – the current conjuncture

- “crisis of democratic capitalism” (Streeck)
- Broken, dysfunctional growth model derailing prosperity
- Widening social and spatial disparities – “people and places left behind”
- Social and political legitimation crisis, economic populism (Brexit, Trump) and geographies of “liberal metropolitan elites” versus (non-?)liberal, non-elite ‘ordinary’ regions
- Public policy concern, failure, exhaustion, uncertainty and confusion...?

Revisiting the regional problem II

- Renewed concern with spatial inequalities a return to the old issue of combined and uneven development



- “In what sense a (new?) regional problem”?
(Massey 1979)

The impasse of existing regional concepts and theories

- Little to say (to date) and asking the right questions? (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014)
- Stuck, trapped, unable and/or reluctant to innovate and/or revise existing frameworks for new realities
- Overly fixated with dynamic and ‘successful’ core region cases
- Persistent but minority pursuit explaining the plight of ‘ordinary’/‘failing’/‘lagging’ regions

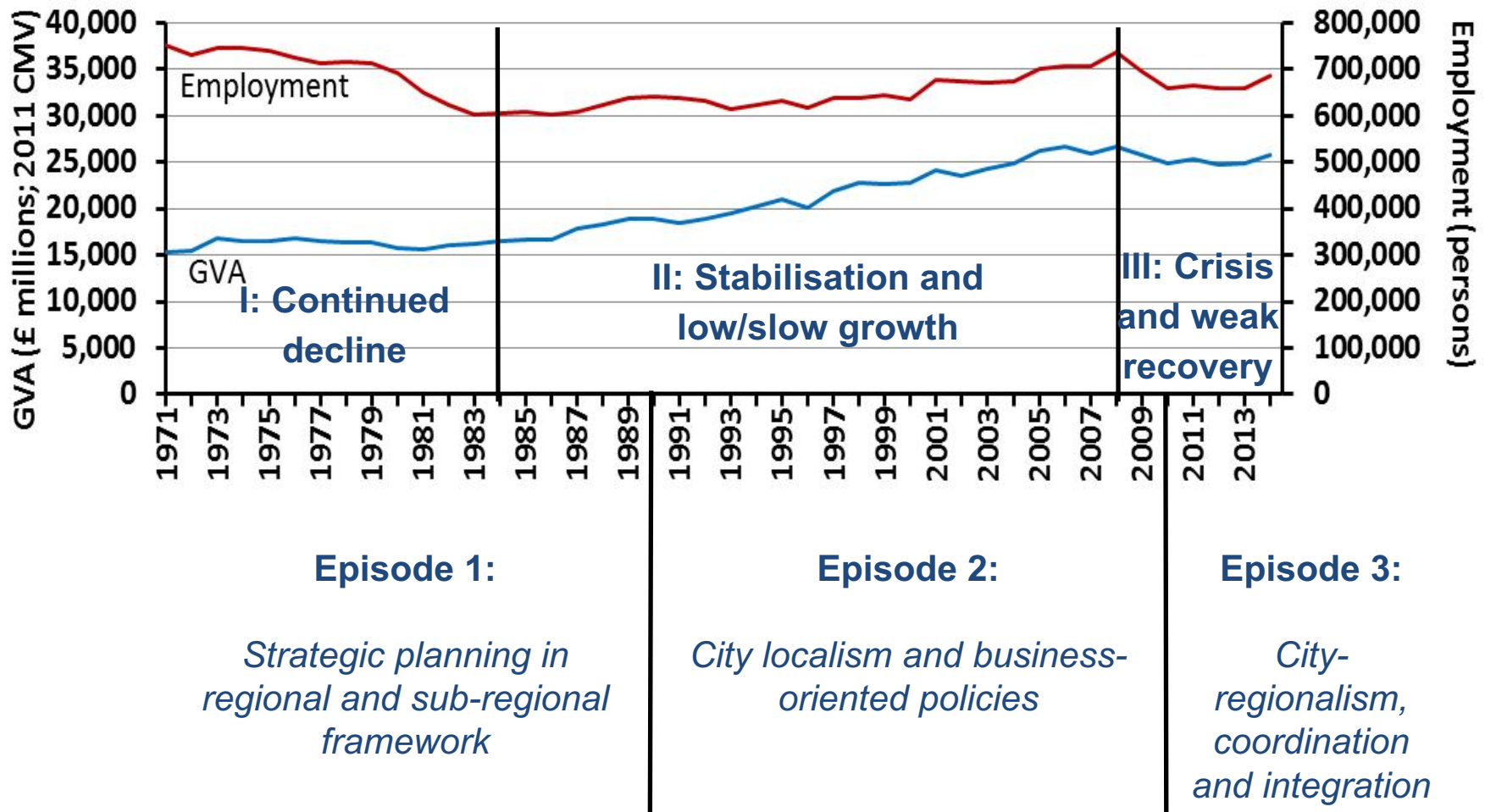
The contributions of evolutionary geographical political economy

- Debt to Massey in historical perspective, geological metaphors, layering and recombination in social and spatial structures and divisions of labour
- Holistic, contextual, and integrated framework
- Connecting spatial economic evolution to broader questions of value creation and capture, agency and structure, adaptation, the state and institutional variegation, and combined and uneven development

Pathways I – temporal evolution and change

- Episodes of change
- ‘Moments’ for conscious and deliberative social agency and institutional intervention:
 - Path creation
 - Path shaping, shifting?
 - Path managed decline, destruction, termination?

Periodisation – economic change, institutions and policies: Glasgow



Pathways II – qualitative

- Shift from only quantitative to qualitative scrutiny of regional development
- What kinds of pathways and for whom? (c. Pike *et al.* 2007)
- Different definitions of regional ‘development’
- More inclusive? Sustainable? Progressive?

‘Inclusive growth’ and the ‘more and better jobs gap’ in British cities, 2015

City	Better jobs gap %	More jobs gap %	More + better jobs gap %	Total Labour Force + Inactive but wants work	Better jobs gap (000s)	More jobs gap (000s)	More + better jobs gap (000s)
Newcastle	21%	24%	41%	749	154	182	304
Cardiff	18%	27%	40%	765	140	204	308
Manchester	20%	25%	40%	1,453	292	357	582
Liverpool	18%	25%	40%	758	140	192	303
Sheffield	19%	25%	40%	977	185	248	389
Nottingham	20%	23%	39%	517	102	120	203
Birmingham	17%	26%	39%	1,378	235	356	540
Leeds	19%	24%	39%	1,199	227	288	464
Glasgow	15%	22%	34%	455	70	102	157
London	14%	23%	34%	4,843	677	1,127	1,642
Edinburgh	18%	20%	34%	725	128	148	244
Bristol	15%	21%	32%	610	92	126	198
Total:					2,442	3,450	5,334

Evolutionary geographical political economy and alternative pathways

- Critique of existing pathways and their multi-scalar foundations
- Rediscovering and articulating normative politics – what kinds of pathways should we be constructing and pursuing?
- What are the opportunities for alternative pathways?
- What counter-hegemonic narratives can be constructed? Just, progressive, solidaristic and sustainable regionalism...?

Conclusions

- Need to revisit the regional problem in the current post-crisis conjuncture
- Existing concepts and theories yet to engage, reluctant or (still) looking elsewhere at different questions
- Evolutionary geographical political economy contributions: pathways (temporal, qualitative) and politics
- Challenge and task to theorise, construct and articulate alternative pathways for regional development



“...history is never closed but maintains an open horizon towards the future.”

Acknowledgements



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