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# ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY RESEARCH GROUP

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## BOOK REVIEW (HUDSON 2005)

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### **Economic Geographies: Circuits, Flows and Spaces**

**Ray Hudson.**

*Sage; London (2005) 248 pages. List Price: £20.99/ \$41.95 ISBN 9780761948940*

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For a long time, we have been looking for a textbook for our theoretically oriented economic geography Course that suits the critical and cultural focus of our Masters Curriculum. In particular, we like to build on the current aspiration to combine political-economic and cultural forms of theorising and analysing economic geographies through a relational approach (Barnes, 2001). So we highly welcomed the way Hudson's volume pursues such an agenda covering a wide range of topics. After carving out its own position in the theoretical debate (Chapter 1) *Economic Geographies* presents a discussion on four types of flows and transformations, namely of value and capital (2), material and nature (3), knowledge and meaning (4), and people (5). After that, the book zooms in onto four types of spaces: regulation and governance, production, sale, consumption and identities, and concludes with contemplating the desirable but difficult conversion of space of pollution and waste into 'spaces of sustainability'. Because of the latter emphasis, Hudson's volume also offers scope for engaging with the debates on environment and sustainability, which constitute an important pillar within the wider teaching and research cluster in which our Curriculum is embedded. As a result, our opinion here is based not only on our own reading, but also on teaching experiences and feedback from the students.

Indeed, it is not so much the way *Economic Geographies* meets our own interests, but the reception by our students that has informed us while writing this review. We assess this work as a textbook for graduate teaching (although the cover also recommends it for 'upper level undergraduates') primarily for economic geography students. A clearly positive point is that the book present good value for money, even with the mark-up for continental sales. But after the purchase, we quickly encounter a major problem. The initial feedback from our students, who are well trained in reading academic literature in English, point out that the book is hard to read. Many long and complex sentences, sometimes convoluted, only occasionally punctuated by limited textual and graphic illustrations. Another problem is that while Hudson takes great care to introduce and explain certain concepts, such as those dealing with the capitalist production of value, the organisation of work and spaces of consumption and production, other, often more abstracts concepts such as the structural class relation, spatial fixes and commodity form are used as common terms. Obviously, there is no way a book like this can match the starting levels and expectations of all its (potential) readers, given the

wide variety in the way (economic) geography is taught at undergraduate and graduate levels. What struck us, as well as our students, however, is the variation in the style of writing and argumentation between the chapters. While some chapters were considered not easy but doable and interesting (the introductory chapter and the section on regulation and governance), other chapters were considered almost too easy and, in places, superficial (Flows of People and Spaces of Sale). The dense way the chapter on flows of value and circuit of capital is written, on the other hand, proved to a major stumble block even for those better versed in Marxist literature.

Turning from style to content, again a mixed picture emerges. We admire the way Hudson takes issue with some of the current 'received wisdoms'. In Chapter One, he rejects the idea that we live in a 'consumption' driven economy, on the grounds that the organisation and promotion of production is still the dominant factor in shaping economic space. He considers the shift to a 'sign-value-centred present' unfounded (p. 10), in a sense that markets and production have always manifested a symbolic and cultural dimension as part of their social construction. The idea that we live in a new era of self-consciousness is denounced as 'quite absurd' (p. 11). Rather, most practices and decisions seem to be guided by ingrained habits and 'received wisdoms', which also explains why 'unintended consequences' of economic action are rife. In later chapters, he also takes issue with the coining of the 'knowledge economy'. Rather than the development and circulation of knowledge itself, what is new is the significance of knowledge as a "fictitious commodity" (p. 34).

One could wonder to what extent do later chapters stand up to these strong positions – considering the way these highlight the 'cultural turn' in production, sales and consumption. Writing passionately, Hudson elucidates how the home can become both a space of work (homework, internet sale) and of consumption, and as such has contributed to the control of female labour and the socialisation of women at the same time. This passion also manifests itself in the way he describes knowledge being controlled by retailers and advertiser in their relentless, increasingly sophisticated efforts to lure consumers: "consumers in effect gather around metaphorical camp fires – websites, newspapers, the pub, the kitchen table – swapping and listening to stories about brands" (p. 73). In the same way, he insightfully links flexible specialisation and associated forms of business organisation, a long-standing debate within economic geography, to the sociology of work in this era of 'soft' capitalism. Yet, despite thus hinting at the disciplinary effects of capitalist social relations, the discursive selectivity of new spatial fixes is never really explained. At the end of Chapter 9, for instance, far too brief a reference is made to Miller (2002), wherein real life has been institutionalised and bureaucratised to mirror economic models rather than vice versa.

On the other hand, Hudson remains committed to an 'economy first' position regarding business development and the state, reproducing capitalist economic relations 'in the last instance' (p. 99). The legitimacy of the state is at stake, too. And, at the end of almost every chapter, Hudson makes an effort to draw his readers' attention to economies beyond regulation and the lives of the working poor, for whom access to circuits and flows is limited and often involuntary. This does not come, however, with a more in-depth analysis of how such patterns and practices are culturally embedded and reproduced (cf. Jessop, 2004). Hence, in the end, Hudson does not entirely come to grips with his aim to understand contemporary economic geographies from a combined political-economy and cultural-economy perspective. Rather, the political-economic and the cultural-economic run in parallel. Perhaps what we feel is a missing element in this otherwise original and thought-provoking book is a more fundamental discussion on the relationships between the economic and non-economic beyond class relations.

## **Acknowledgement**

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