

EDITORIAL: ECONOMIC DECLINE AND THE RELEVANCE OF INDUSTRIAL GEOGRAPHY

The current economic downturn presents a challenge for industrial geographers, a trying time that has multiple dimensions. First, as members of society, we cannot help but be impacted by the economic circumstances that for many of us are without parallel in our lifetimes. The lives of millions of people are being affected by bankruptcy, foreclosure, and job loss, and for many there may be little realistic hope of recovery, at least in the near future. The depth of the crisis has permeated society in recent months to such an extent that a candidate for the U.S. presidency who ran in 2008 on a foundational theme of “hope” finds himself in 2009, following his election as president, infusing his speeches with words of warning against economic calamity. Even in an academic setting, many of us have seen salary freezes, cutbacks, and uncertainty at our institutions. On multiple levels, the pain of recession is a real and growing part of our lives.

Yet, related to the nature of the teaching and research we do in our field, our role as industrial geographers extends beyond experiencing recession to a second level of involvement. Given our interests in economic geography, our work links to a proactive world of *examining* the functioning of our economic system and *communicating* the nature of the forces that shape this fundamentally geographic system to our colleagues, students, and broader community. It is empowering on

many levels to think of the possibilities for contribution that are ours because of what we study.

However, as always, there are things we can seek to do better. Two observations, one from each of the aforementioned areas of examination and communication, provide some insight into the possibilities for positive change.

1. Our research can be even more relevant to the broad range of problems now faced by society. It is clear that one area of need in current economic planning and policy-making relates to a basic understanding of the factors that contribute to economic decay, so that these conditions may be addressed. Although an exceedingly well-established body of research deals with the geography of business decline (Massey and Meegan 1982; Clark and Wrigley 1997; Essletzbichler 2004), important gaps exist in that literature. Business decline research in geography has historically focused on job loss and plant closure, and has been characterized by an overwhelming orientation toward the study of manufacturing. It is clear that losses in these traditional areas of concern remain important in the current recession, but it is also clear that the economic problems we now face go well beyond the manufacturing sector and job losses alone. Recent geographic research related, for example, to the unfolding real estate crisis, and weaknesses in finance

and services (Crump et al. 2008; Aalbers 2009), is an essential complement to the historic focal points of business decline studies in our discipline. Other “blind spots”, or research weaknesses rooted in our disciplinary traditions, certainly exist in geography. Geographers who display the flexibility necessary to diversify their research agendas to encompass current issues provide a real service to geography and society. For the sake of relevance and ultimately the survival of our field, we must be willing to go beyond the research boundaries of the past so that we can address the full spectrum of themes that are most important for our future.

2. We need more industrial geographers willing and able to engage a broader audience. Diverse research agendas are important, but they are not enough. Although a small number of economic geographers (Richard Florida being a classic case) and non-geographers with spatial interests (Paul Krugman being another timely example) have carved out public reputations related to expertise in our field, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that public debate and policy formation could use a higher awareness of the basic principles on display in any economic geography class. Krugman’s colleagues in economics have grasped this point, to the benefit of their discipline; we ought to learn from their example. Industrial geographers need to be more active in translating the fundamentals of economic geography into a language and format that is relevant to the needs of policy-makers and the public at large.

Industrial geographers have always had messages worth sharing outside of our

immediate, professional circles. For the good of society and the growth of our field, it is important that we engage in a continuous assessment of the research that we do, how well this work meets societal needs, and how we might best position our analysis for effective dissemination beyond our profession. As a journal with an empirical and applied orientation, *The Industrial Geographer* aims to contribute to this process.

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