Navigating economic geographies

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Abstract
In both a formal and temperamental sense, contemporary Anglo-American economic geography is a heterodox enterprise. The paper explores distinctive currents in the discipline’s theory-culture, both in its own terms and in relation to the wider field of heterodox economics. A methodological intervention is proposed, inspired by the substantivist project of “comparative economy,” with the goal of prompting a renewed conversation between economic geography’s “lumpers,” those concerned with the refinement and reconstruction of generalized categories of analysis, and its “splitters,” who opt to work against (or outside) such tacitly accepted categories, favoring their deconstruction and displacement. Even if lumpers and splitters are never entirely comfortable in one another’s company, they should not be allowed to live apart. Furthermore, their cohabitation is an enduring and positive characteristic of economic geography’s heterodox theory-culture, the substantive concerns of which center on the problematic of economic spatiality, its constitution, causality, and consequences.

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It is good to have hair-splitters and lumpers
(Charles Darwin 1857).

Setting the scene: splitting differences

The paper reflects on the character and consequences of analytical and theory-making practices across the field of economic geography—its theory-cultures, for short. The pluralization here is not casual, since it will be suggested that economic geography is by its nature a heterodox endeavor. Contemporary economic geography can be considered to be heterodox in the weak (and somewhat negative) sense that the pull of orthodox neoclassical economics has not been a defining current in field (although this may be changing), which alone might qualify economic geography as a branch of heterodox economics. But the discipline can also be said to be heterodox in the stronger (and indeed positive) sense that it displays a theory-culture that is robustly polycentric and pluralist. Across the always-shifting diversity of the field, epistemological and ontological orientations frequently hew towards heterodox positions and perspectives too. These include the widespread recognition of, and engagement with, *inter alia*, the emergent, instituted, and socially processual character of economic processes and practices; the constitutive roles of uneven development, spatiality, relationality, and local embeddedness as non-transient features of economic life; and the inseparability of the economic from the political, the natural, the cultural, and so forth. The discipline’s methodological tolerances are also relatively wide, spanning ethnography, modeling, discourse analysis, and much in between, albeit with a concentration of qualitative case studies conducted in various registers and oriented to midlevel theorizing.

Contemporary economic geography shows little sign of becoming unified around a single program or dominant perspective, frequently bridling, in fact, at the very suggestion. This means that the field, at least since the late 1970s, has been not only diverse but boldly unbounded and intellectually eccentric (in the constructive meaning of the word), while its shared worldview and purpose is difficult to marshal under anything like a parsimonious or
succinct description. In the absence (notably) of a received definition, it can be said that this is a field that works with and from the recognition of economic-geographical difference (formally stated, the more-than-contingent or constitutive spatiality of the economic), mapping and explaining “the difference that space makes” across an array of economic processes, practices, and performances. To invoke the paper’s epigraph and what will be a recurring motif in the following argument, this means that depicting, parsing, and accounting for economic-geographical difference—finding patterns and connections across diversity by “lumping,” validating exceptions and alternatives by “splitting”—are enduring features of economic geography’s heterogeneous theory-culture. Echoing its reading of actually existing economies, this is an intellectual culture marked by persistent disequilibrium.

In this context, the paper’s title signifies two things. First, it recognizes that there is no single pathway into, or through, economic geography (even if some are more trodden than others). It follows that there is no privileged vantage point from which to survey or read this diverse field. Situated knowledge is therefore more than a poststructuralist caveat; it is a necessary recognition of diversity and positionality. Second, the title hints at the sense that commitments to, and within, economic geography are rarely once-and-for-all matters of certitude. The ground is always moving, as are the field’s coordinates and constituencies, and it is in the nature of economic geography’s heterogeneous theory-culture that there is no consensus on analytical frameworks or methodological strategies, and little that is fixed in either substantive research priorities or received epicenters of influence. Characteristically restless, economic geography is not a discipline with a strong gravitational center, with canonical beliefs and long-lived sacred texts, or with determinate objects of analysis. Drawing the contrast with the monism of orthodox economics, with its “implacable centre,” Barnes and Sheppard (2010, 199) aptly observe that “[f]rom the beginning economic geography has been a discipline with a centre that did not hold.”

This does not mean, however, that there is no “there, there.” At the very least (and this is probably not a small thing), there would seem to be something like a “structure of feeling,” to borrow Raymond Williams’ term, some patterning of a shared culture, spirit, or
consciousness in economic geography. (Anecdotally, those located “outside” economic geography, and looking in, will routinely say that there is.) But even if there are elements of a shared culture, this does not mean that economic geographers are all singing, arm in arm, around the same campfire. Far from it. Presumptuous claims made on a core project or programmatic mission for economic geography are liable to generate ambivalence, unease, or even hostility. And maybe it is such responses that are the most telling indicators of a shared culture—an unsettled, decentered, pluralist heterodoxy. “Turns” may be declared from time to time in economic geography, but they never really hold; rather, they are symbols of a theory-culture actively resistant to consensus or consolidation, and generally more inclined to “turn again.” The field has for some time been given, in Allen Scott’s words, to “twists and turns of substantive focus and sudden changes of theoretical mood” (Scott 2000, 484), possessed of an “anti-canonical [and] open-ended” spirit of inquiry that endlessly breaks down and through any boundaries created for itself (Sheppard et al. 2012, 18). Over the past two decades, in particular, economic geography has taken to narrating and re-narrating its own story, which surely cannot be put down (at least not entirely) to disciplinary narcissism or intellectual insecurity. It has more to do with the fact that neither the provenance of, nor perspectives in, economic geography are self-evident or pre-given, and that no one (situated) account can ever do. These are circumstances that call for a certain degree of reflexivity, both epistemologically and sociologically; which render unstable, provisional, and contestable any pan-disciplinary claims to a singular identity or dominant direction; and which demand that questions of position and perspective are not just passively acknowledged but actively addressed. Positionality and context, in other words, really matter.

Consider the immediate setting: Oxford’s Museum of Natural History is the point of departure for the Fourth Global Conference on Economic Geography. It was on this site that one of the most consequential debates in the history of science took place in 1860, between Thomas Huxley, an ardent follower of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford. And so it is certainly not out of place, in this discussion of the patterning and diversity of analytical practices in economic geography, to evoke
Darwin’s mildly irreverent distinction between lumpers and splitters—familiar terminology in mid-19th Century debates around what was known at the time as “geographical botany.” Back then, the scientific occupation of taxonomy was said to be informally divided between these two tribes, the differences among which were instinctively and viscerally felt. While the splitters were inclined to proliferate categories of analysis, identifying many genera, species, and varieties, the lumpers preferred to combine ostensibly related forms together within the ambit of more generic categories.

This is how a contributor to the prominent Victorian periodical *Cornhill* (self-describing as a “convinced and consistent” lumper, the bearer of “conscientious objections to splitting”) characterized his differences with the gentleman botanist William Borrer, by all accounts an “abandoned splitter”:

[M]odern biologists are divided into the two camps of the splitters and the lumpers. The first are in favour of making a species out of every petty local race or variety; the second are all for lumping unimportant minor forms into a single species (Anon 1894, 295).

The lumpers were said to favor inclusive, integrative categories; they chose to live with a relatively high degree of intra-category heterogeneity, opting to attach overriding significance to similarity, family resemblance, recurrence, and connectivity; on some accounts they were intellectually more conservative, at least in the sense that the default position was to work with and defend extant categories, incorporating new discoveries within established schema. The gaze of the splitters, on the other hand, was irresistibly drawn towards separation rather than similarity, and (the cultivation of) difference and deviation rather than connectivity and conformity; drawn to new species and varieties, they would call for the subdivision of existing categories or the creation of new ones, validating smaller variations in the specification of less promiscuous, more “local” units of analysis. (Mr. Borrer, for example, whose life goal had been to cultivate (and classify) each and every British species, had scrupulously sought to distinguish some seventeen varieties of the dog-wood plant, and no less forty strains of the native blackberry.)

Similar bifurcations have been witnessed in scientific enterprises ever since, and not only amongst geographical botanists. In the wake of the millennial protest movements
ignited in Seattle, Porto Alegre, and elsewhere, the analyst of comparative political systems, Sidney Tarrow, restated the case for “splitting the biggest lumps” off some of the most amorphous categories in the contemporary social sciences, namely the one-lump conception of globalization as free-market homogenization, which had been hitched to a hastily assembled other, the hardly less promiscuous concept of “global resistance” (Tarrow 2002, 234). Around the same time, the renowned economic historian Charles Kindleberger stumbled across the distinction between lumpers and splitters, having been intrigued to see his habit of drawing cross-contextual analytical generalizations portrayed as the work of an arch-lumper. Following an impromptu investigation of the origins of the term, he was relieved to discover that the label was not intended as pejorative, conceding that it was indeed “more or less true that I believe financial crises have broad similarities” (Kindleberger 2000, 88). A thoroughly heterodox scholar himself, Kindleberger’s mediation on lumping and splitting in economics did not lead him all the way back to Darwin, but his instinctive wariness of intellectual monocultures led him to conclude—along with the great scientist—that ongoing dialogue and debate between the two camps represented a healthy state of affairs. (Darwin’s counsel, in correspondence with his longtime interlocutor Joseph Dalton Hooker, an enthusiastic lumper, was that it was “good to have hair-splitters and lumpers.”)

Bearing this advice in mind, the paper proceeds in three steps, taking the form of an inevitably situated, perhaps provocative, but hopefully constructive series of reflections on economic geography’s contemporary condition. It begins by considering the nature of heterodox theory-cultures across the field economics, which in aggregate at least are often defined against the foil of neoclassical orthodoxy. Second, the paper elaborates the claim that contemporary economic geography is—in both a formal and a temperamental sense—a heterodox discipline, prompted by the claim that central tendencies in the discipline can be enveloped by the signifier “geographical political economy,” the patterns of devotion, deviation, and dissent from which reveal a field still somewhat haunted by Marx but also to varying degrees in the throes of a poststructuralist exorcism. And third, since healthy heterodoxies should really be dynamic, evolving, and contestable, rather
than settled or static, a heterodox intervention is proposed in the form of a constructive methodological challenge. Here, the paper draws upon a reinterpretation of Karl Polanyi’s notion of substantivism, an anthropological formulation originally elaborated in opposition to the methodological norms of neoclassical formalism, as a prompt to a different kind of heterodox conversation. The debt here is not to the familiar Polanyi (the originator of that now freighted term, “embeddedness”), but to the rather less well-known postwar Polanyi—Polanyi the comparative economist. His was a project of heterodox economics, programmatically concerned with the spatial and the social; it was never completed, although its guiding principles and methodological spirit remain suggestively provocative.

**Economic heterodoxies**

What does it mean to characterize economic geography as not just generically heterodox, but as a branch of heterodox economics? On the face of it, this signifier of weak-center multipolarity captures something about the contrarian spirit of the field, and its limited tolerance of orthodoxies of just about any stripe. On the other hand, there is surely more at work here than dissent and negation, or the mere absence of orthodoxy. Strictly speaking, however, the label “heterodox” establishes no more than a state of exception (hence the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, “Not in accordance with established doctrines or opinions, or those generally recognized as right or ‘orthodox’”). In the language of economics, of course, heterodoxy carries very particular connotations. Across the broad and heterogeneous field of heterodox economics—which spans everything from economic history to feminist economics, and institutionalism to Marxism, and much else besides—the shadow of the Big Other that is neoclassical economics looms dauntingly large. As Sheila Dow (2000, 157, emphasis added) puts it, “heterodox economists cannot *but* be aware” of this outsized orthodoxy, against which they are unevenly unified in dissent, even if their own disparate priorities and purposes are not so easily bracketed as a shared endeavor. Tony Lawson’s (2015, 26) purposive strategy has been to articulate what he sees as the foundations of heterodoxy’s “unity within difference.” It is difficult to escape the fact, however, that some of this unity derives from a sense of mutual
estrangement from the orthodoxy, one that represents more than just an intellectual mainstream, but also a bastion of gatekeeping and management functions, with implications for access to disciplinary resources, status, and other forms of recognition (see Fourcade et al. 2015).

There are several levels of irony at work, however, in the heterodox habit of assembling itself in the mirror of orthodox economics, not least in that the dissenters have proven to be rather more adept at portraying the theory-culture of the orthodoxy than the (mostly unreflexive) mainstream itself. Hardly a mere inversion, there is no such sharpness of focus in the rather blurry, kaleidoscopic figure that is to be found on the heterodox side of the looking glass. A common complaint, more ironically still, is that heterodoxy’s galvanizing critique of orthodox economics ascribes an exaggerated degree of unity to the mainstream neoclassical project. Conventionally, this is defined by more or less strict devotion to the holy trinity that is atomistic self-interest, rational optimization, and general equilibrium. It is well known, of course, that many in the orthodox camp have strayed from this path, even if only rarely does this mean falling under the spell of genuinely heretical influences. There have been deviations, for example, into experimental and behavioral economics, into evolutionary game theory, and into the study of information asymmetries that raise, and do not neatly resolve, some quite troubling and even sacrilegious questions for the orthodox belief system. Some claim that mainstream economics is fragmenting under these centrifugal dynamics.

One does not have to be a card-carrying splitter, then, to notice a series of deviant tendencies within the neoclassical program. Where mainstream economics demonstrates a strikingly monist intellectual culture, however, is in the field’s resolute commitment to formalistic-deductive methods, in the pervasive tendency to equate theory building with modeling, and in the veneration of the theory-language of mathematics. What Lawson calls the “mathematising inclination” of orthodox economics, reinforced by a preference for formalistic representation and deductive modeling, amounts to more than an innocent methodological choice; it implies (indeed imputes) the existence of a closed-system economy, the most pertinent features of which are not only measurable but modelable,
and therefore comprise known coordinates and event regularities: “the formalistic-deductive framework that mainstream economists everywhere adopt and insist upon,” Lawson (2015, 32) remarks, “is so taken for granted that it goes largely unquestioned.” This robustly positivist orientation, grounded in a predisposition towards mathematical modeling, substantially (pre)determines what orthodox economics can see, and how that which is rendered visible is subsequently valued.

Where they respond to challenges deriving from heterodox economics, mainstream economists will often do so by finding closed-system substitutes, in effect to model or remodel these challenges into digestible (or manageable) form (see Lawson 2015, 43). Such is their taken-for-grantedness, mathematical modes of knowing and communication are considered to be practically synonymous with “serious work” in mainstream economics (Lawson 2015, 3), as in the declaration, “If it isn’t modeled, it isn’t economics” (Colander et al. 2004, 492). Critiques and alternatives that fall “outside the net of mathematical formalism” tend to be filtered out if they cannot be expressed in modeling terms; they may “not even [be] recognized as economics” (Dow 2000, 168).

There are differences and debates around many issues within mainstream economics, but rare indeed are instances of dissent from the monoculture of modeling.

To a mainstream economist, theory means model, and model means ideas expressed in mathematical form ... Mainstream economists believe proper models—good models—take a recognizable form: presentation in equations, with mathematically expressed definitions, assumptions, and theoretical developments clearly laid out ... [It is understood] that the legitimate way to argue is with models and econometrically constructed forms of evidence [but] that no model is perfect. Indeed, students learn that it is bad manners to engage in excessive questioning of simplifying assumptions. Claiming that a model is deficient is a minor feat—presumably anyone can do that. What is really valued is coming up with a better model, a better theory ... In this way economists learn their trade (Strassmann 1994, 153-4).

When the leading growth theorist, Paul Romer, raised some troubling questions about the economics profession’s apparent tolerance for analytical and political sleights of hand enacted under the cover of modeling and quantification—a form of sophistry that he chose to portray as “mathiness”—the pattern of responses spoke to an entrenched culture of methodological conformity. The advice from his friends was “don’t make waves,” while
young colleagues were especially anxious that if they “deviate[d] from what’s acceptable, they [would] get in trouble” (Romer, quoted in Sussman 2015, 2; Romer 2015).

Amongst the social sciences, economics stands practically alone in its capacity to maintaining a “unitary disciplinary core,” based on a disciplined intellectual culture that tends to be self-regarding and deferential to internal hierarchies (Fourcade et al. 2015, 96). It is notable that when economists venture into other fields, they do so inclined more to teach than to learn, armed with rigorously defined models deemed appropriate for “set[ting] other disciplines straight” (Fourcade et al. 2015), duly reinforcing the common perception amongst “sociologists, geographers, historians, political scientists, [and] even psychologists, [that] economists resemble colonists settling on their land.” After Clifford Geertz, one might peer behind the strongly centered theory-language of orthodox economics to conceive of this as a culturally particular domain of “sacred symbols,” one that has been defined by the combination—and indeed integration—of a widely shared worldview (a model of reality) and a particular ethos (or model for living). Orthodox economics reads the world through its model of a price-directed market system populated by rational actors living under circumstances of scarcity, but this is bolstered, sometimes almost unconsciously, by adherence to a scheme of normative valuation, a model for competitive modes of existence and methods of minimalist governance (Benton 1982; cf. Galbraith 1971; Geertz 1973). Crucially, the latter maps onto significant sources of ideological and institutional power within contemporary capitalist society:

Economics as a profession is prominently intertwined with public administrations, corporations, and international organizations; these institutions not only provide economists with resources and collect their data, they also foster a “fix it” culture—or, as sociologists would put it, a particular “habitus,” a disposition to intervene in the world ... Economists, particularly modern economists, want to fix things, which is both a product of their theoretical confidence and of the position of their discipline within society (Fourcade et al. 2015, 107).

The normative power of economics takes a particular historical form under the economizing hegemony of neoliberalism: even while mischaracterizing the social world, neoliberalism works with performative force and persuasion, “disseminat[ing] the model of the market to all domains and activities” (Brown 2015, 31, original emphasis). “Within
neoliberal rationality,” Wendy Brown (2015, 36) continues, “human capital is both our ‘is’ and our ‘ought’—what we are said to be, and what we ought to be, and what the rationality makes us into through its norms and construction of environments.”

It is important to emphasize that heterodox economists do not find it necessary to disavow either normatively-based argument or the value of mathematical modeling (both of which have significant and constructive roles to play within pluralist and reflexive theory-cultures) in their repudiation of the orthodox variety of formalized market reductionism. But if the monism of orthodox economics is primarily epistemological, the pluralism of heterodox economics finds a different expression. Heterodox practices are orthogonal to those of the mainstream in the sense that the embrace of (and respect for) pluralism is axiomatic, not marginal, exceptional, or temporary. The limited pluralism of orthodox economics may involve some splintering around the edges, but the central tendencies in its resolute theory-culture are such that pluralism can only be a “temporary position,” en route to an anticipated synthesis (Dow 2000, 163). Heterodoxy, on the other hand, is based on recognition that all scientific enterprises are conducted by and within scholarly communities (usually revealed as research programs), each of which operates according to internally-sanctioned paradigms and methodological practices, the premises of which are somewhat variably recognized and respected in other communities, and which in principle are always open to revision. The criteria for recognizing and rewarding “progress,” in turn, are also governed by scientific communities themselves, proceeding according to “local” understandings of normal science and achieving wider influence in accordance with their “persuasive” efficacy. Since the facts do not speak for themselves, and neither is there a universal yardstick of scientific validity, “progress” across the heterodox economic sciences is characteristically governed by more or less compelling arguments, backed by various forms of documentation and evidence; persuasion is not simply a narrow matter of “science,” but also a rhetorical, ideological, institutional, cultural, and sociological issue.

Reflexive and self-aware heterodoxies will often internalize a challenge to the imperialist claims of orthodox or ruling paradigms (this is the measure of more-than-
normal science, or “extraordinary science” in the Kuhnian sense), but in the case of economics at least the effectiveness of these challenges to mainstream supremacy has (so far) been limited. Heterodox knowledge cultures are defined by an active embrace of pluralism and by the simultaneity of alternative ways of knowing (along with their own modes of representation), as different paths are followed in a parallel and overlapping fashion. It is in this sense that heterodoxy’s “unity within difference” takes the form of a “coming together of separate ... heterodox projects or traditions,” not into a unified science but as a diverse community of practices within a polycentric culture of dialogic coexistence (Lawson 2015, 26, emphasis added).

Heterodox economics defines a loosely bounded and decentered field that (just about) hangs together despite its enduring internal differences, its multicuture of coexisting research programs being fortified not just by a shared rejection of reductionism and monism, but by fundamentally different conceptions of economic ontology. Heterodox economists tend to read “economy” as a processual and open-ended system, subject to transformative social agency and enduring patterns of institutionalization. Along with virtually all of the human sciences, with the notable exception of orthodox economics, they characteristically see social forms and processes preceding the formation of individual preferences, rather than the other way around (Vidal and Peck 2012; Fourcade et al. 2015). Heterodox economists also reject the notion that the economy (or, in its reduced form, the market) can be conceived as an hermetically separate or functionally autonomous domain, understanding this to be embedded in and co-constituted with the more-than-strictly-economic world. In such open (and porous) systems, the universe of relevant relationships and variables is somewhat unbounded and not comprehensively knowable, with the result that knowledge-building initiatives, research programs, or theoretical formulations, are always partial and contestable (Lawson 2015). The formalistic-deductive methods of the economics mainstream, in contrast, typically presuppose relatively high degrees of closure, in the sense of a known array of variables and relationships rendered mathematically commensurate, demarcated from (or subordinating) the spheres of culture or politics or nature, closed-system qualities that are
imputed to the market as a self-regulating domain, coterminous with economy, with its own rationality, logic, and characteristic patterns of behavior. The orthodox economic ontology is premised on a singular economy, which is encountered and read in a similarly singular fashion, the variability of which over historical time and concrete space being deemed for the most part trivial or transitory.

If Tony Lawson is one of those who represent orthodoxy’s orthodoxy as a fundamentally epistemological one, he portrays the foundations of economic heterodoxy in ontological terms. On this basis, he rejects any claim to the existence of a legitimately separate, let alone superior, science of the economic:

[T]he materials and principles of social reality are the same across economics, sociology, politics, anthropology, human geography, and all other disciplines concerned with the study of social life. Hence I think we must accept that there is no legitimate basis for distinguishing a separate science of economics. Rather, economics is best viewed as at most a division of labour within a single social science (Lawson 2015, 45, original emphasis).

Amongst the (critical) social sciences, heterodox economics is duly defined by its substantive concerns with the material conditions of well-being (along with their constitutive cultures, social relations, and recurrent practices and processes), and not by a determinate or exclusive methodological or theoretical canon, while the various branches and sub-branches of heterodox economics (ecological economics, economic sociology, economic anthropology, and so on) are likewise defined by their respective substantive foci, and by a sustained concern with particular problematizations, knowingly coproduced not as universal modes of explanation but alongside (and in conversation with) other heterodoxies. In contrast to orthodox economic formalism, economic heterodoxies are defined substantively, more by what they do than by how they do it, and by what they seek to problematize, rather than the parameters they choose to impose.

**Theory-cultures in economic geography**

According to the (admittedly forgiving) criteria by which economic heterodoxy has defined itself, economic geography—at least in its post-1970s Anglo-American form—qualifies as a
heterodox project, with Eric Sheppard (2016, emphasis added) having recently gone as far as to characterize its prevailing theory-culture in terms of “heterodoxy as orthodoxy.” But what are the positive features of economic geography’s theory-culture, on what grounds might it be said to “hang together” (Barnes and Sheppard 2010, 195), despite its manifestly disparate concerns, its theoretical and methodological diversity, and its occasionally argumentative disposition? The following are some situated and experiential observations concerning the patterning and diversity of analytical practices in economic geography, which in their nature are open to challenge and correction

First, “space matters” for economic geographers in the most basic sense of an ontology founded on the principles of open-system complexity, social and institutional variegation, uneven development, and more-than-contingent geographical difference. Second, economic geography is characteristically engaged with the real and the now, with studies of actually existing economies, mostly conducted in real time; it is for the most part a “dirty hands” enterprise, in which researchers collect and construct their own data (working alone or in small teams), typically in direct dialogue with economic actors. Third, there is a leaning towards richly contextualized, contingency-laden, and often cluttered modes of explanation, married with a degree of suspicion about highly parsimonious, heavily stylized, or overly deductive reasoning; intolerant of both grandiose theorization and pedantic description, this is a field that both attracts and produces small-scale lumpers, the manipulators and modifiers of (generally midlevel) theories, and more skeptical splitters, working between the deconstruction of coarse conceptual categories and the development of alternatives. Clark (1998, 75, 74) characterizes prevailing methodological norms in economic geography this way: “a fine-grained, substantive appreciation of diversity, combined with empirical methods of analysis like case studies,” involving the utilization of mostly “qualitative and speculative [modes of inquiry] in the hope of representing the spatial scope and diversity of economic life.”

This methodological orientation is reflected, fourth, in a robust culture of critique, featuring alternating currents of deconstruction and reconstruction, as well as periodic “turns,” but also in a lower level of priority assigned to methodological triangulation and
verification. The disciplinary temperament is one of eclecticism, skepticism, and impatience, would-be orthodoxies, or research programs, rarely being allowed to reach the stage of calcification but often failing to develop to the point of thoroughgoing codification either, progress being measured more by change than consolidation (see Barnes et al. 2007; Sheppard et al. 2012). To summarize, the prevailing theory-culture in contemporary (Anglo-American) economic geography is, amongst other things, precocious, unruly, vigorous, inconsistent, anti-canonical, erratic, restive, improvisational, selective, forgiving, unsystematic, fickle, creative, impatient, and forgetful.

In this respect, economic geography’s internal culture is noticeably different even from those of its closer relatives in the non-nuclear family of heterodox economic studies, such as economic anthropology and economic sociology. Somewhat impressionistically, in relation to these peers, economic geography is characterized by an uninhibited degree of eclecticism in the choice of theories of methods; by elevated levels of theoretical and normative display, broadly distributed across the field; by a porous and inclusive intellectual community with open borders and low barriers to entry; and also by less exacting expectations with respect to methodological specification and codification (see Peck 2005; Grabher 2006). If the various branches of the heterodox family are defined not by a singular parentage but by self-determined foci of substantive concern, however, then the domain of economic geography is unusually sprawling and practically boundless, perhaps even in comparison to sociology and anthropology. Economic geography’s wide-ranging beat encompasses all aspects of the geographical variegation of economic processes, practices, and phenomena, in other words the inherent lumpiness of the economic world itself. At root, economic geography problematizes (if not privileges) the spatial dimensions of economic diversity (Clark 1998; Peck 2005; Barnes and Christophers 2016), a more-than-ample remit that has been grasped and signaled, in a wide variety of ways, including: the recognition of basic notions of uneven geographical development and unequal exchange; the production of positive theory claims around logics of agglomeration and (regionalized) cumulative causation; the anti-essentialist validation of alternative economic imaginaries and community economies; attentiveness to the relational
positioning of regional economies, with reference to spatial divisions of labor, regulatory orders, global production networks, and such; the development of evolutionary and institutionalist formulations like path dependency and developmental lock-in; and methodological orientations tending to favor local case studies (nominally or explicitly) located within worlds of economic difference. The heterodox conversation in economic geography persistently turns on these and other issues concerning the nature, extent, and form of economic spatiality—and how to capture, explain, represent, and respond to it.

Neither eternal nor universal understandings of the economic have much currency in the field of economic geography, which instead is attuned to distinguishing and dealing with kaleidoscopic difference as its always-moving object. From the austere perspective of orthodox-economic monism, this may look like a state of permanently contingent distraction, or a splitter’s charter, but in fact relatively robust currents of both lumping and splitting coexist in the field of economic geography, the heterodox conversations between which, rather than flowing towards some equilibrium resolution, tend to be perpetually destabilized under conditions of continuing turbulence or “chop.” There are precious few smooth or entirely predictable passages through the shifting currents and countercurrents waters of economic geography. The field’s lumpers and splitters are passing and engaging one another all of the time.

Economic geography’s lumpers are drawn towards bigger, connective categories, variously trimming in the direction of emergent prototypes like new industrial spaces, hegemonic formations like neoliberal governance, or widely encompassing concepts like financialized capitalism. They will rarely go to the stake for an absolutist interpretation of these categories, instead tending to favor their adaptive (re)use and ongoing modification, on the basis of productive frictions and tensions with grounded empirical evidence. The discipline’s splitters, on the other hand, are wont to identify significant exceptions to these and other overarching formula(tion)s, to demand recognition for alternative configurations and visions of the economic, to pull the practically neglected and ostensibly marginal into the spectrum of the theoretically and politically visible, and to value exuberant difference over tendential singularity. Crucially, the splitters and lumpers in economic geography do
not exist as warring factions, separated by an unbridgeable divide, even if they oscillate around a conspicuously absent center. Most economic geographers will be inclined to work more in one register than the other, while acknowledging that the terrain is shared, and not likely ever to be monopolized.

Economic geography’s distinctively heterodox formation is characterized by a climate of mostly pacific coexistence (in that a wide range of intellectual projects and programs function as neighboring clusters or loci of activity), although this is marked, according to some observers, by a centrifugal pull towards as a multitude of solitudes (Barnes and Sheppard 2010). This means that coexisting projects only rarely chafe against one another, and only sporadically contest the same explanatory turf. While Allen Scott (2000, 493) once remarked that the field is predispositionally “quarrelsome,” today’s economic geography seems to be rather less about a few Big Arguments and instead more of a continuing cacophony. There is more talking past than taking on, more live-and-let-live than there is active raking over of differences. With some exceptions, economic geography’s theory-culture consequently marked by broadly tolerant cohabitation, amid varying degrees of ambivalence, (mis)communication, and mutual (in)compatibility, coupled with an unruly accretion of habitual orientations, unevenly shared sensibilities, and loosely taken-for-granted positions, many of which are only really remarked upon on occasions of noticeable breach. Its quite particular brand of heterodoxy has been shaped by a diverse array of sedimented perspectives and practices, or what Scott aptly calls “traces,” including a knot of propositions, premises, and practices derived from various forms of political economy, institutionalism, feminism, management theory, poststructuralism, and so on, such that the field’s somewhat cumulative but heterogeneous culture of emergence is shot through with webs of continuity and commonality, the “[l]andscape of economic geography [perhaps still] being best represented as a sort of intellectual palimpsest rather than a unified front” (Scott 2000, 495).

Having properly issued all of the necessary caveats, Eric Sheppard has sought to gather this particular configuration of unity-within-difference under the capacious banner
of “geographical political economy” (Sheppard 2011, 2016; cf. MacKinnon et al. 2009; Peck 2012; Jones 2015), a big-tent edifice shaped at least as much by corralled dissensus as by settled consensus. There have been occasions when geographical political economy has paused to look at itself in the mirror of neoclassical economics, but this has hardly been a preoccupation for an unplanned research program that has largely made its own tracks, mostly by walking them. There has been an uptick in engagements with neoclassical alternatives of late, although more as a response to the resuscitation of orthodoxy’s own version of “geographical economics” than as a locally grown initiative. For quite some time, orthodox economics has been a “lost continent,” with few cross-channel connections to economic geography’s island (cf. Peck 2012).

In as far as geographical political economy represents a prevailing current within contemporary economic geography, this speaks to the character of a discipline that remains, to varying degrees, “haunted by Marx” (Sheppard 2011, 320; Swyngedouw 2009, 548), even if sometimes this means little more positions being defined outside or against various strands of (neo)Marxian political economy. A similar point might be made about numerous branches of heterodox economics, where Marx and Marxism remain significant (if not defining) points of reference points. Again, the contrast with the orthodox mainstream—within which Marxian economics is somewhere between invisible and irrelevant—is particularly stark. In economic geography, followers of high-church Marxism are few and far between these days, in the loose congregation that is geographical political economy, although there are some articles of the old faith that have passed, in diluted form, into the ecumenical mainstream. It is true that some have taken a more orthodox path (albeit rarely beyond the precincts of conventional institutionalism), while more have embraced various forms of poststructuralism (as a more reflexive style of political economy in some cases; splitting away from geographical; political economy in others). But even across these differences, something approaching a critical commonsense can be discerned:

[T]he consensus among economic geographers is that capitalism is conflictual and unstable, incapable of solving its own internal problems and productive of the very socio-spatial inequalities that its proponents believe it can (at least in principle) overcome ... Beyond
conceptualizing capitalism as an unstable economic system, characterized by uneven geographical development, geographical political economists insist [that] capitalism is just one way of organizing the economic imperatives of any society (i.e., production of a surplus, transforming “nature” into objects of use, exchanging such products, distributing the surplus among participants, setting aside surplus for accumulation and/or reproduction, improving technical knowhow and waste creation and disposal). While capitalism may be hegemonic, it is neither necessarily superior to alternatives nor the only form of economy worthy of serious consideration (Sheppard 2011, 320-1).

Economic geographers devote considerable energy to understanding how contemporary capitalism works, and periodically fails, across its many forms and formations. Much of the field operates in “restructuring time,” being particularly attuned to emergent dynamics of capitalism(s), studied in motion and through methodological optics like regional clusters or global networks, its constantly reassembled project tending to move with the rhythms of (selected features of) the actually existing economy, often at the breaking edges of change. This brings with it the virtues of real-time relevance and almost spontaneous renewal, but economic geography remains vulnerable to the critique that its attention span is both restrictively short and myopically focused. The dominant gaze remains a presentist one, drawn to the frontiers of capitalist restructuring, with both more deeply historical and substantively expansive inquiries remaining for the most part minority enterprises. The time before Fordism or developmental-statism, for example, is not especially well charted, and while the more-than-capitalist nature of economies is (now) widely recognized in theory, rather more isolated have been significant adaptations in practice.

It is another measure of economic geography’s critically oriented heterodoxy that one of the principal lines of internal contention in recent years has concerned the character and consequences of capitalist hegemony. Here, though, something like an impasse has been evident. Telling critiques developed by feminist and poststructuralist scholars have called into question the presumed centrality of advanced-capitalist dynamics, as well as the analytical priority conventionally assigned to production, to wage-labor, and to the formal sphere of economic relations. The charge is that sprawling theories of capitalist restructuring are overgeneralized, constraining, and unproductive meta-narratives—yielding totalizing conceptions that tend to look “down” from what are cast as commanding heights or “out” from a presumed center of driving processes—essentializing
visions that are deemed equally problematic in conventional globalization theories and neo-Marxist formulations. It was Gibson-Graham (1996, 3) who first articulated the complaint that “depictions of capitalist hegemony deserve a particularly skeptical reading,” notably for the way that these tend to relegate noncapitalist or anticapitalist worlds, lives, and visions to the margins of the barely visible, credible, and perhaps even believable, while acting as a self-applied “brake on the anticapitalist imagination.” This is the extra-capitalist universe that is submerged under the waterline of Gibson-Graham’s now-famous iceberg metaphor, a diverse and fecund undersea world that languishes out of sight in so-called “capitalocentric” readings. These tend to assign vitality, centrality, and dynamism to the rationalities of capital accumulation, enterprise competition, and class struggle around the (waged) workplace, it is argued, in a manner that devalues or obliterates the actually existing diversity of economic processes and practices, rendering subordinate and inert the noncapitalist economy.

Having portrayed “the beast”—of a rapaciously omnipresent capitalism—in this way, Gibson-Graham could see little to no purpose in efforts to tame or domesticate the creature, to be distracted by the elaboration of its taxonomic varieties and adaptive mutations, or to be taken in by superficially sophisticated accounts of its confounding and contradictory behavior. They have sought instead to starve the beast, depriving it of the oxygen of attention, “muzzl[ing] and silenc[ing] it,” and then pretty much exiting the jungle altogether in order to engage in alternative forms of cultivation. They chose, in other words, to ask different questions:

What difference might it make [to] allow an anticapitalist economic imaginary to develop unrestricted? If we were to dissolve the image that looms in the economic foreground, what shadowy economic forms might come forward? In these questions we can identify the broad outlines of our project: to discover or create a world of economic difference, and to populate that world with exotic creatures that become, upon inspection, quite local and familiar (Gibson-Graham 1996, 3).

As a strategy for recognizing and working with economic-geographical difference, this is not one satisfied with the extension or refinement of conventional registers of (capitalist) diversity; it seeks instead to occupy new (or reconstituted) positions beyond and outside the political economy of contemporary capitalism, rejecting received frames of (critical)
analysis for their alleged conflation of “capitalism” and “economy,” and for an endemic and debilitating capitalocentricity. (The analytical sin of capitalocentricity attributed to radical political economy can be considered analogous, in principle, to that of market-centricity in orthodox economics, since these are each world-reading devices that assign priority and pertinence to a systemic nexus of predefined forces and relations.)

Gibson-Graham’s alternative strategy, since adopted as the programmatic ethos of the community economies collective (Community Economies Project n.d.), has been to construct new frames and formulas for economic vision and action around alternative models of (and for) ethical living, around experiments in neocommunitarianism, and around acts of wilful self-organization (see Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). This is about more than establishing a new project-position within the always-emergent heterodoxy that is economic geography, or raising an awning alongside the big tent of geographical political economy. Rather, it represents an internally delivered but virtually external critique (if not repudiation) of significant elements of the theory-culture of economic geography. The serious charge, leveled especially at the discipline’s political-economic lumpers, is that their expansive, system-like, and integrative categories of analysis—such as capitalism, financialization, or neoliberalism—are irresistibly prone to slide down the slippery slope to totalizing, over-encompassing modes of analysis; by accident or design, they tend to temper or trivialize extracapitalist diversity, imposing self-limiting methodological constraints and stunting the political imagination. A preoccupation with the lumpy categories of capitalist restructuring is seen to obscure the actually existing, granular diversity of economic life. According to this critique, there is a price that must be paid for a process-oriented worldview—for visualizing financializing and neoliberalizing capitalism as a grid or “matrix” of forces, rules, and dynamics—in the form of a truncated analytical and political outlook, variously marked by intellectual conformism, incremental reformism, and pre-emptive closure or fatalism. Those transfixed by the matrix are unable to see beyond it, or to think outside its categories. Worse still, in recounting tales of the prodigious power, menacing rationalities, and tentacular capacities of the beast, analysts risk becoming complicit in the reproduction of
extant (or imagined) structures of dominance. In this vein, Gibson-Graham (2008, 619) equate the critical study of neoliberalization with “an ethical choice to participate in constituting neoliberalism.”

The stock defense, such that it has been fully articulated, is that political-economic *geographers* are to some degree inoculated against the diseases of totalization, homogenization, and universalization, by virtue of a deeply socialized recognition of sociospatiality, uneven development, variegation, path-dependency, and embeddedness. (They work with smaller lumps, at least.) This does not really wash with those who have leveled the charge of essentialism. The critique of capitalocentrism stands, apparently itself as something like a total one. Defenses, such as they have been mounted at all, tend to be regarded as manifestly insufficient (or even delusional), on the grounds that, for political-economic lumpers, difference is still often gathered at the margins or in concession, under the smothering signs of global connectivity or capitalist articulation, and typically in the shadows of dominance or hegemony. The pluralization of capitalism, for example, is seen as a sleight-of-hand method of “represent[ing] capitalism’s chameleon qualities as an aspect of its sameness” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 9), merely stretching the same big-lump category into subtypes, rather than transcending or trashing the totalizing category itself. Furthermore, antiessentialist critics maintain that the ingrained habit of equating context-spanning political-economic processes with power, dynamism, and agency functions inevitably to privilege some sites, spaces, sinews, and subjects over others, therefore serving to resurrect hierarchies of recognition, pertinence, and valuation. Against these oppressive structures, antiessentialist and anticapitalist alternatives require both analytical and political autonomy.

Consistent with basic precepts of heterodoxy, the anti-essentialist program has established its own codes of performance and communities of practice, along with largely independent criteria for evaluation, critique, and progress, according to internally validated principles of localized normal science. As such, the program exists in a space of intellectual self-determination, alongside but not answerable to others. This is not, however, a receipt for passive cohabitation. The antiessentialist project reciprocates, as it
were, the allegedly imperial (over)reach of capitocentrism (which by definition does not keep itself to itself, but blunders into other domains) by projecting its critique across much of the extant field of economic geography, or at least the expansive dominion that would be geographical political economy, raising mostly unanswered questions about the very foundations of its “heterodoxy as orthodoxy.” In as far as it is possible to summarize the responses to this critique across economic geography’s heterodox mainstream, one might say that these have typically been accommodative, absorptive, or additive. There has been some degree of incremental adaptation across the field, at least in terms of common language and framings, running the spectrum from quite profound poststructuralist turns, and the repudiation of big-picture, big-story categories, to the more superficial adoption of less deterministic terminology. There have also been efforts to extend the spectrum of the economically visible, and to validate an expanded array of alternative, community, social, and non-capitalist economies, in action-oriented interventions and performative projects as well as in more conventional research initiatives. So there has been some accommodation and adaption to antiessentialist critiques. But there remain, nevertheless, basic and quite stubborn differences between those (lumpers) that are convinced that they can see the matrix of political-economic power relations, even if it works in mysterious ways, and those (splitters) that either do not recognize the matrix, or prefer to focus their attention and energies elsewhere.

While there has been a fair amount of splitting and refinement of received, big-process categories of analysis (from globalization, capitalism, and neoliberalism on down), and some degree of lateral augmentation of these (in an incremental, “and/also” fashion), it is undeniably the case that the categories themselves are still very much in circulation. For Gibson-Graham (2008, 618), this represents more than methodological inertia, but a troubling attachment to debilitating versions of “strong theory”; their diagnosis of this situation goes beyond the suggestion of a stubborn reluctance to change (or to listen), to the more disconcerting claim that parts of the field may have succumbed to a kind of intellectual paranoia, symptomized by the (bad) habit of marshaling “every site and event into the same fearful order [such that e]verything comes to mean the same thing, usually
something large and threatening.” Here, the recognition of a matrix-like order becomes its own disorder. Appropriately enough, the Rorschach test (which has its own place in the annals of rudimentary psychodiagnosis) has been invoked as a heuristic device by Gibson-Graham et al. (2013, 7-8), a scheme of pattern recognition that in this context serves as a metaphor for the propensity to perceive the (same) economic world in either foreboding or emancipatory ways: the paranoid subject remains in the thrall of dark shapes of devilish connection, while those able to see with new eyes are drawn to the white spaces of economic possibility.

In economic geography ... the dominant topic of research over the past decade or more has been neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalist globalization. This has been represented as needing study for the apparently self-evident reason that “it is the most important process of our age, transforming geographies worldwide” ... In the face of what has become “normal science” for economic geography—studies of neoliberal this and that—many geographers are making other choices, contributing to new performances by bringing economic diversity to light ... Through devoting academic attention to hidden and alternative economies they have constituted new objects of study and investigation, making them visible as potential objects of policy and politics (Gibson-Graham 2008, 619-20).

A stark (indeed binary) choice is duly presented, between the numbing darkness of the neoliberal night, with its fatalistic and deterministic embrace of strong theories of corporate hegemony and market rule, and the sunlit horizon of experimental alternatives, with its left-libertarian ethic of self-realization, supplemented by deliberately “small,” autonomous, or local categories of analysis and practice. Relative to economic geography’s loosely articulated pluralism, with its laissez-faire culture of live-and-let-live cohabitation, this represents a notable impasse, if not a theory-cultural split universe—a two-solitudes condition.

All heterodoxies are contested, of course, and this is certainly not the only line of fracture (or communication failure) in the heterogeneous universe of contemporary economic geography, in which the degree of inter-referencing and mutual dependency between different intellectual projects may be eroding over time. Barnes and Sheppard (2010, 194), after all, described a condition of “multiple solitudes,” marked as much by detached monologues as by genuinely responsive dialogue. But if economic geography’s
almost-absent center lies somewhere between, or at the confluence of, various political-economic, poststructuralist, evolutionary, feminist, and institutionalist currents, then this apparent stall in the conversation may have consequences for the field’s heterodox theory-culture more generally. There is arguably little to be gained by reiterating what by now are fairly well-articulated positions—between, on the one hand, that variant of qualified lumping in which diversity is recognized around a dominant axis of relational difference (what might be called the problematic of variegation), and on the other, that version of principled splitting in which extracapitalist difference is validated and valued more unilaterally and on its own terms (the posture of alterity, perhaps). But instead, might there be different ways of staging this conversation, drawing on different methodological axioms, and calling upon a different grammar of heterodox dialogue? Might it be possible, in other words, for economic geography’s lumpers and splitters to engage in different ways?

The substantivist imaginary

What economic anthropologists call substantivism can be seen as a mode of methodological framing that is, at one and the same time, broadly consonant with prevailing patterns of practice in economic geography yet also a provocation to think and do things somewhat differently. The origins of substantivism go back to Karl Polanyi’s protest against what he perceived as the “economistic fallacy,” the tendency to (super)impose, as a normalized analytic, “the market shape of things” (Polanyi 1977, xl).\(^1\) The economistic fallacy is an act of selective seeing, carrying with it a diagnostic and normative privileging of market rationalities and forces. By the same token, it is also a form of myopia—relegating non-market (or “irrational” or “cultural”) phenomena to the blurry margins. Polanyi saw the economistic fallacy as

\(^1\) In the *Grundrisse, Marx* (1973, 105) was similarly critical of “those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society.” Polanyi’s relationship with Marxism is a complex matter. He can be read as a creative postmarxist or as a muted antimarxist, amongst other positions (see Burawoy 2003; Dale 2010; Block and Somers 2014).
the practice of analyzing all economic systems through a theoretical gaze that presumes that the horizons of the economy are fully comprehended by a map that includes only market exchange and the calculative behavior couplet ... [G]iven the methodological and ontological standpoint that it embraces, the neoclassical theory constitutes the paradigmatic case of the economic fallacy, analyzing as it does both market and non-market economic activities indiscriminately through a formal choice-theoretic framework built upon the postulate of rational individual calculative behavior (Adaman and Madra 2002, 1046, emphasis added).

This, in other words, is to question the indiscriminate projection of the market pattern (and presumptions of market-like behavior) onto all economies, past and present, a problem compounded by a singular reliance on methodological formalism (based on a choice-theoretic framework that privileges economizing behavior under conditions of scarcity, governed by prices). Polanyi did not believe that the apparatus of mainstream economics was inherently and necessarily problematic; his point was that its domain of applicability was far more circumscribed than was conventionally acknowledged; that perhaps it made (some) sense for actually existing market economies, but certainly not for all economies. Polanyi’s wide-ranging explorations of ancient and contemporary economies, including so-called “primitive” societies, had convinced him that the market was neither a universal phenomenon nor the civilizational future of society, but a “special case” (see Fusfeld 1957; LeClair 1962). In his more polemical moments, Polanyi railed against the devastating effects of commodification and marketization, of course. His quarrel was not with the recognition of the system of regularized exchange as one (albeit only one) variant of economic organization, but with implicit or explicit claims to analytical universality (“marketcentricity,” as he might have put it), and politically, with the elevation of the logic and ethic of the market to the status of a governmental program and reigning social principle. This marked the birth of what Polanyi called “market society,” the

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2 This qualified concession to market rationality would later attract criticism on the grounds that the applicability of neoclassical theory ought to be questioned in nominally market economies too, although there were perhaps circumstantial reasons, relating to the McCarthyite climate, for Polanyi’s acceptance of a provisional division of labor between his insurgent heterodoxy and orthodox economics (see Peck 2013c). As if to underline the point that contemporary borrowings from Polanyi require some careful reinterpretation, he once remarked (problematically) that the “last two centuries produced in Western Europe and North America an organization of man’s (sic) livelihood to which the rules of choice happened to be singularly appropriate [consisting of] a system of price-making markets” (Polanyi 1957, 244), having previously declared (polemically) the market mentality to be practically “obsolete,” the legacy of a failed historical experiment in liberal capitalism (Polanyi 1947, 109).
historical threshold after which the “formerly harmless market pattern expanded into a sociological enormity” (1947, 113). Polanyi may be most famous for the elusive metaphor of embeddedness, which despite its limitations as a rigorous analytic nevertheless signals in a blunt fashion that market-exchange systems are never exclusive or autonomous, since in practice their existence depends on legal and institutional frameworks, while their operations are always and everywhere infused by cultural predispositions and preconditions. It is more than ironic that actually existing markets (must) coexist with, are codependent on, and are enabled by other socioeconomic forms and modes of regulation, even as the latter are commonly (mis)represented, in market ideologies, as anathema, as alien, inferior, and anachronistic, as meddling interventions, and as “interferences” with otherwise freely and efficiently functioning systems (see the discussion in Hodgson 2015).

So markets—qua regularized systems of exchange—are out there, even if they are not everywhere. And they may be dominant under some circumstances, but they can never be coterminous with “the economy” and neither do they define, teleologically, an ultimate stage. Formalistic methods may grasp some of the pertinent features of markets, even as they tend to understand these in methodologically reductive and socioinstitutionally impoverished terms. However, in what amounts to an orthodox version of totalization, essentialism, or “economics imperialism,” the market optic is oftentimes rendered as a universal, a first and foremost source of causality, an all-encompassing diagnostic, or as a one-size-fits-all “map” of (rational) economic behavior. In anthropological terms, this projection of the market model represents a kind of ethnocentricity analogous to the study of comparative religions from the perspective of Christianity, or the judgment of alternative political systems according to some idealized template of Western democracy (Dalton 1969; Halperin 1994; Gudeman 2001). It also amounts to a profoundly inaccurate reading of the ethnographic and archeological record, which displays a qualitatively rich geography of socioeconomic forms while giving lie to the “myth of the individualist savage” as some direct ancestor to homo economicus (Polanyi 1947, 112; Sahlins 1972; Rosser 2005). “In the beginning, there were markets ...” will not do; neither will market teleologies, or contemporary conceptions of blanket marketization.
Rather than hewing towards a monist interpretation of the economic—based on a
deductive and singular model of the perfect market and rational calculation—the
substantivist alternative is constructed between, and across, grounded readings of real
economies, leveraging the actually existing heterogeneity of economic subjectivities,
cultures, institutions, and structures as concretely revealed time and space, “the fount of ...
substantive concepts [being] the empirical economy itself” (Polanyi 1959, 166).
Substantivism is a means of bringing into the field of the analytically visible the full
spectrum of (institutionally stabilized) social means that have been developed for the
satisfaction of material needs (this is what Polanyi called the other meaning of the
economic—its human, material, and substantive meaning). It is a receipt for an
analytically polycentric and empirically grounded “cross-cultural economics” (Fusfeld 1957,
354), a searching and creative program of “comparative economy” (Dalton 1968, xi), or
what from a slightly different angle might be called economic geography.

The heterodox group of economists, anthropologists, and historians with which
Polanyi surrounded himself in the postwar phase of his career, some of whom would later
style themselves as “comparative economists,” were motivated by the (negative) question
of whether the postulates of economic formalism—with its underlying science of choice—
were relevant for the so-called ancient and primitive societies. Their extensive (if
necessarily exploratory) surveys of the historical and ethnographic record convinced them
otherwise. They knew markets when they saw them, but they also encountered many
other socially durable ways of organizing economic life. As the young scribe Abe Rotstein
wrote in the introductory note to the Polanyi group’s Trade and Market in the Early
Empires,

It is an impoverished economic history that narrows its concern to markets or market
antecedents, for these may only be fragmentary aspects of the economy. The economy
would then seem to be in unilineal evolution to our own day, whereas in fact other

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3 An institutional manifestation of the comparative economists’ positive program was the establishment in
the early 1960s of the Association of Comparative Economics (later the Association of Comparative Economic
Studies), which would launch the journals Comparative Economic Studies and the Journal of Comparative
Economics. Polanyi apostle George Dalton was president of this group in the late 1960s, working to capitalize
on the “theoretical affinity between economic anthropology and [the study of] comparative economic
systems” (Stanfield 1980, 594; Dalton 1968).
economies need not be miniatures or early specimens of our own, but may be sharply at variance with it, both as to individual motives and organization (Rotstein 1957, xviii).

Yet the Polanyians were determined not to get bogged down by indigestible levels of complexity, or to drop down an empiricist rabbit hole by conferring unique, *sui generis* status on each and every localized socioeconomic formation.

The comparative economists were lumpers, yes, but certainly not of an indiscriminate kind, since they saw a vital methodological purpose in splitting too: they endeavored to work across revealed economic difference, carefully formulating their categories in relatively small lumps, in order to develop and revise operational concepts along with appropriate tools of analysis.\(^4\) Having rejected the monism of market ontology, their lever would be the expressed diversity of economic life, not to capture this photographically, in some fixed and final way, but to work across and relativize economic difference as a combined empirical and theoretical strategy:

In order ... to see what is analytically important in Trobriands’ economy, [we] must first understand the structure of industrial capitalism; to understand the special usage of pig-tusk and cowrie money, [we] must first understand the organization and usage of dollars and francs (Dalton 1968, x).

On the basis of a wildly ambitious attempt to document the principal lines of diversity across “all of the empirical economies past and present” (Polanyi 1957, 244), the comparative economists identified, verified, and then interrogated three or four organizational species (or what they termed modes of economic integration), which *always in combination* occupied a socially contingent if institutionally stabilized presence in the accumulated record: exchange, reciprocity, redistribution, and (less consistently)

\(^4\) The Polanyi group may have been more secure than they should have been in their understanding of the “facts” of economic diversity, although such declarations of empirical certainty were usually advanced in the service of theoretical reflexivity: “One of the peculiarities of economic anthropology,” Dalton (1968, xxxvii) wrote, is that “neither the facts nor the folk views of primitive (sic) economic life are in doubt. The ethnographic record is large and detailed. What is in doubt is the most useful theoretical approach to organize the many descriptive accounts.” Polanyi (1947, 112) was inclined to report the “facts” in a similarly bald manner. Matters of presentation aside, this raises the question of what one might venture to say, well over half a century later, about the received condition of the accumulated geographical “record,” and its theoretical “organization.” How far from exhaustive, really, have been the discipline’s manifestly incomplete efforts at mapping expressed-geographical diversity? How do prevailing theoretical frameworks encounter, organize, and explain those nodes and coordinates of diversity that have been documented?
householding. For present purposes, the details of this particular schema are less relevant than the epistemological principles upon which it is based, including, first, the recognition of enduring and irreducible diversity (substantive economic systems are understood as compounds of durably distinctive forms, found side by side, in many somewhat-interdependent combinations); second, an appreciation of the historically and geographically contingent nature of the resulting hybrids (one or other mode of organization may be dominant, but these are nevertheless constituted relationally); and third, the absence presumptions of historical teleology, universal centrality, or incipient homogenization (all such hybrid formations being socially made and open to politically guided change, not structurally preordained).

On this basis, Polanyi and his followers can be counted amongst the original theorists of the hybrid economy, the constitutive elements (or moving parts) of which were defined and refined through transductive dialogue between, on the one hand, an extremely wide range of concrete cases identified from the historical and contemporary record, and on the other, creative forms of midlevel theory building involving the continuous interrogation of categories and concepts. Exchange, reciprocity, redistribution, and householding were identified as the principal sources of economic diversity to which the comparative economists repeatedly returned, as the basic organizational building blocks of real economies. It has been said of the Polanyian style of qualified, principled lumping, which directs attention towards institutionalized patterns and socially stabilized forms of coordination, that

All economies, that is, all the material aspects of human cultures, involve the provisioning of human purposes by the technological interaction and transformation of nature. In all but the most primitive (sic) societies, there is also a division of labor with the concomitant necessity of integrative institutions to coordinate economic activities. These institutions have at least superficial similarities—marketplaces, trade, monetary objects, and accounting devices (Stanfield 1980, 595).

Similar principles of substantive diversity might just as easily apply to other well-known schematics—such as markets, hierarchies, and networks; capitalist, altcapitalist, and noncapitalist economies; state, market, and third sector, and so forth—all of which ought to be deemed revisable through “lateral” interrogation, amidst and in relation to their
others, and in dialogue with culturally and analytically situated interpretations of the facts on the ground (see Adaman and Madra 2002; Peck 2013c).

Now, a quite reasonable observation would be that some aspects of this kind of approach can be found in currents of extant practice in economic geography, especially those involving the formulation and refinement of midlevel concepts, attuned to broader theory claims, through case-study investigations. This is partly true, but with an important qualification: substantivist epistemologies call for programs of inquiry and research designs that are demandingly comparative in a double sense. First, there is a minimum requirement for cross-cultural, cross-contextual, cross-site, or cross-local comparisons, as means to render the near-familiar newly strange, as a means of moving recursively between moments of lumping and splitting, and as a guard against (implicitly or ignorantly) ethnocentric theorization. Within economic geography, norms of lone-scholar production, sometimes extending to small-group collaborations, raise some obvious practical problems in this regard—perhaps one reason for the ongoing paucity of comparative work in a field that otherwise (and somewhat paradoxically) trumpets its commitment to geographical contextualization and spatially sensitive explanation—but the methodological and interpretive point nevertheless stands. The injunction is boldly to work across economic-geographical difference with the aid of research designs that embrace, problematize, and provide a potential basis for explaining that diversity. There are a great many ways of doing this, including the classic model of side-by-side comparison of (like or contrasting) economies, but any honest assessment would have to conclude that the productive execution of such research designs in the field has been sporadic at best. In explanatory terms, economic geography’s “island” has been smaller (and sociologically cosier) than some might like to think (Peck 2012).

If this first dimension of comparativity (comparing places), while demanding, is at least conventionally understood and occasionally realized, but otherwise worked around or compensated for, the same cannot be said of the second substantivist axiom: this is an injunction to extend analyses across the heterogeneous, diverse, hybrid, and variegated

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5 For suggestive examples, see Saxenian (1996), Gertler (2004), and McDowell (2011). See the discussion in Barnes et al. (2007).
economy itself—*in situ*, as it were. This means working at the interstices of, as well as between and across, revealed economic difference, for instance, between community economies and the state, or firms and households, coexisting however contingently and asymmetrically within the “same” economy, no matter how that might be defined. It means striving to exceed, say, “market only” or “network only” methodological optics, and transcending (or at least thoroughly positioning and contextualizing) modes of analysis that are grounded in a single explanatory site, such as the wage-labor process, the banking sector, the state, or the cooperative economy. In the Polanyian lingo, it demands an analytical reach across, as well as into the various creases and crevices of, what were determined to be the bare-minimum signifiers of economic difference (redistribution, reciprocation, exchange, householding). As a matter of methodological principle, these or other dimensions of durable economic difference should be afforded parity of analytical esteem, sans binding or *a priori* expectations of hegemonic dominance, functional centricity, or prevailing trajectory. (This is a pre-emptive caution against built-in and self-affirming assumptions of capitalocentricity or market-centricity or state-centricity, or the dominance of finance or the efficacy of production networks, or the social integrity of community economies; instead, it is to be expected that asymmetrical relations, political autonomy, or hegemonic dominance, where evident, should be documented empirically, not presumed.) There is a concern, in other words, to specify both the “shifting place” and the shifting, multifaceted form of the always-compound, always-hybrid economy (cf. Polanyi 1959, 168), by way of research designs that bring to light and problematize internal diversity and geographical difference, and that expose and explain the relationally interconnected, heterogeneous makeup of actually existing economies. It entails a maneuver that is less like “adding diversity on” and more akin to embracing diversity as a methodological objective—and then verifying, stress-testing, and accounting for that diversity.

The goal of exposing and diagnosing hybridity, of working laterally across diversity within a regional economy, need not always entail exhaustive, holus-bolus modes of inquiry, but at a minimum there is a call for more-than-monological encounters, such as
those that travel in from (or out to) the constitutive outsides of market-exchange, the state-governance nexus, or corporate-hierarchical systems; or alternatively, those that problematize interstitial formations or boundary objects, like varieties of market regulation associated with different state forms, or those third-sector or social-economy experiments that exist somewhat outside, but not exactly beyond, the market and the state. A guiding principle here is that each and every economic site, institutional formation, pattern of subjectivities, and such like, is understood not as some hermetically sealed domain but through its relational connections to, and hybrid blends with, other spheres, near and far, and according to their relative positioning within constitutively diverse economic landscapes. Once again, research designs that explicitly work across difference within regional or local settings can be found in economic geography, although they are hardly commonplace.  

Economic geographers tend to find themselves working amid thickets of contingent, contextual, and conjunctural effects, many of which—notably those deemed to be connected to space, place, and spatiality—are assigned higher levels of explanatory significance than would otherwise be the case in other branches of the heterodox economic sciences. However, it is notable that only sporadically have research designs in the field been sufficiently compelling to persuade other heterodox economists of the “difference that space makes,” a (defining) feature of economic geographer’s own belief system that has won no more than limited recognition on the “outside” (cf. Peck 2005). Diversity-embracing “Polanyian comparisons” represent one way to address this. Exhortations to engage in more comparative work, even of the conventional sort, are liable to be treated in the same way as other varieties of eat-your-greens advice, being recognized as almost uncontestably a “good thing” and yet often out of reach for practical reasons (see Barnes et al. 2007), but beyond their contribution to healthy methodological lifestyles they serve a more particular purpose in substantivist economics: difference-

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6 For some early contributions, see Bagguley et al. (1990) and Hanson and Pratt (1995). For a creatively complementary research agenda, see Pollard et al. (2011). For an exploratory application in explicitly Polanyian terms, see Peck (2013b, 2013d).
spanning comparisons, either between spatially discrete sites or across the realms and registers of economic diversity within heterogeneous formations, necessarily place an analytical premium on robust methodological designs and lucid exposition, and the simultaneous parsing of both evidentiary and theory claims. Furthermore, the promise of substantively comparative economic geographies is that they might set up, constructively, a different kind of conversation between lumpers and splitters, courtesy of a demanding repertoire of relational methodologies in which the utility and reach of categories of analysis is persistently stressed and always open to revision.

By way of a conclusion: comparatively productive economic geographies?

Economic geography, this paper has suggested, already possesses a heterodox theory-culture, perhaps as much by accident as by design, one that tends productively to favor the experimental and the emergent. More than this, the discipline places a premium on moving with the shifting tides and currents of the real economy, which is properly recognized as a source of both vitality and relevance, and which with more mixed results fosters a persistent “churn” across much of the field. These are surely aspects of our socialized and evolving theory-culture that many in the field will want to preserve. At the same time, if there is truth in the observation made by Trevor Barnes and Eric Sheppard (2010) that intensifying dynamics of fragmentation and dissipation are at work in the discipline, in what they interpret as a less-than-productive form of centrifugal or disengaged pluralism, then those concerned with the combined or social productivity of the field qua field, its more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts contributions, have no grounds for complacency.

Heterodox disciplines are in their nature undisciplined, unsettled, and resistant to unification. Yet if they are to flourish as heterodox communities, they must develop ways actively to cultivate, and periodically to reinvigorate, internal codes and modes of dialogue and debate, sustained across difference. It has been suggested here that a distinctive facet of economic geography’s theory-culture is the always-unresolved tug-of-war between its
lumpers and its splitters, between the staking of generalized theory claims and the search for telling exceptions, between the construction of umbrella concepts and overarching frameworks and their purposeful critique and contestation. The discipline’s lumpers habitually engage with prevailing categories of analysis, working towards their refinement and reconstruction, while its splitters prefer to work against (or outside) such tacitly accepted categories, often entailing their deconstruction and displacement. If there is a necessary relation at the heart of economic geography’s theory-culture, it is that lumpers and splitters need one another. They each do and see things that the other does not, and the presence of each is a check on the potentially wayward tendencies of the other. One of the occupational hazards of lumping is that of singularism, the short cut taken to monocausal explanation (an extreme expression of which is universalism); an occupational hazard of splitting, on the other hand, is that of separatism, and the dead end of idiosyncratic explanation (the extreme form of which is particularism). The contested explanatory spaces in between are invariably more productive.

Perhaps it is true that lumpers and splitters are never entirely comfortable in one another’s company, but neither should they be allowed to live apart. Unsettled cohabitation seems to be a feature of economic geography’s theory-culture. Hence the relevance of calls for “engaged pluralism,” and for the development of “new vocabularies” for communication across difference, including the making of creole languages around so-called trading zones (cf. Barnes and Sheppard 2010). Beyond this, the field may also need to work on the collaborative development of new methodological rules and routines, especially where these have to potential break down some of the walls around those explanatory comfort zones that understandably tend to grow up around particular research programs and approaches, which can become self-affirming if they end up privileging their own, sequestered, modes of inquiry and objects of analysis. Substantivism, with its culture of situated theorizing and engaged comparativism, might be one way to do this (among others), one that resonates with extant practice in some respects, but which also draws out both lumpers and splitters onto the always-contested terrain of connectivity and diversity. The field would do well not just to acknowledge but
to actively engage this heterodox theory-culture, and to make a virtue of the fact that, as Darwin put it, “It is good to have hair-splitters and lumpers.”

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