

[Andrés Rodríguez-Pose](#)

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Threat or opportunity? On the ‘cross-corridor diaspora’ of British economic geographers

Andrés Rodríguez-Pose

Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics

British economic geographers are moving in droves to Business Schools. This is, according to James et al. (2018), a matter of utmost concern. Having one third of academic economic geographers outside established Geography Departments can lead, in their opinion, to a ‘hollowing-out’ of the discipline “to such a degree that the sustainability of the broader project is being undermined” (*ibid*, 7).

That British economic geographers are moving is not a new phenomenon. For decades, many of the best British researchers ended up in departments in North America – and not always in Geography, e.g. David Harvey, Brian Berry – and, increasingly, elsewhere. What is new is that they are moving to other disciplines within UK academia. Is this bad?

For James et al. (2018), the move to Business Schools can only be cast in a negative light. This so-called ‘diaspora’ across University corridors will inevitably lead to UK Departments finding it “difficult to maintain an EG curriculum at the undergraduate level, which may enhance a sense of isolation for economic geographers, thereby propagating more movements in what becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic” (*ibid*, 8). It may also encourage a shift in the research agenda, as geographers in Business Schools may pursue “a certain kind of firm-centric economic geography” (*ibid*, 8).

But while there could be negative aspects in this transfer, the positive ones more than compensate for them. No one is coercing British economic geographers to move. They are doing so willingly and after careful consideration of the individual and collective pros and cons of such a change. From an individual perspective, economic geographers are finding better conditions in Business Schools: the benefits go beyond salaries and encompass better research funding and facilities, and more enticing opportunities to train. From a collective point of view, geographers in Business Schools would have carefully pondered the implications of any move for their research and their capacity to spread their message to society. They would also have considered how well they will fit in what is undoubtedly a very different environment, as they would have weighed the risk of becoming isolated and outnumbered versus the opportunities of building cross-disciplinary bridges. They would have thought about their future standing, relative to their position in a Geography Department. In brief, their move would be a conscious decision. A decision that is, in many ways, flattering as it reflects their worth in the broad academic market. Getting a job in a Business School indicates that what they are doing is of interest not just to geographers, but also to broader sectors of academia and society. Hence, voting with their feet does not represent an act of treason, but a way to enhance the overall standing of economic geography. This, in itself, is fantastic news for Geography as a whole. After decades on the retreat, geographers are *colonising* other disciplines.

James et al. (2018), however, adopt a very different view. For them, “a diminished economic geography within Geography Departments leaves us progressively less well positioned to contribute to major policy or media debates around the economy” (page 8). But why can economic geographers not have a similar, if not greater, voice from a Business School? Arguably, economic geographers have a greater stage to reach businesses, policymakers, and

society in Business Schools than in Geography Departments. After all, the presence of economic geographers has been dwindling in Departments of Geography. This could expose a declining standing of UK economic geography: whereas in the 1970s and 1980s Britain ruled the economic geography wave, today much of its dynamism is found elsewhere. Dutch, Scandinavian and, to a lesser extent, German universities are among the leading foci of new ideas in economic geography. As such, they increasingly fish for top graduates in the UK University pool. Canada has become – and, fundamentally, the universities of Toronto and British Columbia – a major centre in the discipline and Asia is the rising star – with Singapore leading and Chinese universities following suit.

Overall, James et al.'s (2018) essay feels very much like an exercise in nostalgia: the grass was always greener in the past. The 1980s was the golden age; the age of the big names in economic geography. But if we were to ask, how much influence did these big names have in business practices, policy-making, and society, the answer would be, at best, mixed. With few and notable exceptions, many leading past economic geographers remained cocooned within the boundaries of the discipline, often stuck in debates that had little bearing and/or influence outside the walls of Geography Departments. Was economic geography more vibrant, more coherent and more relevant in the 1980s and the 1990s (*ibid*, 13)? I really doubt so. The move of economic geographers to other disciplines is proof of vitality, rather than a signal of weakness. And there are many other indications: economic geography journals have never before enjoyed their current standing and the influence of economic geography in real-life debates and policy is possibly greater than it has ever been.

Hence, the assertion that “economic geography is only likely to survive as a vibrant intellectual field in the UK if key thought leaders continue to be produced and reside within Geography Departments” does not really stand scrutiny (*ibid*, 9). In many ways, this debate is reminiscent of the 2000-2001 discussion about the desirability for economic geographers to engage outside the boundaries of the discipline (Amin and Thrift (2000) vs. Rodríguez-Pose (2001)). It reflects the atavistic complex of geographers, in general, and economic geographers, in particular, to actively partake in – rather than follow – cross-disciplinary debates. After all, as Amin and Thrift (2000: 8) remarked, economic geographers cannot “lie down with the lion and become anything more than prey”. Yet, the transfer of economic geographers to other disciplines is a sign that this can be done and that the change can bring both individual and collective benefits. The move of economic geographers to Business Schools is not a danger, but an opportunity to make our voice heard louder and have a greater influence on society. We should fete this ‘cross-corridor diaspora’ and not be afraid of it.

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