Progress in Human Geography
2021, Vol. 45(6) 1678–1691

DOI: 10.1177/03091325211011684
journals.sagepub.com/home/phg
SAGE

Economic geography I: Uneven development, 'left behind places' and 'levelling up' in a time of crisis

Andrew Leyshon
University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

This article is the first of three reviews in which economic geography is viewed through the lens of crises. This article focuses on the resurgence of uneven development as a political problem, which has led to public policy debates and responses in which economic geography is an underpinning construct. The article focuses on the UK where public policy responses have engaged with the problems caused by uneven development. Arguments made over many years about the long-term damaging impacts of geographical inequalities in opportunity and income have broken through into the political mainstream and gained traction. The article explains how this happened, as an already unbalanced regional economy was exacerbated first through growth led by financial services and then austerity-led decline. There are opportunities for economic geography in this public policy conjuncture, although it will require an ability to engage competently and critically with mainstream economics, and a willingness to work with political actors and a challenging, frustrating, and uncomfortable political process. Moreover, it also requires that the problem of uneven development remains adequately defined and attended to, so that appropriate public policy responses may be formulated, and continues to garner sufficient political attention, to allow both time and opportunity for intervention in public policy.

Keywords

Brexit, economic geography, left behind places, levelling up, public policy, uneven development

This is the first of three reports that survey economic geography. It's been some time since the field was surveyed in a trio of *Progress* reports. Indeed, it is more than two decades since first Trevor Barnes and then Jane Wills wrote a succession of reports on political economy which were ostensibly reviews of contemporary economic geography research (Barnes, 1995, 1996, 1998; Wills, 1999, 2000, 2002). *Progress* reports thereafter tended to focus on narrower domains of enquiry, as economic geography evolved. The wider changes in the sub-discipline in the intervening period have been documented by a steady flow of critical texts, edited volumes of handbooks that have illustrated the growth and development of economic geography scholarship (Barnes and Christophers, 2018; Barnes et al., 2016; Coe

Corresponding author:
Andrew Leyshon, School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park Campus, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK.
Email: andrew.leyshon@nottingham.ac.uk

et al., 2019; Leyshon et al., 2011; MacKinnon and Cumbers, 2018).

The focus of these reports is determined by two related criteria, and which helps connect it to the reports of Barnes and Wills. The first is that economic research should be *urgent*: that is, it should help to 'contribute to an economic geography that exposes the material geographies of disadvantage' (Samers, 2001: 191). Disadvantage is an increasingly significant feature of contemporary global capitalism and has become a focus of attention across the academic political spectrum, taking in both heterodox and orthodox approaches (e.g. Deaton, 2013; Milanović, 2016). The second criterion is that the research should in some way address contemporary *crisis*. The concept of crisis is firmly established in political economy accounts and frequently used as a heuristic device to expose the 'black boxes' of systems and institutions when, for one reason or another, they fail. In other words, crises are episodes when that which is taken for granted, and has fully sunk into the economic, social, and political background, may be suddenly foregrounded and subject to new attention and scrutiny. As Roitman argues, the 'concept of crisis is crucial to the "how" of thinking otherwise' (Roitman, 2014: 9). However, given the rate at which crises have emerged since the millennium, it is hard not to be sympathetic to Roitman's broader argument that the idea of crisis has lost much of its ontological power, and far more critical attention needs to be paid to a crisis of the very concept of crisis.

Notwithstanding such reservations, the three reports will revolve around crises that are founded to a greater or lesser extent in economic geography, and certainly qualify as urgent. These are, in turn, uneven development, and the post 2016 attention to what came to be known as 'left behind places', which will focus mainly on the United Kingdom; the economic geographies of the Covid-19 pandemic, where the geographical focus will broaden; and emerging economic geographies of the climate crisis, which will have broadest geographical focus of all.

Uneven development, 'left behind places' and 'levelling up'

The mainly heterodox groundings of economic geography (Peck, 2012) means that it's well attuned to addressing the causes and consequences of emerging crises, even those of its own making, in the form of sub-disciplinary crises of confidence. Periodically, there emerge voices within economic geography who worry that it is not quite doing the things that it should be doing, or that scholarship is not in quite the right place, that it has taken a wrong turn and needs to be set back on the right path, or at least should be on a different path.

Self-questioning is intrinsic to all academic disciplines. While challenging and disruptive, it helps ensure that work remains sufficiently critical and rigorous, encouraging academics to stop and pause and consider *why* they are undertaking the research that they do. There is no evidence that such episodes are any more prevalent in geography than in any other discipline, although they may have more significance. In comparative terms, geography is a relatively small academic discipline, with a history that confers upon it both a distinctive and constrained global footprint (Heffernan, 2012; Johnston and Sidaway, 2015) and a lower 'carrying capacity' – that is, where the number of researchers in the field is broadly related to the number of students that it is able to recruit and the level of research income that it is able to secure – than many other cognate disciplines. Given the broad and expansive nature of geography, where scope is often privileged over scale, the critical mass of academics in any sub-discipline, such as economic geography, can at times seem fragile (Rodríguez-Pose, 2001). While geography is adaptable and open, both to ideas and researchers, its constituent sub-disciplines can often lack the numerical weight of their counterparts in cognate academic disciplines.

For economic geography, its direct counterparts have most often been found in the much bigger and better resourced disciplines of economics and, more recently, business and management studies. The influence of these disciplines is present in many of economic geography's periodic episodes of sub-disciplinary uncertainty, and which are broadly of three kinds. First, sometimes the concern within economic geography is about a failure to engage sufficiently with debates of contemporary importance and significance. Dicken (2004) noted that geographers were absent from wider debates on globalisation during the 1990s and early 2000s, despite it being a subject upon which geographers – not least economic geographers such as Dicken (1994, 2015) – had made important cross-disciplinary contributions and interventions. As Dicken balefully concluded:

> Geography is rather like the small child in the school playground who always gets missed out when the big children are picking teams. Nobody seems to want to choose us. (2004: 6)

Dicken refers throughout to geographers, although it is quite clear given the subject matter that it is economic geographers in the main who are being excluded here. He acknowledges that disciplinary scale is part of the problem in his recommendation for geographers to join forces and break out from their 'fairly narrow ways' and work across geographical sub-disciplines. But there is also an accusation in Dicken's account of failure among (economic) geographers to recognise when to 'lean in' to important interdisciplinary debates that have broad significance.

This leads us to a second kind of sub-disciplinary uncertainty, stemming from concerns about engagement with much stronger disciplines, which tend to occur at exactly those moments of interdisciplinary rapprochement of the kind that Dicken would encourage to amplify economic geography's voice in wider debates. Such developments have often been met with caution and, at times, not a little hostility. For example, consider the intervention by Amin and Thrift (2000) following a growing engagement between economic geography and geographical economics during the 1990s. As well as providing a rather pessimistic status update on economic geography, Amin and Thrift (2000: 8) advised against collaboration with economists given the relative size of the two disciplines, warning fellow economic geographers that 'we would be fooling ourselves if we believe that we can lie down with the lion and become anything more than prey'; rather, they argued, the future of the discipline necessitated 'standing on our own terms, out of the long shadow of economics'. Clearly, engagement between economic geographers and economists does not inevitably lead to the predation of the former by the latter, and on occasion can even lead to productive engagements, such as the evolutionary 'turn' in economic geography (Boschma and Martin, 2010; Grabher, 2009; Martin and Sunley, 2007). Nevertheless, strong echoes of Amin and Thrift's cautionary tale emerged in a revisionist history of 21st century British economic geography (James et al., 2018). This survey suggested capacity had indeed been undermined, although less by a sudden act of predation than a gradual process of migration, as researchers moved to larger and better funded business and management schools, entities that have become increasingly important features of UK universities, especially since the millennium. While career opportunities for economic geographers in business and management were welcome, in that it gave options to those that might have been denied in their home discipline – and offer salaries and levels of internal funding typically higher than in geography – it was implied that the norms of their new discipline would constrain the kinds of work undertaken by this growing diaspora. However, some critics suggested that this tale of loss was rather overstated, given the exclusion of critical issues such as gender and race in much mainstream economy geography (Cockayne et al., 2018; Gray and Pollard, 2018).

A third and final area of sub-disciplinary concern, which follows on directly from the perceived failure to be engaged in key interdisciplinary debates and an associated lack of capacity and confidence, was an inability to contribute significantly to public policy debates. For example, Peck (1999) prefigured both Dicken's critique of geography's marginalisation and a wider concern that geography was failing to engage in what later become known as the impact agenda (Martin, 2001; Rogers et al., 2014). When it comes to wielding power in public policy debates, Peck suspected that economic geographers, despite all that they have to offer, just did not have the political heft where and when it matters:

> The brutal truth is that economists tend to be clustered at the formulation end of the policy-making cycle ... Too often, economic geographers are deployed as the manual labourers of the policy world, earning rewards and exerting influence in ways commensurate with this position in the policy-making division of labour. Meanwhile, it is an economist, rather than an economic geographer, who is whispering in the ear of the minister. (Peck, 1999: 134)

Aspects of Peck's lament were challenged at the time (Banks and MacKian, 2000; Pollard et al., 2000), but the general argument held. However, more than 20 years on, and despite the valid and convincing arguments about marginalisation and hollowing out, there are now clear signs, in the UK at least, and in relation to policy relevance and influence, that things have begun to turn for economic geography, if not necessarily yet for economic geographers. Since 2016, economic geography, and the importance of uneven development as a political force, began to move towards the front and centre of various UK government initiatives. Many economic geographers, who spent much of their career seeking to explain and, at times, justify economic geography as an academic sub-discipline – to other academics in interdisciplinary fora or to sometimes sceptical parents at undergraduate Open Days – would be forgiven for finding this turn of events both mildly bewildering but full of possibilities. How did this happen?

Left behind places?

The victory of the Leave campaign in the UK's 2016 referendum on membership of the EU and the election later that year of Donald Trump to the US Presidency saw geography surface within both academic and lay explanations of these unexpected outcomes. For some it was, at least in part, the revenge of those in the so-called 'left behind places' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Kemeny and Storper, 2020; Sykes, 2018); that is, the cities, towns and regions located beyond the large and successful agglomerations that had become the sites of economic growth in the 21st century. Both the Leave and Trump campaigns used populism to proffer easy solutions to those who felt both excluded by traditional politics and that the places in which they lived had been bypassed by successive waves of jobs and economic prosperity (Moretti, 2013). In the US, research has begun to explore the relationship between support for a populist agenda and the varying fortunes of places (Alba and Foner, 2017; Broz et al., 2021). But in the remainder of the report, I will focus on the UK example. This is in part due my own geographical biases and familiarity, but mainly because it is the place where uneven development has emerged both as a political problem and triggered a public policy response that, in theory at least, has the potential not only to reach across the political spectrum and engage economic geography.

Levelling up

In the UK, the Leave vote was generally accepted as a statement of discontent among populations living beyond London and the South East or outside other large metropolitan centres. Leave was the preferred option of those with lower academic qualifications and lower incomes, although 52% of people who voted Leave lived in the southern half of England, while exit poll data suggested that 59% of Leave voters were middle class (Dorling, 2016). Nevertheless, the scale of the rejection of the EU in some places – despite many being significant beneficiaries of EU regional support – encouraged a recognition that the unbalanced nature of the economy must have played at least some role in the outcome and needed to be addressed. Terms like regionalism and levelling up began to circulate in Westminster circles and entered policy debates (Tomaney and Pike, 2020), encouraged by interventions from public intellectuals that railed against the perils of globalisation and metropolitanism, and the importance of place, but from a broadly right of centre political position (e.g. Goodhart, 2017). A commitment to geographical rebalancing began to be expressed in policy documents from 2017 onwards and consolidated in the 2019 general election where a large Conservative victory was achieved in part by an unprecedented collapse of the so-called ‘Red Wall’ parliamentary constituencies (Quinn and Addley, 2019); that is, mainly working class areas in the North and Midlands, held by the Labour Party for decades but which changed allegiance to secure the exit from the EU that these places had voted for in 2016. This result further amplified calls for geographical redistribution and levelling up.

Even the Centre for Policy Studies, founded in the 1970s by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher to oppose the prevailing Keynesian orthodoxy and promote ideas of economic liberalism and market logic, became an enthusiastic advocate of levelling-up and rebalancing (King and Ives, 2019). However, while the UK government repeatedly declared their ambition to bring about ‘levelling up’, Tomaney and Pike (2020: 43) accurately pointed that it lacked a clear definition so ‘nobody knows what this means’, although there did seem to be a consensus that ‘Left-behind places are defined by their weaknesses’. The fact that levelling-up is a tricky concept to pin down may, of course, not be entirely accidental and might qualify as a ‘chaotic conceptualisation’ (Sayer, 1992). That is, a rhetorical device which is ‘neither simply sloppy nor accidental’ but ‘function[s] actively to carry out real ideological work, disguising interests and inequities’ (Trowler, 2015: 297). As a metaphor, levelling-up operates in several semantic areas (cf. Gillespie, 2010), ranging from aquatic, gaming and engineering performance, as in ‘firing on all cylinders’ (Lancaster, 2020), in ways that appeal in different ways to different audiences.

So, it is perhaps not surprising that a definitive understanding of levelling up remains elusive. But irrespective of whether anyone knows precisely what levelling up means, the fact that there is a debate about it at all is quite remarkable given that until recently a concern about the economic fate of places that found themselves unable to compete economically appeared irrelevant and trivial. Since the 1980s, UK policy has been relatively relaxed about redistribution and spatial equity, being more focused on global competitiveness (Bailey et al., 2019; Crafts, 2012). Informed by the growing influence of agglomeration research on policy (Nathan and Overman, 2013) economic geographers and spatial economists argued that rather than encourage activities to move from London and the South East to benefit other places, as in traditional regional development policy (Taylor and Wren, 1997), arguments were made to ease regulations in London to allow growth and expansion (Cheshire and Hilber, 2008); the UK’s most competitive agglomeration needed support and investment, not constraint, so that it might better compete with city-regions elsewhere in the global economy. Support for the London city region is in part reflected in the larger than expected per capita share of public infrastructure funding that has been channelled to it over a long period of time (Pike et al., 2019). From this perspective, this is a just-deserts outcome and that, in any case, the advantages of London are overstated:

> Once incomes are taxed, pensions and social security benefits are paid and account is taken of increased housing costs in London and the South East, regional imbalances in average household living standards are much reduced, with median living standards in London no higher than the national average. (Giles, 2021)

According to the Office of National Statistics London was one of only three UK regions – with the South East and East of England – that produced more in taxes than they received in public expenditure (Athow, 2017). The disbursement of public funds through infrastructure investment in the regions in which much of it was generated might appear fair by some measures.

Indeed, the very idea of regional policy, which was concerned with problems of regional equity, seemed so out of place that even the academic journal that perhaps had done most to draw attention to the issues of uneven development in the UK, *Regional Studies*, failed to mention regional planning at all in its 50th anniversary issue (Harrison et al., 2021). The received policy position, informed by decades of orthodox economic thinking, was to advocate non-intervention, because to do otherwise would be counterproductive. Policy makers should simply trust that 'markets will adjust – if the barriers preventing them from doing so are removed' (Bailey et al., 2019: 320). Perhaps the apotheosis of this form of thinking was recounted by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2018) in his tale of how Tim Leunig, an economist researching the uneven geography of prosperity, took some risk with his personal safety in giving a talk in Liverpool to inform his audience 'that, economically, their home city's time had passed' and that they and inhabitants of other struggling places should really 'move to more affluent places to take advantage of the opportunities on offer'. These more affluent places were, of course, for the most part in the southern part of the UK and, in particular, in the London city region. But by October 2008 the consequences of relying so heavily on London was already apparent.

London calling

An implicit growth model that might crudely be described as 'letting London rip' and which encouraged its powerful concentration of economic activity to be successful globally, with the belief that wealth would trickle down or be redistributed, was not without its consequences. For example, while London's financial centre was indeed successful and battled it out with New York for global financial pre-eminence, its contribution to the rest of the UK was consistently overstated, especially in terms of job creation (CRESC, 2009). As a result, the financial services sector became an engine that intensified uneven development in the UK and a national growth model built on its foundations was risky because 'finance has been the great *unleveller* in the UK economy . . . [leading to] a distribution of incomes which has increased social inequality from top to bottom and a distribution of jobs which has increased regional inequality' (Buchanon et al., 2009: 14, emphasis added).

Drawing on official employment statistics, Buchanon et al. argue that during the 1990s and 2000s employment growth was driven mainly by the state and not the private sector. Indeed, job creation in the UK in this period was driven largely in what they describe as in the 'para-state' sector; that is, that part of the private sector that was dependent upon state sponsorship through funding devices such as the private finance initiative and requirements for subcontracting and outsourcing (Buchanon et al., 2009). During the 2000s, the Labour government increased public expenditure, especially in health and education, adding jobs in both the state and para-state sectors that were distributed through the UK's regions. However, the number of private sector jobs created outside the para-state sector was relatively anaemic, and were dependent upon the continuation of the benign macroeconomic conditions that had begun with the entry of China as a major deflationary force in the 1990s and its successful incorporation into global production networks as a manufacturing hub (Coe and Yeung, 2015; Yang, 2013). Low inflationary macro-economic conditions ushered in in a low interest regime that helped fuel the experimentation in financial products 'chasing alpha' (Augar, 2009) leading eventually to the breaking of the global financial crisis.

Indeed, it was in the wake of the financial crisis that the notion of rebalancing the UK economy gained currency, which was initially framed in the context of weaning the UK economy off its dependency on the financial services sector, although even here there remained 'a substantial disjuncture between the rhetoric and practice of rebalancing' (Berry and Hay, 2016: 3). The most immediate government intervention was to convert a financial crisis into a fiscal crisis, which in turn led to a different kind of rebalancing: a concerted effort to drive down public expenditure. This was led by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government elected in 2010.

Austerity

Until the financial crisis, economic stability and increases in public expenditure went hand in hand, because as 'market transactions continued to grow, the government was able to justify its increasing expenditures on public programmes by the expected growth in tax receipts' (Lee et al., 2009: 732). Even without a change of government, the financial crisis would no doubt have brought about a more parsimonious attitude to public expenditure than hitherto given the considerable costs of bailing out the banks (Haldene, 2012; Tooze, 2018). But public expenditure cuts were deepened by a new government using the crisis to bring about step-change restructuring in state expenditure. In so doing, the economic model that had fuelled employment growth in the state and para-state sectors – especially in those regions outside London and the south east that had seen only lacklustre employment growth in the private sector in the previous decade or so – failed. But, as Fetzer (2019b) argues, the form that austerity took was particularistic: it was designed to target some areas to the exclusion of others, 'cutting spending on education (crumbling schools, tuition fees) and the working poor (tax credits and housing benefit cuts), [while directing it] to state pension recipients' (Fetzer, 2019b).

The programme of austerity in the areas targeted was non-trivial. Overall, welfare and social protection expenditure was cut by 16 per cent per capita, but was higher at District level, by as much as 23.4 per cent between 2010 and 2015. Within this there were also large variations, 'ranging from 46.3 per cent to 6.2 per cent, with the sharpest reductions [in spending] in the poorest areas' (Fetzer, 2019a: 3850). Indeed, Fetzer argues that the combined scale and specific geography of this fiscal contraction had a direct impact on the outcome of the Brexit vote. Drawing both on election outcome and panel data, there was evidence of a geographical correlation between support for the UK Independence Party – the only political party with an official policy to Leave the European Union – and places with poorly performing economies, but only after 2010. The reason, Fetzer (2019a) argues, is that welfare reforms hit those places most reliant on low skill jobs and welfare expenditure. In other words, the UK state sought to solve its fiscal crisis through a radical reduction in the volume of money disbursed to local political structures. Economic geographers have begun to reveal how these cuts served to amply uneven development, especially in England:

> The cuts experienced by local government in England were deeper and more severe than the cuts experienced by local government in Scotland or Wales. Devolved government in Scotland and Wales gives these nations more room to find alternative cuts and other funding sources. In England . . . cuts in central government grants were particularly severe for municipal budgets, and particularly the London boroughs and other cities with a legacy of an older industrial base. Conversely, a swathe of 'middle England' in the South central part of the country experienced the smallest spending cuts. This form of urban austerity thus drives a division between those cities that have the economic ability to withstand this fiscal disciplining and those that are unable to do so. (Gray and Barford, 2018: 558)

Geographers have undertaken research into the implications of austerity to reveal how it created new kinds of inequality and hardship, felt keenly at the level of households and communities, with gendered outcomes (Hall, 2019a, 2019b; MacLeavy, 2011). This work helps explain why austerity has been identified as partly responsible for a faster than average slowdown in life expectancy in the UK, deepening regional inequities in levels of health in the UK (see Marmot et al., 2020). Such outcomes, combined with politically orchestrated fears that new waves of migration from the EU were driving down wages, especially for semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, and concerns about eligibility for a declining pot of benefits (Outhwaite, 2019), helped to fuel anti-EU sentiment in poorer areas of the UK; indeed, 'in England it was in university towns alone that Remain won handsomely' (Anderson, 2021).

The stark nature of the results forced uneven development back onto the political agenda as attention was drawn to the enduring geographical inequities of the UK economy, but now given a new twist after years of austerity funding cuts. And as more attention was drawn to the problem, so its sheer scale was revealed. Across a range of key indicators such as productivity, income, unemployment, the UK was found to be divided than any comparable economy (Raikes et al., 2019). For example, according to McCann (2016), by the time of the EU referendum, half of the UK population lived in places in where levels of productivity were lower than in struggling regions of eastern Europe and the southern United States. A new political arithmetic was required that could incorporate such sentiment into new policy initiatives, and which required a break from traditional laissez-faire approaches to economic policy (Bailey et al., 2019).

The return of regional policy?

An attention to regional inequality and broader industrial strategy had emerged in the period running up to the Brexit vote. For example, new pan-regional organisations were encouraged to focus on economic development beyond London and the South East. The Northern Powerhouse was a 2014 initiative led by then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and northern-based MP, George Osborne (Lee, 2017). This was later followed by the creation of the Midlands Engine (Bentley, 2018; Green and Rossitor, 2019) which had a similar objective to better coordinate activities and planning across a contiguous pan-regional space to better aggregate and scale activities across and between provincial cities that might enable these areas to collectively take advantage of, and benefit from, agglomeration economies. These initiatives accelerated after 2016. For example, science funding – traditionally highly skewed towards the 'golden triangle' of elite universities in London, Oxford and Cambridge (Forth and Jones, 2020) – was quickly co-opted to deliver more equitable regional outcomes (McCann, 2019), with research programmes being framed within a 'Place Agenda' written into a new UK white paper on Industrial Strategy in 2017 (Government, 2017). A Strength in Places Fund[1] was set up to attempt to mobilise place-based synergies between Higher Education Institutions and local businesses to encourage near-market innovation.

But it was after the General Election of 2019, that the government appeared to redouble its commitment to uneven development, bolstered as it was by winning long-held Labour seats in the Midlands and North based on a promise to deliver Brexit and start a process of restitution under the banner of levelling up. New funding vehicles were created, such as a Towns Funds, a Community Renewal Fund and a Levelling Up fund, with the latter alone containing as much as £4.8bn for tackling uneven development and deprivation.

So, at last, is this the opportunity for economic geographers, as Peck hoped, to get up close and personal with government ministers? Well, only in part, and not only because such intimate encounters became problematic in the regime of social distancing necessary following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Economists still hold sway in these debates, not least because the primary means of evaluating the value of places remain those of conventional economics. The importance of geographical difference has afforded more influence to spatial economists through their analyses of variations in productivity over space, as well as to those economic geographers who are at least fluent in the language of orthodox economics (e.g. Martin et al., 2018). This work has made important observations about the depth, scale and persistence of gaps in economic performance both between and within different parts of the UK. But research is also required to identify the kinds of reforms needed, which include institutional redesign and greater levels of devolution, political autonomy and accountability (Beel et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2019; Seaford et al., 2020). Research is needed to move towards a clearer understanding of the causes and consequences of uneven development and help to build a better understanding of what levelling up might mean. Here there is considerable scope for engaging a broader heterodox group of economic geographers, where there is appropriate expertise in analysing the relationship between the local state, its institutions and economic development (Beel et al., 2021; MacLeod and Jones, 2018). Such efforts could involve researchers working not only on geographical political economy but also on cultural economy given the recognition that considerable emotion and affect was expressed in the Brexit vote (see Anderson et al., 2020; Bromley-Davenport et al., 2019)

However, this trajectory may be too optimistic. One reason why levelling up remains vague is that it is politically expedient for it to remain so (Tomaney and Pike, 2020). Or, as indicated earlier, it is a chaotic conception with purpose. It is suggestive of a new economic geography settlement, but a deliberate lack of precision enables actors of all kinds and dispositions to imagine what levelling up might be. Thus, economic geographers see an opportunity to reengage with public policy in relation to the problems of uneven development in the UK which have been of concern in the discipline for at least two academic generations (Massey, 1984). But this opportunity may well be chimeric. For example, consider the March 2021 UK Budget. While levelling up featured strongly, in an announcement of funds being allocated to it, hope that this was part of a broader transformational project was hard to sustain. Based on where the money was allocated, which seemed to disproportionately be allocated to political constituencies held by the ruling party and which seemed to bear little obvious correspondence to objective understandings of deprivation (Walker et al., 2021), then perhaps levelling up may have less to do with broader notions of economic and social justice, than a traditional form of pork barrel politics designed to deliver a parliamentary majority at the next general election. The fact that such decisions came at the same time as the government gave signs that it was abandoning a commitment to a broader industrial strategy deepened that suspicion for many (Inman, 2021; Mazzucato et al., 2021).

Conclusions

The emergence of a political problem such as left behind places and the development of possible prescriptions, such as levelling up, have surfaced in response to a crisis founded in economic geography. This crisis has provided an opportunity for policy formulations to emerge in which economic geography is an underpinning construct. To figure so strongly in government initiatives was once an aspirational state of affairs for economic geographers. That uneven development has entered everyday political vocabulary in the UK is a moment of significance for the subdiscipline and creates an opportunity for academics to attempt to engage directly in policy debates of direct relevance to their discipline. Arguments made over many years about the long-term damaging impacts caused by uneven development have broken through into the political mainstream and gained traction. There are opportunities for economic geographers, although in many cases it will require an ability to engage competently and critically with the language of mainstream economics, but also a willingness to work with political actors and a political process that many might find challenging, frustrating, and, at times, uncomfortable. Moreover, it also requires that the problem of uneven development remains of sufficient political significance that it requires persistent and repeated attention. Whether this issue will have sustained political traction is difficult to predict. However, evidence that levelling up will persist, at least as an idea that frames events in terms of the geographical equity of outcomes, is the way in which, having now been brought into sharp political and analytical focus, uneven development has become a lens through which to view other kinds of problems. One example is growing evidence about the outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has revealed that the impact of the virus has been highly uneven, with a disproportionate impact on communities already characterised by economic precarity, low levels of income and long-standing health inequalities (British Academy, 2021; Raval, 2021). Moreover, the spread of Covid-19 has served to deepen racial and gender inequalities. In my next report, I will address the emerging economic geographies of the Covid-19 pandemic, which will range from impacts on monetary policy, supply chains, forms of working and the continued advances of platform modes of economic intermediation.

Author's note

Between October 2020 and April 2021, I worked as Academic Partner Coordinator for the Midlands Engine Observatory. The Midlands Engine partnership, which covers both the East and West Midlands, brings together public sector partners and businesses to complement the activity of local and combined authorities, Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), universities and other regional organisations and companies. My role was to help establish a Research Partnership for Midlands-based universities and develop a research funding programme based on expression of interest calls in undertaking research on issues of relevance to the Midlands Engine partnership.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Christian Berndt for inviting me to write these reports. I extend my thanks to him and to Noel Castree and Alex Hughes for their support, encouragement, considerable forbearance and very helpful comments earlier drafts of this article. They bear no responsibility for the outcome.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Andrew Leyshon https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0822-1441

Note

1. See https://www.ukri.org/our-work/our-main-funds/strength-in-places-fund/.

References

Alba R and Foner N (2017) Immigration and the geography of polarization. *City & Community* 16(3): 239–243.

Amin A and Thrift N (2000) What kind of economic theory for what kind of economic geography? *Antipode* 32(No 1): 4–9.

Anderson B, Wilson HF, Forman PJ, et al. (2020) Brexit: modes of uncertainty and futures in an impasse. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45(2): 256–269.

Anderson P (2021) The breakaway. *London Review of Books* 43(2). Available at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n02/perry-anderson/the-breakaway (accessed 21 January 2021).

Athow J (2017) The wealth of regions – measuring the UK's tax and spending imbalance. In: *National Statistical: News and Insights From the Office of National Statistic*. Available at: https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2017/06/12/the-wealth-of-regions-measuring-the-uks-tax-and-spending-imbalance/ (accessed 12 June 2017).

Augar P (2009) *Chasing Alpha: How Reckless Growth and Unchecked Ambition Ruined the City's Golden Decade*. London: The Bodley Head.

Bailey D, Glasmeier A and Tomlinson PR (2019) Industrial policy back on the agenda: putting industrial policy in its place? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 12(3): 319–326.

Banks M and MacKian S (2000) Jump in! the water's warm: a comment on peck's 'grey geography'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25(2): 249–254.

Barnes TJ (1995) Political economy I: 'the culture, stupid'. *Progress in Human Geography* 19(3): 423–431.

Barnes TJ (1996) Political economy II: compliments of the year. *Progress in Human Geography* 20(4): 521–528.

Barnes TJ (1998) Political economy III: confessions of a political economist. *Progress in Human Geography* 22(1): 94–104.

Barnes TJ and Christophers B (2018) *Economic Geography: A Critical Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Barnes TJ, Peck J and Sheppard E (eds) (2016) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Economic Geography*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Beel D, Jones M and Jones IR (2021) *City Regions and Devolution in the UK: The Politucs of Representation*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Bentley G (2018) Territory, policy and governance at meso-scale? The midlands engine. In: *'Place-Based Perspectives on the UK Industrial Strategy'*, In: F Fai Bath (ed) Institute for Policy Research Policy Brief, University of Bath.

Berry C and Hay C (2016) The great British 'rebalancing' act: the construction and implementation of an economic imperative for exceptional times. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18(1): 3–25.

Boschma R and Martin R (eds) (2010) *The Handbook of Evolutionary Economic Geography*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

British Academy (2021) *The COVID Decade: Understanding the Long-Term Societal Impacts of COVID-19*. London: British Academy. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3238/COVID-decade-understanding-long-term-societal-impacts-COVID-19.pdf (accessed 21 January 2021).

Bromley-Davenport H, MacLeavy J and Manley D (2019) Brexit in Sunderland: the production of difference and division in the UK referendum on European Union membership. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37(5): 795–812.

Broz JL, Frieden J and Weymouth S (2021) Populism in place: the economic geography of the globalization backlash. International Organization forthcoming. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/populism-in-place-the-economic-geography-of-the-globalization-backlash/98ED873D925E0590CB9A78AEC68BB439 (accessed 23 April 2021).

Buchanon J, Froud J, Sukhdev J, et al. (2009) Undisclosed and unsustainable: problems of the national UK national business model. In *CRESC Working Paper Series, Working Paper No.75, University of*

Manchester. Available at: https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/cresc/workingpapers/wp75.pdf (accessed 20 January 2021).

Cheshire PC and Hilber CAL (2008) Office space supply restrictions in britain: the political economy of market revenge. *The Economic Journal* 118(529): F185–F221.

Cockayne D, Horton A, Kay K, et al. (2018) On economic geography's "movers" to business and management schools: a response from outside "the project". *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50(7): 1510–1518.

Coe NM and Yeung HWC (2015) *Global Production Networks: Theorizing Economic Development in An Interconnected World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Coe NM, Kelly P and Yeung HWC (2019) *Economic Geography: A Contemporary Introduction* (3rd edn), Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Crafts N (2012) British relative economic decline revisited: the role of competition. *Explorations in Economic History* 49(1): 17–29.

CRESC (2009) *An Alternative Report on UK Banking Reform*. Manchester: Centre for Research on Socio Cultural Change, University of Manchester. Available at: http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/cresc/sites/default/files/Alternative%20report%20on%20banking%20V2.pdf (accessed 16 January 2021).

Deaton A (2013) *The GREAT Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Dicken P (1994) The Roepke lecture in economic-geography global-local tensions – firms and states in the global space-economy. *Economic Geography* 70(2): 101–128.

Dicken P (2004) Geographers and 'globalization': (yet) another missed boat? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29(1): 5–26.

Dicken P (2015) *Global Shift: Mapping the Changing Contours of the World Economy*. (7th edn). London: SAGE.

Dorling D (2016) Brexit: the decision of a divided country. *BMJ* 354: i3697.

Fetzer T (2019a) Did austerity cause brexit? *American Economic Review* 109(11): 3849–3886.

Fetzer T (2019b) Long read | debunking myths on links between austerity and brexit. In: *LSE Blogs*. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/10/17/long-read-debunking-myths-on-links-between-austerity-and-brexit/ (accessed 12 January 2021).

Forth T and Jones R (2020) *The Missing £4 Billion: Making R&D Work for the Whole UK*, London: Nesta. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/the-missing-4-billion/ (accessed 7 May 2020).

Giles C (2021) UK budget: the long road to levelling up. *Financial Times*. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/44455301-6ef2-4528-bd3c-6bfa6376ef36 (accessed 2 March 2021).

Gillespie T (2010) The politics of 'platforms'. *New Media & Society* 12(3): 347–364.

Goodhart D (2017) *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: C. Hurst & Co.

Goodwin MJ and Heath O (2016) The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: an aggregate-level analysis of the result. *The Political Quarterly* 87(3): 323–332.

Grabher G (2009) Yet another turn? The evolutionary project in economic geography. *Economic Geography* 85(2): 119–127.

Gray M and Barford A (2018) The depths of the cuts: the uneven geography of local government austerity. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11(3): 541–563.

Gray M and Pollard J (2018) Flourishing or floundering? Policing the boundaries of economic geography. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50(7): 1541–1545.

Green A and Rossitor W (2019) Geographical scales and functions: the case of the Midlands Engine. *Evidence paper for the Midlands Engine Independent Economic Review*. Available at: http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/38261/1/1233094_Rossiter.pdf (accessed 30 October 2020).

Haldene A (2012) The doom loop. *London Review of Books* 34(5): 21–22. Available at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n04/andrew-haldane/the-doom-loop (accessed 7 May 2020).

Hall SM (2019a) Everyday austerity: towards relational geographies of family, friendship and intimacy. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(5):769–789.

Hall SM (2019b) *Everyday Life in Austerity: Family, Friends and Intimate Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harrison J, Galland D and Tewdwr-Jones M (2021) Whither regional planning? *Regional Studies* 55(1):1–5.

Heffernan M (2012) Histories of geography. In: Clifford NJ, Holloway SL, Rice SP and Valentine G (eds) *Key Concepts in Geography*, London: Sage.

HM Government (2017) *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain fit for the Future*. London: BEIS. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf (accessed 21 July 2020).

Inman P (2021) UK business leaders condemn 'sad and bad' axing of industrial strategy panel: group led by Bank of England economist ditched in favour of government's 'plan for growth'. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/mar/04/business-leaders-condemn-decision-axe-uk-industry-strategy-panel?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (accessed 4 March 2021).

James A, Bradshaw M, Coe NM, et al. (2018) Sustaining economic geography? Business and management schools and the UK's great economic geography diaspora. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50: 1355–1366.

Johnston RJ and Sidaway J (2015) *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography Since 1945*. 7th edn. London: Routledge.

Kemeny T and Storper M (2020) Superstar cities and left-behind places: disruptive innovation, labor demand, and interregional inequality. Working Paper (41). International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103312/ (accessed 23 April 2021).

King N and Ives E (2019) A rising tide: levelling up left-behind, *Britain Centre for Policy Studies.* Available at: https://www.cps.org.uk/files/reports/original/191028170944-ARisingTide3.pdf (accessed 21 January 2021).

Lancaster S (2020) "Levelling up"—why Boris Johnson can't stop saying it and what he really means. *Prospect*. Available at: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/levelling-up-why-boris-johnson-cant-stop-saying-it-and-what-he-really-means-speech-politics-language (accessed 17 January 2021).

Lee N (2017) Powerhouse of cards? Understanding the 'Northern Powerhouse'. *Regional Studies* 51(3): 478–489.

Lee R, Clark GL, Pollard J, et al. (2009) The remit of financial geography-before and after the crisis. *Journal of Economic Geography* 9(5): 723–747.

Leyshon A, Lee R, McDowell L, et al. (2011), *The SAGE Handbook of Economic Geography*. London: SAGE.

Mackinnon D and Cumbers A (2018) *An Introduction to Economic Geography: Globalisation, Uneven Development and Place*. London: Routledge.

MacLeavy J (2011) A 'new politics' of austerity, workfare and gender? The UK coalition government's welfare reform proposals. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 4(3): 355–367.

MacLeod G and Jones M (2018) Explaining 'Brexit capital': uneven development and the austerity state. *Space and Polity* 22(2): 111–136.

Marmot M, Allen J, Boyce T, et al. (2020) *Health Equity In England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On*. London: The Health Foundation.

Martin R (2001) Geography and public policy: the case of the missing agenda. *Progress in Human Geography* 25(2): 189–210.

Martin R and Sunley P (2007) Complexity thinking and evolutionary economic geography. *Journal of Economic Geography* 7(5): 573–601.

Martin R, Sunley P, Gardiner B, et al. (2018) The city dimension of the productivity growth puzzle: the relative role of structural change and within-sector slowdown. *Journal of Economic Geography* 18(3): 539–570.

Massey D (1984) *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures of the Geography of Production*. London: Macmillan.

Mazzucato M, Macfarlane L and Dibb G (2012) Building back worse. *Project Syndicate*. Available at: https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/boris-johnson-governments-bad-industrial-strategy-by-mariana-mazzucato-et-al-2021-03 (accessed 22 March 2021).

McCann P (2016) *The UK Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, Globalisation and Governance*, London: Routledge.

McCann P (2019) *UK Research and Innovation: A Place-Based Shift*. Swindon: UK Research and Innovation.

Milanovic B (2016) *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Moretti E (2013) *The New Geography of Jobs*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books.

Nathan M and Overman H (2013) Agglomeration, clusters, and industrial policy. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 29(2): 383–404.

Outhwaite W (2019) Migration crisis and “Brexit”. In: Menjívar C, Ruiz M and Ness I (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190856908.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190856908-e-7 (accessed 21 January 2021).

Peck J (1999) Editorial: grey geography? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24(2): 131–135.

Peck J (2012) Economic geography: island life. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2(2): 113–133.

Pike A, O’Brien P, Strickland T, et al. (2019) *Financialising City Statecraft and Infrastructure*. Cheltenham: Edwards Elgar.

Pollard J, Henry N, Bryson J, et al. (2000) Shades of grey? Geographers and policy. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25(2): 243–248.

Quinn B and Addley E (2019) Labour recriminations begin as Tories demolish ‘red wall’. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/13/tories-hopeful-election-political-earthquake-will-smash-labours-red-wall (accessed 13 December 2020).

Raikes L, Giovannini A and Getzel B (2019) *Divided and Connected: Regional Inequalities in the North, the UK and the Developed World. State of the North 2019*. Manchester: IPPR North. Available at: file:///C:/Users/Andrew/Downloads/sotn-2019.pdf (accessed 21 January 2021).

Raval A (2021) Inside the ‘Covid Triangle’: a catastrophe years in the making. *Financial Times*. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/0e63541a-8b6d-4bec-8b59-b391bf44a492 (accessed 5 March 2021).

Rodríguez-Pose A (2001) Killing economic geography with a “cultural turn” overdose. *Antipode* 33(2): 176–182.

Rodríguez-Pose A (2018) The revenge of the places that don’t matter. In: *VOxEU*. Available at: https://voxeu.org/article/revenge-places-dont-matter (accessed 6 February 2021).

Rogers A, Bear C, Hunt M, et al. (2014) (1). Intervention: the impact agenda and human geography in UK higher education. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 13: 1–9 (accessed 28 January 2021).

Roitman J (2014) *Anti-Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Samers M (2001) What is the point of economic geography? *Antipode* 33(2): 183–193.

Sayer A (1992) *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Seaford C, Glover B, Collinson S, et al. (2020) Achieving levelling-up: the structures and processes needed, LIPSIT Report Available at: https://lipsit.ac.uk/project-outputs/ (accessed 20 December 2020).

Sykes O (2018) Post-geography worlds, new dominions, left behind regions, and ‘other’ places: unpacking some spatial imaginaries of the UK’s ‘Brexit’ debate. *Space and Polity* 22(2): 137–161.

Taylor J and Wren C (1997) UK regional policy: an evaluation. *Regional Studies* 31(9): 835–848.

Tomaney J and Pike A (2020) Levelling up? *The Political Quarterly* 91(1): 43–48.

Tooze A (2018) *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*. New York, NY: Viking.

Trowler V (2015) Negotiating contestations and ‘chaotic conceptions’: engaging ‘non-traditional’ students in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly* 69(3): 295–310.

Walker P, Duncan P, Pidd H, et al. (2021) Tories accused of levelling up ‘stitch-up’ over regional deprivation fund. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/04/tories-accused-of-levelling-up-stitch-up-over-regional-deprivation-fund?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (accessed 4 March 2021).

Wills J (1999) Political economy I: global crisis, learning and labour. *Progress in Human Geography* 23(3): 443–451.

Wills J (2000) Political economy II: the politics and geography of capitalism. *Progress in Human Geography* 24(4): 641–652.

Wills J (2002) Political economy III: neoliberal chickens, Seattle and geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 26(1): 90–100.

Yang C (2013) From strategic coupling to recoupling and decoupling: restructuring global production networks and regional evolution in china. *European Planning Studies* 21(7): 1046–1063.