

Economic geography I:

Uneven development, 'left behind places' and 'levelling up' in a time of crisis

Abstract

This paper is the first of three reviews in which economic geography is viewed through the lens of crises. This paper 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 paper 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 paper 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

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

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 years 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, Peck and Sheppard, 2016; Coe, Kelly and Yeung, 2019; Leyshon, Lee, McDowell and Sunley, 2011; MacKinnon and Cumbers, 2019).

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 (for example, 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.

I. 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 globalization 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 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?

II. 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 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 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, Frieden and Weymouth, 2019). 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 began to enter 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 (for example, 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 by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher in the 1970s 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 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 to be deemed unfortunate but ultimately irrelevant and trivial. Since the 1980s UK policy has been relatively relaxed about redistribution and spatial equity, being more focused on global competitiveness (Bailey, Glasmeier, and Tomlinson 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, Galland, and Tewdwr-Jones 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, Glasmeier, and Tomlinson 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 globally 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 distributed through the UK's regions. However, the number of private sector jobs outside the para-state sector was relatively anaemic, and that 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 (Yang 2013; Coe and Yeung 2015). Low inflationary macro-economic conditions ushered 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 in 2010.

III. 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 targeted 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 percent per capita, but was higher at District level, by as much as 23.4 percent between 2010 and 2015. Within this there were also large variations, ‘ranging from 46.3 percent to 6.2 percent, 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 amplify 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; Hall 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, Giovannini, and Getzel 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, Glasmeier, and Tomlinson 2019).

IV. 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 Fund¹ was set up to attempt to mobilise place-based synergies between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) 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 to, 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 (for example, Martin et al. 2018). This work has made important observations about the depth, scale and persistence of gaps in economic

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

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, Jones and Jones 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, Jones, and Jones 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, Macfarlane, and Dibb, 2021).

V. 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 sub-discipline 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.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Between October 2020 and April 2021, I worked as Academic Partner Coordinator for the Midlands Engine Observatory. The Midlands Engine partnership, which cover both the East and West Midlands, brings together public sector partners and businesses to complement the activity of local and combined authorities, LEAs, 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.

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