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The Construction of Work, Privilege, and Power in Economic Geography: The View from Inside the Project

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On Being Outside “the Project”: A Symposium in honor of Susan Christopherson

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The View from Inside the Project

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*Antipode* published Susan Christopherson’s “On Being Outside ‘the Project’” in 1989 just as her (other) career-defining work in economic geography was garnering substantial attention. I cannot speak to the debates in and around economic geography when Christopherson wrote “On Being Outside ‘the Project’”. I did not enter the field for another decade and the questions that she (and others) laid out about the construction of privilege and power in the field were simply extant when I arrived—not resolved but known.

It is, of course, instructive to think back on how Christopherson’s critique has played out within the field. Almost 30 years after “On Being Outside ‘the Project’” I see this fight for theoretical centrality from my own perspective informed by my experience as Christopherson’s advisee and later co-author and colleague. As she wrote in “On Being Outside ‘the Project’”: “The question, then, is not the reconstruction of human geography, but the construction of power through theory.” (p.88) “The Project”, then, is ultimately about power.

Christopherson’s research addressed the connections between labor, privilege, and power. In our 2007 book, *Remaking Regional Economies: Power, Labor, and Firm Strategies in the Knowledge Economy*, we were explicit about placing the analysis of power at the center of our Project:
Networks of all kinds, including firm networks, are constructed around power relations. Networks encompass hierarchies of power or they wouldn’t be networks. There would be no incentive for the more powerful members to remain in the network if they didn’t disproportionately gain the benefits of network participation. Just as individuals “network” in order to promote their individual interests (rather than those of the network as a whole), so do firms. Networks can and frequently do take the form of hierarchies, with marginal benefit to the less powerful members. (Christopherson and Clark 2007b: 7)

Our work on “power in firm networks” analyzed knowledge-intensive industries experiencing rapid transformations (Christopherson and Clark 2007a). We were mapping the evolution (both conceptually and geographically) of evolving and enabling industries–their technological origins, their network organizations, their products, their processes, and ultimately, the ways in which power was constructed and exercised in these networks and by whom. Policy implications arise from identifying and understanding the construction of political and economic power.

It was in “On Being Outside ‘the Project’” that Christopherson trained her analytical gaze on the industry in which she worked and its specific production processes. She critiqued these practices within the discipline with specificity:

The development of abstract theories of the kind that have become increasingly powerful in the 1980s is an intensely social and, dare I say it, elitist enterprise. The emerging theoretical work process requires economic as well as intellectual resources, including the time and money to travel to Barcelona, Bologna, or wherever the currently hot conference is being held … The implications of this work process for the construction of a class system within academia are seemingly opaque to most of those who practice it … (p.87, 88)
Academic fields are places in constant dialogue and the questions and practices that animate them are produced; they are constructed. They are also highly contingent, fluid, and dynamic. As a consequence it behooves us to understand the connections between the work we perform, the privilege it produces, and the power that it confers. It is here that we observe the convergence and the continuity in Christopherson’s own sites of inquiry. As she was studying work–service-based work, project-based and contingent work–in a variety of industries from film to photonics, she did not divorce her lived experience from her analytical position. In our work we saw the power operating in the construction of firm networks because of our lived experience as participants in networks ourselves–with varying degrees of power and privilege.

Christopherson did not view the academy as somehow insulated from the construction of hierarchies intended to differentially assign opportunities to some participants rather than others. In “On Being Outside ‘the Project’”, she further argued that by marginalizing questions about “real world” work, geographers misunderstood the labor markets essential to understanding production systems. Relegating difference–variation–to the outskirts of theory results in incomplete theories.

Here, the relentless formalism of economic geography runs up against the messy contingency of the real world–“the emotional labor of the nurse or flight attendant” (p.86)–that which is difficult to measure, quantify, model, and compare across cases and observations. This is not to say that economic geography remains committed to formalism as a conservative approach to questions of political economy or politics, but rather the field remains formal in its own construction (and presentation) of self. Economic geography has a predilection for formal (quantitative) models and affection for categories and typologies. In short, it has an overarching affinity for fitting actors and processes into tidy, comparable boxes to better serve the construction of our grand theories: new regionalism, the new economic geography, evolutionary economic geography.

Being outside the Project is hard. But constructing your own Project is even harder. Taking the time to identify the intersections and acknowledge the connections and stay in the
conversation even when, perhaps especially when, your voice and your work are not heard is especially hard. It has now been almost three decades since Christopherson gave a voice to this critique of the field. In that time, she produced a substantial contribution to the field of economic geography. She also moved from being a part of the Project to ultimately shaping a Project herself. And that was what was required: moving from the being to the shaping. Power is derived from a capacity to act.

Which returns us to the question of how work constructs privilege and assigns power to participants in the Project. Allusions to what motivated Christopherson to write “On Being Outside ‘the Project’” are found in Linda McDowell’s (1992) “Multiple Voices: Speaking From Inside and Outside ‘the Project’”, also published in Antipode. McDowell highlighted the 1988 Association of American Geographers annual meeting as a determinative event. I suspect we can all picture it. Those disciplinary debates that simmer on the back burner during the year while in your home department bubble up to the surface in an over air-conditioned, windowless conference room. Once again seated in the receiving audience watching in real time the social construction of the field–your field–and the marginalization of your own work in it. Sometimes there is one woman on the panel, or one person of color. Sometimes that person is you.

On occasion, there is an undeniable spatiality to the peripheralization. Certain panels and papers are relegated to the smaller, more distant conference rooms and less desirable time slots. As geographers, we can be inconveniently attentive to the meaning of time and space in our own practices. We cannot argue that there are not spaces where we can speak and can be heard. But when we return to our home departments and turn the temperature back down on our exasperation, we then experience the next round of indignities. We spend the year watching our citation count seemingly stuck like a broken odometer on an old car. We are speaking but no one is citing. It is, still, all about the construction of power.

At different points there have been discussions of a “transformed geography”. A geography that, for one thing, integrates feminist epistemologies–a geography that accepts variation in ways of knowing. I would further argue that a transformed geography requires
variation in ways of participating—ways of working. Lived experience can again be instructive. It is worth noting that when Christopherson went back to her home department after that 1988 AAG, it was not to a geography department. This has been my experience as well. I cannot, however, claim to sit outside the social construction of the field. As part of the leadership in the AAG, as a journal editor, and as a tenured professor, such a claim would be neither honest nor compelling. I am very much a participant in a network of privilege. It is not clear, however, that this network of privilege is where the power lies. Christopherson argued that power was constructed through theory. It is not just a matter of getting a seat at the table but figuring out how to use it.

One of the most striking moments in “On Being Outside ‘the Project’” is the discussion of fear. Christopherson cites fear as a key constraint for a transformed geography. “Fear of being left out. Fear of being labeled. Fear of not dealing with the “in” subject. Justifiable fear of never being cited except in a list of interesting, albeit peripheral, work …” (p.88). We do not talk about fear much in the academy although it guides much of what we do. Our fears create a web of paralyzing internal contradictions—fear of being ignored, fear of being engaged, fear of being evaluated, fear of never being recognized, fear of being the lead, fear of forever following, fear of never being nominated, and ultimately, a fear of losing. This discussion of fear is essential. It is critical to recognize that one takes hits in this business. Some will be cheap shots; others are earned. Some can be avoided with wisdom and experience. Others are just coming your way. You will get knocked down. That’s not the hard part. The hard part is getting back up.

The construction of power through theory requires not just rethinking but repositioning. In the end, it requires the courage and confidence to place your work inside the Project. It requires flipping the script. And, it requires a recognition that there are multiple Projects operating. As it turned out, Christopherson’s research on labor markets, work, and changing industrial structures from the 1980s proved prescient. In the subsequent decades work only became more flexible, more contingent, and more project-based. Those work practices and firm strategies that initially appeared marginal became central. The contingency that once existed at the lower rungs of the
career ladder crept steadily upwards, concurrently operationalizing a whole new coded vocabulary about entrepreneurship, freelancing, coworking, and making. Everyone from economic geographers to technology commentators now argues that firm strategies (including locational choices) are largely determined by labor market characteristics (a theme in *Remaking Regional Economies*). Today, the reorganization of work is rapidly reshaping the spatial organization of cities—inside buildings through co-working and maker-spaces, and in central business districts through innovation neighborhoods and technology districts. It is worth noting that the attention to difference, to variation, and to power in the empirical research provided an accurate analysis of what was coming next as well as a theory that explained it. So, upon reflection, perhaps there is a transformation of geography happening after all.

**References**

