

God Tricks or Barnes Tricks? Comments on 'What's Wrong with American Regional Science?'

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Let me come right to the point: this essay irritates me enormously. Central to Trevor Barnes' text is the concept of a "God trick". As best I can determine from the context of his comments, a God trick seems to be a mindset, or a concrete act based thereupon, derived from the belief in a body of disembodied knowledge that aspires to be universal in nature and that is based upon a firm certitude concerning its intellectual position. (I stand to be corrected if this is not the precise definition, but I think that we all get the general idea suggested by the term).

My first, and overwhelming reaction to Professor Barnes' essay is that he is guilty of precisely that for which he so vehemently criticizes regional science: with firm certitude he is applying a universal framework (this one derived from science studies), one that specifically considers all of regional science as an undifferentiated whole, one that does not take into consideration the "local" or "regional" differences that are so frequently cited in his text.

I am told by colleagues that attended the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Regional Science Association in May 2003 that the original focus of this paper was "regional science", in general, not "American regional science", in particular. I am also told that the title change that reflects "American" regional science was the result of certain objections that were raised at the time of the presentation. The title notwithstanding, most of the text continues to talk about regional science, in general, even though most of the discussion concerns individuals working in the US in the period 1950 – 1970. If I am being unfair to the author, I sincerely

apologize, but this is my understanding of the origin and the transformation of this paper. Irrespective of the accuracy of the above information, the final paragraph of the paper (“...I am very glad to publish this paper in the *Canadian Journal of Regional Science* ... long live Canadian regional science”) is an ineffective “quick and dirty” way out of the problem that the author’s universalist approach has created for himself. Even worse, it appears to me to be highly patronizing in tone.

This essay is particularly unsatisfactory because it only tells part of the story: the “rise and fall” of regional science is covered (the period 1950 to 1975, approximately), but it fails to mention an equally significant period (1975 to the present) that is characterized by the subsequent renaissance (the “fall and rise”, if you will) of certain elements within the larger regional science universe, a renaissance based upon solid applied research conducted with the purpose of contributing to important public policy debates. As several of my papers that are cited by Professor Barnes will demonstrate, I am no fan of the “disembodied knowledge” approach to regional science. Therefore, what disturbs me most about this essay is the facility with which it unjustly dismisses the very important and very relevant “embodied knowledge” contributions of many individuals (many of them in the US) and, indeed, of entire regional RSA sub-groups.

The formation of the Canadian Regional Science Association and its first annual meeting held jointly with the Northeast section of the RSA at Dalhousie University in Halifax in 1977 (not “the early 1980s”; please excuse my obsession with identifying the correct date) and the publication of the first issue of the *Canadian Journal of Regional Science* (fondly referred to by all of us at the time as the “immutable mobile” of the Association) in 1978 are elements of this renaissance. Indeed, the “Canadian alternative” (to borrow the title of a book by geographers William Bunge and Ron Bordessa) approach to regional science is, in itself, a fascinating and important story that merits being told. Another element of the renaissance of regional science is the development of the *Association de science régionale de langue française* (the French language RSA) as a major scholarly body concerned with applied scientific research. Obviously, the list of contributors to this renaissance is much longer: the Australians, the Japanese and many other “regional” groupings have given an applied flavor to regional science, as have a myriad of individual American researchers.

It seems to me that Professor Barnes shut down his word-processing software just at the point where the story begins to get interesting. Doing so strikes me as being unfair to a large number of his colleagues. If there is a story to be told, it should be told fairly and comprehensively,

rather than trying to squeeze a highly complex reality in to the pigeon hole provided by some obscure framework taken from “science studies”.

All things considered, I’d rather have spent my time re-reading Walter Isard.