

**Regional Science and Walter Isard:
A Response to “What’s Wrong with American
Regional Science? A Science Study View” by
Trevor Barnes**

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First, I am both flattered and embarrassed by Trevor Barnes’ frequent references to my writings. How can I possibly disagree? And indeed, I agree with the basic thrust of his argument. There is little I can usefully add to Barnes’ insightful analysis, using a science study perspective, of the birth and subsequent evolution of “American” regional science.

However, after reading Barnes’ paper, I would suggest a new title. Rather than “What’s wrong with American regional science?”, “What’s wrong with Isardian regional science?” seems more appropriate. Walter Isard looms very large in the paper, as indeed he should. And that is my point. Walter Isard is the founder, creator, and spiritual leader of regional science (or perhaps, more correctly, of ‘classical’ regional science). He is, by any account, a great man, with the superior intellect, vision and ambition that distinguish men of his stature; but, also with the failings. What Barnes’s recounts is in large part the story of one man: how one man single handedly attempted to create and shape a new field of knowledge. I suggest that his endeavour was, on many counts, a success. However, regional science did not necessarily evolve in the direction that Isard foresaw, which in my opinion is not a sign of failure, but rather that Isard’s ideas unleashed a chain of reactions and counter-reactions, in tum creating a very fecund scientific community. Regional science journals and associations abound, and continue to multiply.

Of course, as Barnes' and others (including myself) have argued, the new field was heavily influenced by both its land and time of birth, a land where optimisms prevailed (at least then) at a time when positivism was the dominant perspective. The fact that Isard was American is not insignificant. However, much of Barnes' critique of "American" regional science is, I would argue, a critique of Isard's vision of regional science and (more to the point) of the way he (Isard) would have liked regional science to evolve. To point out the limits of Isard's vision of regional science (notwithstanding his over towering presence) is not the same, I would argue, as identifying the limits of regional science as a whole; that is, as it has evolved beyond and since Isard's first writings.

From the very beginnings, others (including his first pupils) went in different directions and explored new paths, including those in the United States. I would for example argue that Alonso (his first PhD.) already takes a broader (less mathematical-deterministic) view of human relationships in his writings than did Isard (at least at the time). The U.S.-based Western Regional Science Association (arguably the most dynamic 'regional' regional science association), under the early leadership of Lay Gibson, rapidly evolved in a different (more pluralistic) direction. The tug-of-war between classical regional scientists (let's call them that) and the others will continue, in the U.S. and elsewhere. And that is all to the good; the constant confrontation of ideas is an essential element of scientific progress - and Barnes' critique is an eloquent example of this. Whether Isard would agree with Barnes' critique is not the point. The point is that there would have been no debate, no equivalent intellectual ferment and outpouring of ideas, without Walter Isard.

Where Isard failed is in not creating a new distinct field (discipline), with its own orthodoxy and theoretical base, which largely explains the demise of the regional science department at Penn. What he created instead is a scientific community. Regional science associations (and journals, although often with other names) are the only forums where geographers interested in economics and economists interested in geography can interact. Add in a few errant sociologists, city planners, engineers, and others, and you have a very interesting mix, and a stimulating scientific community. I sometimes think of myself as an economist. But, were it not for regional science, I would, in all likelihood, never have interacted (as I have) with well-known Canadian geographers such as Larry Bourne, William Coffey, and now Trevor Barnes. I would be much poorer for it. Regional science will, I hope, continue to flourish in Canada and elsewhere.