SYMPOSIUM: NEW DIRECTIONS IN REGIONAL SCIENCE

Expanding the "Region" in Regional Science: How Third World Experience Can Enrich Our Research

*Kavita Pandit**

The 40th anniversary of regional science, celebrated in 1994, closely coincided with the closure of the Regional Science department at the University of Pennsylvania. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that commentaries on the future of regional science invariably go together with a critical analysis of what we may have done wrong in the past. My commentary here is no exception. I argue that our collective scholarship to date has sorely neglected the Third World as a region, and that our research can greatly benefit by paying close attention to the economic and social transformation underway in developing countries.

That there has been a concerted neglect of the Third World in regional science research is hardly arguable. References to the Third World are notably absent in regional science journals. A cursory survey of the contents of the *International Regional Science Review* (IRSR) revealed that, over the last ten years, only 6 percent of all articles, at best, were concerned with processes in the Third World. Indeed, even the term "periphery," as used in a recent IRSR commentary (Polese 1995), referred not to the Third World but to Canada! Given that the IRSR is the disciplinary journal most likely to publish research related to developing countries, I expect that the share of Third World articles in other regional science journals is even lower. It is also worth noting that the membership application form for the RSAI asks for prospective members to indicate their regional focus from a list that has no entry for the "Third World."

Why have regional scientists neglected the Third World? In the case of those trained as geographers, this may have been the consequence of the paradigmatic shift from the descriptive regional geography approach to the spatial-analytic tradition in the 1960s and 1970s. In their eagerness to sign on to the "quantitative revolution," geographers tried to shrug off any regional affiliation, Third World or other. Economists interested in development issues faced an analogous split in the 1950s when neoclassical development economics parted ways with Marxian economics with its interest in issues of uneven development. Regional scientists followed for the most part the neoclassical tradition which, due to both its demand for detailed economic and social data as well as its theoretical underpinnings on individual utility theory, did not lend itself easily to the analysis of Third World societies. Not surprisingly, it fell upon political economists and others to produce some of the richest work on the Third World.

*Department of Geography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

Why is it important to inject the Third World into regional science? One reason is offered by Leinbach (1995), who argued that regional scientists can and should contribute actively in solving Third World concerns in the areas of, among others, trade competitiveness, resource depletion, and infrastructure demands of a growing population. Leinbach (1995) and others note that by doing so we would be putting our models to use rather than keeping them in the conceptual realm. These points are echoed in the more general calls for regional science research to actively engage in real world problems and issues, thereby "putting the region into regional science" (Isserman 1995, p. 285).

While these calls are well motivated and important, I have two concerns. First, they imply that there is a fundamental tension between conducting theoretical work and exploring a particular regional setting. Thus, academics interested in the Third World risk having their research characterized as simply a regional "application" even if it makes a fundamental contribution to theory. Second, the suggestion that our interest in the Third World should be motivated mainly by the need to formulate better development policy seems to imply that we respond to the question "How can regional science help the Third World?" This in turn suggests that interest in the Third World involves some sort of social work—doing something that is not particularly interesting, but still doing it because we have a conscience.

In my opinion, we have the question phrased backward. Instead of asking "How can regional science help the Third World?" we should be asking "How can attention to the Third World help regional science?" Only then, in my opinion, will we begin to examine critically and reformulate the theories that lie at the core of our discipline. This is because many of our models are based upon conceptual underpinnings that derive from the experiences and realities of western industrialized countries, yet are *de facto* presumed to be universal in their scope. The examination of processes underway in Third World countries takes us beyond simply "testing" our theories in a particular regional setting by encouraging us to engage in broader and richer theorizing about economic and social processes.

A tangible example is provided by the historical evolution of our understanding of the Demographic Transition. The pioneering works by Thompson (1929) and Notestein (1945) linked fertility reductions in society to economic growth, industrialization, and urbanization. Their model was largely based upon the experience of western industrialized countries, but carried with it the expectation that the patterns would be replicated in Third World countries. With time, it became clear that in some Third World countries, fertility declines were taking place in advance of economic growth and development, while in others the fertility decline was not occurring despite modernization. The attempt to understand this led to a richer theorization of the Demographic Transition, as seen in Caldwell's (1976) work on intergenerational wealth transfers and the demand for children and Leibenstein's (1975) work on household decision-making behavior regarding fertility.

A second example of how Third World experiences can enrich theory is provided by the dynamics of sectoral shifts of labor. Works by Clark (1940), Fisher (1939), and Kuznets (1966) established, largely based on the experience of industrialized countries, that the process of economic development is accompanied by a progressive shift in the labor force from agriculture to manufacturing and then to the service sector. This phenomenon was explained largely by the shifts in the structure of demand that accompany development. Yet, as Third World countries began their development, they experienced a surge in informal, service-based activities that lead to a "leapfrog" growth of services—a shift from the primary to the tertiary sector, bypassing the secondary (manufacturing) sector. Examination of the factors behind this apparently "aberrant" shift revealed the influence of high population and labor force growth on sectoral patterns and led to a greater understanding of supply-related factors in the labor force transition (Oberai 1978; Pandit and Casetti 1989).

Similar rich conceptual insights can be gained in other areas of regional science as well. Given the Southern Regional Science Association's traditional interest in rural issues, the examination of the dynamic processes of rural restructuring underway in developing countries can potentially yield interesting parallels as well as refinement of theory. Regardless of substantive area, however, attention to Third World processes is likely to help articulate broader, more relevant theory, the need for which is becoming increasingly imperative as we move closer to functioning as a global economy and society.

The issue of data adequacy often arises when discussing research in developing countries and needs to be briefly addressed. Certainly, in comparison to the rigorous and extensive data routinely collected in more developed countries, the quality and quantity of data for Third World countries appears to be limited. Yet, in the past few decades, there has been considerable improvement in the statistical reporting in most Third World countries, and our ability to examine empirically processes underway in these countries is growing rapidly. Further, there are rich sources of data other than those collected by national governments, and the proliferation of these provides more opportunities to conduct statistically rigorous analyses than ever before. Where the data still do not measure up to the requirements of our analytical tools, we can be challenged to use and to develop alternative methodologies.

Leinbach (1995) notes that the future of development in the Third World will be influenced by the extent to which young scientists contribute to development issues. While this may be true, I am also convinced that the future of regional science in the coming decades will be influenced by the extent to which we allow Third World realities to contribute to our theorizing. This then is the new direction I would like to see in regional science research.

REFERENCES

- Caldwell, John. "Toward a Restatement of the Demographic Transition Theory." *Population and Development Review* 2 (3-4) (1976), 321-66.
- Clark, Colin. *The Conditions of Economic Progress*. London: Macmillan, 1940.
- Fisher, Allan G.B. "Production, Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary." *Economic Record* 15 (1939), 24-38.
- Isserman, Andrew M. "The History, Status, and Future of Regional Science: An American Perspective." *International Regional Science Review* 17 (3) (1995), 249-298.
- Kuznets, Simon. *Modern Economic Growth: Rate, Structure, and Spread*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966.
- Leibenstein, Harvey. "The Economic Theory of Fertility Decline." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 89 (1) (1975), 1-31.
- Leinbach, Thomas R. "Regional Science and the Third World: Why Should We Be Interested? What Should We Do?" *International Regional Science Review* 18 (2) (1995), 201-209.
- Notestein, Frank W. "Population—The Long View." In T.W. Schultz (ed.) *Food for the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945.
- Oberai, A.S. *Changes in Structure of Employment with Economic Development*. Geneva: International Labour Office, 1978.
- Pandit, Kavita, and Emilio Casetti. "The Shifting Patterns of Sectoral Labor Allocation During Development: Developed Versus Developing Countries." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 79 (1989), 329-344.
- Polese, Mario. "On the Cultural Origins and Future Directions of Regional Science: A Voice from the Periphery." *International Regional Science Review* 17 (3) (1995), 311-318.
- Thompson, W. "Population." *American Journal of Sociology* 34 (6) (1929), 959-975.