

Where Is the Value Added in the Cluster Approach? Hermeneutic Theorising, Economic Geography and Clusters as a Multiperspectival Approach

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Summary. Barnes has argued that (new) economic geography has moved in to a phase of theory development that he describes as ‘hermeneutic’ theorising. This epistemological position is characterised by an interpretive, reflexive and open-ended mode of inquiry that recognises the diversity of sources available for theorising and the subsequent conversations that will ensue from such diversity. In a recent deconstruction of the clusters concept in economic geography, and especially that version (or brand) expounded by Michael Porter, Martin and Sunley ask the question as to what added value is delivered by the concept’s gatecrashing of academic and policy debates. This paper argues that clusters should not be overendowed as a singular ‘brand’, but recognised as an emergent set of multiple perspectives in dialogue. From a position of hermeneutic theorising, ‘clusters’ have the potential to add value by allowing theoretical debate across a wide range of (overlapping and competing) perspectives whose partiality and situatedness are made explicit. The possibilities for theoretical, empirical and policy cross-fertilisation from the difficult act of holding together these threads is one potential drawn from the conversations engendered through hermeneutic theorising in economic geography. Nevertheless, this ‘work in progress’ must be deepened and extended if the potential of clusters is to be realised.

There is no doubt that what it means ‘to do’ theory is quite different between the old and the new economic geographies, and in the process redefining the very discipline itself (Barnes, 2000, p. 19).

Hermeneutic theorising ... is a much better description of the kind of theorising found in the new economic geography, and marked by an interpretive mode of

inquiry that is reflexive, open-ended and catholic in its theoretical sources (Barnes, 2000, p. 546).

Introduction

The popularity of the idea of clusters in recent years has met marked ambivalence within the academic community of economic

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geography. Ultimately, academics have engaged, lured by renewed pressures to achieve policy relevance and tempered by an uneasy recognition of the concept's theoretical immaturity. Arguably rooted in the realm of stylised facts and thin abstractions (Clarke, 1998; Allen, 2002), cluster analyses have, nevertheless, seen the employment of a diversity of theoretical frameworks ranging from geographical econometric models to normative recipes for generalised economic success (Benneworth *et al.*, 2003; Gordon and McCann, 2000; Martin and Sunley, 2003).

In Martin and Sunley (2003), the authors deconstruct the concept to make better sense of the diversity of activity taking place under the rubric of 'clusters', although not, purportedly, with the wish to debunk it. Their 2003 *Journal of Economic Geography* paper "Deconstructing clusters: chaotic concept or policy panacea?" provides a powerful argument that the eclectic assembly of a diversity of perspectives is a "dubious endeavour" (p. 14). For them, the concept has become 'chaotic'

in the sense of conflating and equating quite different types, processes and spatial scales of economic localisation under a single, all-embracing universalistic notion (Martin and Sunley, 2003, p. 10).

In this paper, we continue the process of theoretical reflection on the concept of 'clusters' by drawing on Barnes' hermeneutical theorising framework to explore whether this diversity has more beneficial implications for economic geography. Despite agreement with much of the detail of Martin and Sunley's critique, from this perspective we find deconstruction of the cluster concept to be a rather more positive experience. Opening the 'black box' of the cluster approach provides recognition of the (multiperspectival) range of academic and policy threads (both encompassed and evolving). Accepting these multiple perspectives permits the difficult act of "share(d) conversations in epistemology" (Haraway, 1991, p. 191, quoted in Barnes,

2000) at worst and, at best, the possibilities for theoretical, empirical and policy cross-fertilisation. It is in this sense, therefore, that a rigorous multiperspectival clusters approach (incorporating hermeneutic theorising) can add the value that Martin and Sunley are seeking.

Following this introduction, the paper sets out Barnes' (2000) argument for a new style of theorising in economic geography. This first section sets the epistemological context for a short review of the 'rise of clusters' in economic geography as perceived by Martin and Sunley (2003). In response, we argue for clusters as a multiperspectival approach and this approach is exemplified by reference to the variety of work that has been undertaken on London's business services agglomeration. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potentials and pitfalls of the conversations provided by a multiperspectival clusters approach engendered through hermeneutic theorising in economic geography.

Theorising Economic Geography

Barnes (2000) argues that there is a new form of theorising that characterises much of the contemporary work of economic geography. In contrast to the 'epistemological theorising' of the late 1950s and early 1960s—for example, he suggests that the very idea and practice of theorisation has shifted within economic geography towards an approach he labels as 'hermeneutic theorising'. Each of these approaches, epistemological and hermeneutic theorising, is an attitude to developing and using theory and each "implies a specific set of conditions that shape and constrain what counts as appropriate, novel and persuasive vocabulary in redescription" (Barnes, 2000, p. 5).

Central to the first of these, epistemological theorisation, is a belief that the aim of theory-building is to develop abstract vocabularies that 'mirror' (as best they can) an external and independent reality. In this sense, the aim is to use vocabularies with unambiguous meanings which invoke clear and determined relationships which exist be-

tween objects in an independent ‘world-out-there’. The problem from this perspective is to find the vocabulary that most transparently represents the real relationships between objects. For Barnes, this theoretical perspective first came to the fore in economic geography in the 1950s in what others have termed the ‘quantitative revolution’. This body of work used an innovative set of practices to drive a theoretical programme which redescribed the world using novel vocabularies. New techniques and technologies in computing and statistics allowed the expression and modelling of relationships using mathematics. This methodology shift had the effect of moving economic geography from the ‘field’ to the ‘desk’. Social physics, morphological laws, the spatial logic of geometry and gravity models were just some attempts to use these innovations the better to mirror the world and underlying reality to improve geographers’ capacities to make a difference in the world.

In contrast, Barnes argues that hermeneutic theorising takes as its starting-point that no vocabulary is perfect or final in its (re)description and, moreover, that there is no end of possible sources for vocabularies of theorisation. Diverse vocabularies allow for and engender theoretical conversations that hinge on interpretation and which never achieve perfect representation. Theorising is a creative and open-ended process of interpretation performed by community members. Barnes argues that this does not mean that ‘anything goes’ but, rather, that a process of critical scrutiny will take place in order to establish the ‘usefulness’ of a theory. Communities of practice will define any theory’s utility around criteria including resonance with other theories, the convincingness of the argument, its rhetorical power, political sensibilities and the different kinds of action it empowers. Theorising is circular, reflexive, indeterminate and perspectival (Bohman, 1993, p. 116, quoted in Barnes, 2000). Hermeneutic theorising therefore explicitly recognises that knowledge (interpretation) is situated and partial (although certain vocabularies may hold sway as useful for long periods of time).

Accounting for Clusters

The Rise of the Ideas of Clusters

To make sense of the notion of clusters in economic geography, it feels intuitive to begin by noting the general resurgence of interest in “the region as a scale of economic organisation and political intervention” (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2002, p. 293). More particularly, this generic ‘reassertion of location’ (Martin and Sunley, 2003) has revived historical work on ideas of specialised industrial location, but reinterpreted in the context of contemporary structural economic challenges. Newlands (2003)—for example, outlines five different theoretical traditions drawn upon by the current industrial clusters literature

- standard agglomeration theory, from Marshall onwards;
- transaction costs: the ‘California School’;
- flexible specialisation, trust and untraded interdependencies;
- innovative milieux: the GREMI Group; and
- institutional and evolutionary economics.

We can add to this list of theoretical traditions the theory of ‘clusters’ promulgated by Porter (1998), which draws on his strategic management background. As Martin and Sunley (2003) outline, Porter’s cluster theory stems from his work on international competitiveness and national competitive advantage in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His work was driven by a concern with improving US competitiveness in the context of the apparent rise of Japan and other newly industrialising Asian countries. He developed the concept of the ‘competitive diamond’, which separated out four sets of factors which determine the export success of a nation’s firms. Porter went on to argue that the intensity of interaction within the ‘diamond’ is enhanced if the firms concerned are ‘geographically localised’ or ‘clustered’ (Martin and Sunley, 2003) and that a nation’s most competitive industries are likely to be clustered. Porter’s theoretical stance in 1990 was close to long-standing American interests in

regional science (Gordon and McCann, 2000).¹ From this position, Porter built and popularised the idea of clusters in the first half of the 1990s and, through this ‘brand building’ process, he refined his ideas. A further critical point was the publication of *On Competition* in which he set out his regional cluster concepts (Porter, 1998). Moreover, Porter’s success was advanced by geo-economic changes; Japan’s stagnation and the US’ long boom allowed Porter to position his clusters ideas as generic and transmissible wherever neo-liberal deregulation/reregulation processes unfolded (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

While Porter was busy refining his thinking in the late 1990s, others involved in regional development theory debates saw clusters as a useful tool and began to appropriate and develop their own versions of ‘clusters’. Lagendijk and Cornford (2000)—for example, argued for a distinct deviation from Porter’s original work with the subsequent fusion of clusters and networks literature within debates on the restructuring of old industrial regions (Boekholt and Thuriaux, 1999; Cooke, 1995; Morgan, 1997). Another example was the OECD, which saw clusters as a way of promoting innovative growth in its member countries. In this instance, the OECD focused on clusters through their longer-standing interests in concepts of national innovation systems (Bergman *et al.*, 2001).

Over time, a number of theoretical traditions have joined the debate on clusters, each bringing their own views to the concept (Newlands, 2003). This academic engagement must, however, be viewed within the context of the exceptional success of the clusters concept within the policy community (compare Benneworth *et al.*, 2003; Raines, 2002). As Martin and Sunley comment

From the OECD and the World Bank, to national governments ... to regional development agencies ..., to local and city governments ..., policy-makers at all levels have become eager to promote local busi-

ness clusters ... Clusters, it seems, have become a world-wide fad, a sort of academic and policy fashion item (Martin and Sunley, 2003, p. 6).

Indeed, for some, the clusters concept has almost been ‘reverse engineered’ into academic disciplines such as economic geography from the policy community (Benneworth *et al.*, 2003).

The Problem with Clusters

In many ways, Martin and Sunley’s (2003) review paper on clusters has crystallised the dissatisfaction and concerns of many within and beyond economic geography with the notion of ‘clusters’. We do not seek to dismiss these concerns; indeed, we agree with many of them and their underlying arguments. Much clusters work has been done badly—for example, methodological naivety, lack of theoretical reflexivity and cartographic rather than relational views of space. This process of doing clusters badly is actively hurting the development of theory. For Martin and Sunley (2003) this leads them to question the value of ‘theorising clusters’ and, ultimately, makes them sceptical that ‘clusters’ can be ‘done well’ at all and thus add value to existing theories. It is this final theoretical step and resulting conclusion, the concept’s possible added value, which we focus on.

Martin and Sunley neatly summarise their critique in the question

Why is it that Porter’s notion of ‘clusters’ has gate-crashed the economic policy arena when the work of economic geographers on industrial localisation, spatial agglomeration of economic activity, and the growing salience of regions in the global economy, has been largely ignored (Martin and Sunley, 2003, p. 7).

For them, they see little more than a powerful brand in the concept of clusters. We suggest that this leads them to treat the idea of ‘clusters’ as if it is a single stable idea for which Porter is a gate-keeper. As interest in

regional development (Lovering, 1999) has grown, the clusters approach has spread in so many directions that we think it is problematic to consider it a proprietary term, solely identified with the work of Porter.

Instead, by the late 1990s, and presumably the trigger for the Martin and Sunley piece, clusters thinking was a web of interdependent academic thinking, policy-making and consultants' work. The examples of the Rust-belt School and the OECD noted above highlight that clusters ideas have co-evolved with, rather than distinct from, a range of other regionalist perspectives. Similarly, as Newlands (2003) outlines, economic geographers' theoretical traditions in industrial localisation, spatial agglomeration and high-growth regions can, in fact, be found within, informing and part of, the many cluster studies that have peppered recent literatures in economic geography and cognate disciplines (compare the London example below). Indeed, their observation that "clusters, it seems, have become a worldwide fad, a sort of academic and policy fashion item" (p. 6) demonstrates to us that clusters thinking is simply too big to be contained within Porter's writings and 'brand'. Rather than regarding clusters as a stable and well-defined entity, perhaps it is better to consider clusters as a black box, in the language of Legendijk and Cornford (2000), in which a range of evolving academic and policy threads have been placed together.

Indeed, at the heart of Martin and Sunley's critique of clusters lies just such an unresolved paradox. On the one hand, they identify the enormous success of the 'Porter brand' of cluster (and by comparison the 'failure' of the work of economic geographers). Yet, on the other hand, and as part of their deconstruction of the 'chaotic concept' of clusters, they highlight and lament the range of theoretical perspectives (many of which are derived from the work of economic geographers) encompassed within the brand. It is on this basis that their paper concludes by asking whether or not the clusters' approach can add value to these con-

stituent elements. We believe that this key tension in their critique—whether the clusters concept is merely what Porter writes about clusters—provides the means to resolve their question of the significance and added value of the concept of 'clusters'. For us, clusters is a concept which incorporates and extends well beyond the work of Porter and allows the possibility of theoretical debate and multidisciplinary cross-fertilisation.

Deconstructing the Martin and Sunley Critique

Martin and Sunley (2003) offer a highly informative table (Table 1, p. 12) summarising nine different definitions of clusters. This table highlights the theories that have been placed together in the cluster approach. These differing definitions have brought with them ambiguities and contradictions to the attempts to develop cluster typologies. As Martin and Sunley ask, why does the focus shift from "national groups of industries and forms" to "a local grouping of similar firms ... within a highly spatially circumscribed area" (p. 11)? Why do "the social dimensions of cluster formation and cluster dynamics remain something of a black box in Porter's work" (p. 16)? And, ultimately, to what degree is it "possible to construct a universal theory of cluster formation ... capable of covering the wide range of cluster types" (p. 14)?

We do not dispute the inconsistencies, difficulties and problems that Martin and Sunley highlight with the clusters concept and its associated literature. Nevertheless, it is worth making several points. First, we would agree that 'clusters' can appear to lack logical consistency, as writers jump between explanatory frameworks such as agglomeration, transaction costs, institutions and culture. If these analyses are written as if within a singular framework, then the analysis can appear unconvincing, jumpy and illogical (see Martin and Sunley, 2003). Yet, carefully treated as a portmanteau concept, analyses drawing on different case studies and theo-

ries can make sense if the component ideas are each recognised to evolve along their own internal and logically coherent pathway. If the condition of logical consistency is met for each strand, then the fact that “empirical methodologies and ‘mapping’ strategies vary considerably” (Martin and Sunley, 2003, p. 19) does not automatically invalidate the comparability of approaches.

As Martin and Sunley themselves outline in their Table 2 (adapted from Swann, 2002 and echoing McKendrick, 1999), different theoretical perspectives seek different forms of evidence and will do so through different sets of techniques. Gordon and McCann (2000, p. 528) reflect a wider consensus that a single clusters ‘situation’ can empirically demonstrate a range of explanatory theories—“actual clusters may contain elements of more than one type”—and Martin and Sunley (2003, p. 16) agree that in “reality, such co-existence is likely to be the rule”. Of course, rigour must be maintained with a suitable marriage of theory and method *within* each perspective (Massey and Meegan, 1985) but, equally, vitality can arise from the overlapping of different perspectives and precisely not the paring down to a singular narrative. Indeed, Martin and Sunley’s argument that “there is no agreed method for identifying and mapping clusters” (p. 19) sits rather uneasily with their view that “top-down mapping exercises at best only ... provide a shallow, reduced view of clusters” (p. 21). In essence, Martin and Sunley would seem to be demanding that we seek a singular geographical theory of clusters but our argument, drawn from hermeneutic theorising, would be to highlight that this demand is rooted in philosophical perspective.

Indeed, and secondly, in arguing that “the existence of clusters, appears then, in part at least, to be in the eye of the beholder—or should we say, creator”, Martin and Sunley (2003, p. 11) merely highlight the critical issue of the situatedness of our knowledge so central to hermeneutic theorising. This familiar issue has been raised, and rightly so, around other favourite geographical objects

of research such as the ‘urban’, ‘rural’, ‘the region’ or even ‘the regional economy’. The pathway out of such quandaries is, precisely, to return to the question that is being asked (Allen *et al.*, 1998)—to the eye of the beholder and to recognise the theory-laden and political nature of any research question that will be asked, investigated and subsequently judged (Barnes, 2000).

Thirdly, Martin and Sunley begin their useful deconstruction addressing the clusters approach but their narrative quickly reverts to the brand à la Porter. The diversity of perspectives that Martin and Sunley do acknowledge are allowed agency only in the sense that these perspectives are placed within Porter’s ever expanding theoretical model/brand. In turn, the other voices and agents sitting behind the diversity of perspectives are reduced to an overdetermined and centred community of ‘brand merchants’.

By centring the debate around Porter and his brand, and thereby hiding the various other agents active in the current debate, Martin and Sunley obscure that each theoretical thread retains its own coherence, explanatory structure and *set of audiences*. Academics, for example, who have used the term cluster are assumed to have transformed themselves into Porter’s acolytes, rather than the more sympathetic interpretation of themselves being engaged with moving theoretical debates forward. In particular, concern is reserved for “economic geographers [who] themselves started to use cluster terminology in preference to their own” (Martin and Sunley, 2003, p. 8). Similarly, policy-makers, who have clearly shaped the development of clusters ideas in their own interests as a policy tool (Benneworth and Charles, 2001), are scorned as “public policy-makers eager to enter the cluster promotion game” (p. 21) and are presented as passive recipients of received wisdom. This characterisation fits uneasily with analyses which have demonstrated that policy-makers have fitted cluster theories into their own policy needs (Peck and McGuinness, 2001; Dalsgaard, 2001) or alternatively, if appropriate to their own tech-

nical and political needs, have abandoned clusters entirely (Gilsing, 2001; Learmonth *et al.*, 2003).

As examples of the instrumental use of 'clusters policy', Catalonia, Flanders, Scotland and Quebec pioneered clusters ideas as an inexpensive way of opposing their federal centre's dominant industrial policies (which were perceived systematically to discriminate against them). These and other less favoured regions identified a tool to create their own industrial policy priorities, rather than falling into step with federal industrial priorities (Cox, 1998). 'Clusters' allowed them to raise their policy profile and demonstrate opposition and independence, without challenging the overall political legitimacy of the national developmental state. It is only subsequently that clusters have lost much of this subtly oppositional character as national government has adopted them as part of industrial and regional policy. The net effect of Martin and Sunley's determination to centre these heterogeneous views around Porter is to reduce what are in reality multiple and evolving conceptualisations into a singular argument about 'clusters'.

A Multiperspectival Approach to Clusters

Martin and Sunley outline how different people have theorised clusters in different ways. They read this as a devaluation of the integrity of the brand. Ironically, we would suggest that—possibly in their zest for its deconstruction—they overrendom the global brand of the 'Porter cluster'. By highlighting different perspectives, and decentring the idea of clusters from Porter, we seek to raise the contrary position that 'clusters' are more akin to a series of proximate debates. The 'clusters' approach can be thought of as the act of holding together these dissonant threads in conversation. Disentangling the threads, and hence performing convincing 'clusters work' produces (the possibility of) new academic knowledges. Academics as cluster theorists are drawing on a range of perspectives to gain multiple points of access into the same situation (O'Neill and What-

more, 2000). This allows for the possibility of a broader analysis to be produced in which the total knowledge of the 'cluster situation' is greater than that of the component parts. Rather than regarding clusters as stable and a known entity or 'brand', it is more that the brand is polycentric and adopted as such by its diversity of users (academic and policy-maker alike). Multiple strands need not imply incoherence. Coherence is an emergent outcome of how effectively academics perform the theorisation process and is contingent on theorisation being done satisfactorily and convincingly.

The Multiplicity of Cluster Debates: A 'Work in Progress'

The idea that clusters are a multiperspectival concept is central to Gordon and McCann's 2000 *Urban Studies* paper, in which they argue that three separate disciplines—regional economics, business/ management and geography/sociology—have each developed their own theories of what is a cluster. Crudely put, these theories are agglomeration, supply chain co-ordination and embeddedness/institutional thickness respectively. Significant in the argument they put forward is that each of the approaches has a very different locus, a consequence of different disciplinary backgrounds, with different rules of evidence, proof and causality implicit in each. They argue—for example, that agglomeration theories make no claim about causality and institutional theories say nothing about generalisability. Each approach is therefore limited in terms of the claims that can convincingly be made, but cross-referencing these specific/limited/fragmentary claims allows a more coherent analysis, which they demonstrate by reference to the London producer services 'cluster'.

Gordon and McCann use the three approaches to generate evidence that they then stitch into a single narrative about the London business services cluster. The thrust of this narrative is that there are a limited number of very local clusters; some (media and consultancy) are driven by a need for infor-

mation exchange and others (financial services) are driven by the location preferences of key decision-makers. These local clusters exist in a broader greater South East agglomeration, for which the motives and causality are less clear, but in which producer services are more competitive than elsewhere in the UK. Although they do not reflect on the implications of their methodology, Gordon and McCann adopt an approach in which the cluster is explicitly a 'construct', but is also a domain in which various theoretical perspectives have salience. Different points of entry generate knowledge about a situation; they compare that knowledge with other knowledges produced from other entry points into that situation and assemble those knowledges into an overarching analysis. By defining the boundary to what will be compared as the 'cluster', dissimilar methodologies can be integrated into a singular insight (Murdoch, 1997; Cox, 1998; O'Neill and Whatmore, 2000; Gibbs *et al.*, 2001).

Our argument in this paper is that the value added of the clusters approach (drawing on hermeneutic theorising) lies in, first, allowing for and explicitly promoting these theoretical conversations and, secondly, the potential this may afford in which multiple explanations can interact conceptually to provide a richer understanding of the situation than permitted by theoretically monistic approaches. Above, we highlighted how Gordon and McCann used three perspectives to capture what was 'going on' in the London business services cluster. Below, we exemplify further the argument for multiple perspectives by reviewing work on the London business services cluster, which has built on the analysis of Gordon and McCann. What other conceptualisations of the London business service agglomeration could combine into a cluster narrative?

The debate over the nature of the London business services cluster was stimulated by Allen (1992). His essentially theoretical argument was for the service sector as a growth dynamic in its own right (not as an adjunct to manufacturing) and, moreover, a regionally inscribed growth dynamic. One

example was the financial and commercial services of the London city-region (incorporating elements of the South East planning region and beyond) which could be understood in terms of a 'regional mode of service growth'. Subsequently, Coe and Townsend (1998) used the concept of a 'regional mode' to frame a more detailed empirical investigation that concluded that agglomeration of service activity was, indeed, best characterised at the spatial scale of the Greater South East rather than localised London-scale service clusters. Nevertheless, a couple of years later, Gordon and McCann's paper highlighted that the concentration of advanced service firms in London is in fact both of these things and that different theoretical and methodological tools were necessary to discern each of them.

The most comprehensive investigation of these competing explanations has been published recently by Keeble and Nachum (2002). They investigate in great detail—and with great care—clustering processes amongst small consultancies by using samples drawn from the purported heart of the cluster—central London—and the decentralised locations of South West England and East Anglia. What is most instructive for our argument is how they build a more comprehensive explanation by bringing together knowledge produced from different departure points. Keeble and Nachum (2002, p. 68) ask "what the highly problematic notion of 'clustering' may mean in the context of business services". In operationalising the idea of a cluster, they draw, first, on Porter's broad definition based on geographical concentration and functional interconnection. Secondly, they define cluster existence based on quantitative concentration (i.e. central London business consultancies) and, thirdly, their investigation of interconnectedness is driven by a search for interfirm networking, collaboration and labour mobility.

From this overarching working definition, Keeble and Nachum adopt an innovative methodology of following each of these operational strands (plus one of decentralisation based on enterprising behaviour theory) to

their logical conclusion, producing a set of analytical postulates which they then combine into a synthetic narrative about the 'London business services cluster'. Effectively, in each strand they begin from a particular theoretical perspective, operationalise what that perspective would mean in terms of a business services cluster and then collect and analyse their data-sets for that particular feature. Thus, their conclusions include

- (1) the existence of marked relative and absolute concentrations of consultancy SMES (regional science/economics/economic geography; top-down SIC mapping);
- (2) in a functionally integrated cluster (Porter; industrial complexes; interfirm collaboration);
- (3) reinforced and made 'strong' by localised collective learning (economic geography/sociology/STS; personal networks; embodied expertise in a fluid labour market; high rates of spin-off);
- (4) powerfully influenced not by supply-side focused 'agglomeration economy' processes but demand-led benefits of proximity and accessibility to clients (Porter; business studies; economic geography; networks, location prestige); and
- (5) with accessibility incorporating national and global communications nodality and driving the cluster as a neo-Marshallian node (economic geography/sociology) (Keeble and Nachum, 2002, pp. 85–86).

We would suggest that, in this case, the result of this multiperspectival approach is a more confident identification of the existence of a cluster with a more holistic and deeper understanding of what is, or is not, driving its existence. Critically, the approach produces a highly geographical model of the relationships between agents which define the spatial extent and constitution of this particular form of regional development. Through a process of careful synthesis of (selected) different cluster perspectives, 'geography matters' (Samers, 2001) at a variety of scales within their analysis and conclusions.

Weaving the Strands: A Spun Thread or Ragged Mess?

The example of work on the London business services cluster exemplifies the multiple perspectives to be found within the clusters debate. Different perspectives might include agglomeration economies, industrial complexes and a variety of social network models. Even this list by no means exhausts the literature but merely exemplifies those perspectives most common in the geographical and regional science literatures. Strategic management—for example, offers other perspectives on the roles of clusters and particularly the (undertheorised in geography) connection between firm performance and cluster membership (see Tallman *et al.*, forthcoming; Pinch *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, geographical approaches have largely skirted Porter's own competitiveness-based analysis which, although hotly contested for its assumptions (Krugman, 1994), still retains the potential to generate insights into why particular groups of firms at local and national levels succeed.

Each of these different theories might imply a different understanding of a cluster, an accepted methodological foundation and 'rules of evidence and argument'. Gordon and McCann might regard these categories as ideal types, and Martin and Sunley suggest that elements of several are likely to be present in each real cluster. We regard each of these approaches as a lens with which to look at the same situation to produce knowledge which contributes to how we understand both 'that cluster' as well as 'clusters'. Whilst one lens might not be able to discern a cluster in a given situation, that is neither automatic proof that that situation is not a cluster, nor that it is not then valid to consider whether other lenses can see the 'cluster in a situation'.²

Following O'Neill and Whatmore (2000), each lens provides a separate point of entry to understanding clusters in a particular location. This moves beyond the mere 'identification' of a cluster and rather closer to identifying (making visible) the significant

relationships those lenses reveal. For clusters, these relationships might be that an agglomeration is associated with higher productivity, or that some particular network is improving innovation performance. Our argument is that, by identifying the key relationships between agents and objects in particular situations, it is possible to generate a deeper knowledge of the cluster. This, in turn, can enable more precise and useful statements to be made about the nature of economic organisation and regional development in particular contexts or, alternatively, greater explicitness about the theory-laden process which has driven any piece of research on clusters.

The converse, however, is also true. If the opportunity is not taken and we do not theorise clusters or, worse, we theorise clusters badly, then no such better understandings will be generated. We argue that the work of Keeble and Nachum and Gordon and McCann is engaging precisely because they are 'good theorisations', which are convincing, coherent and satisfying. The challenge remains to take forward this multiperspectival method more generally along both tracks, doing good cluster studies which improve how we understand cluster relationships more generally. As Martin and Sunley note, for instance, Porter has never really developed a rigorous theory of social capital and networking, whilst many qualitative approaches begin from analyses of industrial concentration measured in employment or value-added terms. Interpreting and explaining uneven development requires comparison between situations and this approach helps to make explicit the conditions where transfer and generalisation are fair (Sayer, 1991).

This helps also to address the critique of clusters as an abstraction in which particularities of context are generalised into over-determining categories (Sayer, 1989). By adopting a multiperspectival approach, cluster analyses are explicitly and

inescapably partial, provisional and incomplete. Refusing any vantage-point that purports to take in the world at a glance,

they are more modest in the claims they can, and want to, make (Whatmore, 2002, p. 7).

Furthermore, the accumulation of evidence from the application of different lenses is likely to guide an understanding of the weight and significance of any individual example. Whilst we do not argue for a primitive summary of cluster factors to gauge the significance of the 'cluster' (Massey, 1984), it is clear that Gordon and McCann's multi-valent London producer service cluster is highly robust because of dense local linkages, a broader milieu effect and a national innovation system favouring London as a financial services centre. This makes it qualitatively much stronger than clusters which can only be seen through a single cluster lens, such as a micro-clustering network organisation (Lagendijk, 1999).

Conclusion

This paper began by outlining Barnes' claims for a new kind of theorising in economic geography: hermeneutic theorising. Its key characteristics include the recognition that theory is social practice engaged in by reflective and situated practitioners and that theorisation itself be recognised as a less formal activity open towards a diversity of sources. In turn, the ensuing 'set of narrative communities' (Thrift and Olds, 1996) and their conversations represent a constant theoretical 'work in progress' as a constellation of perspectives engage within an anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist atmosphere. Within such a provisional arena of process, political discussion is to the fore as the relationship among different perspectives motivates study aimed, as much as epistemological theorising, at improving the world.

Using the framework of hermeneutic theorising, we have sought to contextualise the concept of clusters in economic geography and the particular concerns of Martin and Sunley around the 'chaotic' nature of this successful brand. In many ways, we agree

with much of their critique of the concept of clusters. Where we differ is in our belief that this concept is very much 'work in progress', with potential utility as a technique to drive forward diverse theorising on industrial agglomeration. For us, the portmanteau concept of clusters represents a potential uniting thread to bring multiple perspectives to explain industrial agglomerations. To date, in some cases this has been done well, but we acknowledge that many other analyses have failed to convince. This mix of success and failure is not inconsequential but a hallmark of the creative process of theorisation in action. We would not yet equate bad cluster analyses with fundamental fault-lines in the concept, as Martin and Sunley seem to do. Instead, we would draw on hermeneutic theorising to note that the potentialities of the theoretical conversations opened up by the clusters approach are, at present, being corroded by poor operationalisation and analysis. This may be the portent of things to come, or clusters may join the more successful lexicon of economic geography, as academics use the conversations allowed by the concept to generate understanding within logically coherent, if theoretically eclectic, frameworks.³ Within this paper, we believe the work we have highlighted on London's business services cluster reflects just that potential.

Our aim in this paper was not to review the clusters debate as a whole; rather, it was to explore the very interesting issues raised by Martin and Sunley. The inconsistencies and ambiguities of the clusters concept are part of the theoretical 'work in progress' around this immature, yet politically powerful, concept. We deem this 'work in progress' as a multiperspectival approach to clusters and believe that this approach's rationale, justification and overarching 'rules of the game' can be set by the epistemological position of hermeneutic theorising. In this paper, we have introduced and enabled this *possibility* within the clusters debate. It is beyond this paper's scope, however, to specify a particular pathway for the approach (such as—for example, dealing with incom-

patibility and methodological pluralism). We also acknowledge that it will require much 'good theorising' before the value of clusters will be realised. We contend that this value added demanded by Martin and Sunley will be delivered, if at all, precisely through its ability to allow for a multiperspectival approach. A significant amount of theorising remains to be done, however, if such conversations are to remake a more holistic understanding of clusters with geography at its theoretical heart.

Notes

1. These interests primarily were in statistical analyses of sub-national industrial concentration, beginning with Isard, and disseminated through the work and the journals of the Regional Science Association International, founded in 1953, and publisher of the *Journal of Regional Science* and the *International Regional Science Review*.
2. See, for example, Miller *et al.* (2001). This rigorous national cluster mapping exercise in the UK recognised that SIC codes would not identify all the likely cluster possibilities and incorporated an additional qualitative programme of on-the-ground interviews.
3. Indeed, theoretical eclecticism has been identified as one element of the vitality of the new economic geography (Thrift and Olds, 1996; Bryson *et al.*, 1999, ch. 2; Barnes, 2000).

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