DÉJÀ VU, MR. KRUGMAN

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After proclaiming a “new economic geography” (Krugman, 1991), economist Paul Krugman has set his sights on urban geography. In The Self-Organizing Economy (1996, p. vi), he talks of “a genuinely interesting interdisciplinary movement of which economics ought to be a part.” At the core of this movement are concepts of self-organizing systems—“complex systems in which randomness and chaos seem spontaneously to evolve into unexpected order”—which “are very exciting, and playing around with them is tremendous fun” (1996, p. vi).

No readers of Urban Geography will disagree with Krugman’s discovery that what they do is fun, but they surely will be appalled by his hubris. He rightly castigates his colleagues for their “neglect of anything having to do where economic activities happen…the way we turn a blind eye to spatial economics is little short of eerie” (1996, p. 9) but fails to associate his excitement of discovery with the gaps that this neglect produced in his professional training, gaps that are all too evident as he proceeds. He appears woefully ignorant of the last half century of geography and regional science. Not one of his references is to any of this work, with the result that he rewalks pathways that were well traveled three and four decades ago.

He begins by presenting the von Thünen, Mills, and Christaller models as effective descriptions of spatial organization but says that they cast no light on self-organization—the unexpected emergence of macrobehavior from the interactions of individual actors who are propelled by seemingly different micromotives. On the other hand, Schelling’s segregation model is cited as a particularly elegant formulation that does. Next comes discussion of “an urban mystery” (1996, p. 39), of all things the rank-size rule, which he asserts is “spooky” because it “seems to have applied to all U.S. cities since 1890!” (1996, p. 40). He follows with a section on temporal self-organization, nonlinear business cycles, percolation economics, and phase locking, and he concludes the book with several examples of spatial self-organization: his own “edge city” model of a polycentric urban area in which order emerges from tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces, path dependence, and positive feedbacks; a dynamic central place model; and the Simon-Ijiri model that predicts the rank-size distribution to be the outcome of a growth process in which individual urban growth rates are random normal deviates.
Déjà vu, Mr. Krugman. Been there, done that. The Simon-Ijiri model was introduced to geographers in 1958 as an explanation of city size distributions, the first of many such contributions dealing with the steady states of random growth processes, contributions that soon were complemented by works detailing the self-organized criticality of central-place and other polycentric spatial arrangements. But then, I suppose, even if Krugman had known about these studies, they would have been discounted because they were not written by professional economists or published in one of the top five journals in economics! Krugman correctly focuses on an interesting interdisciplinary movement, and he can and does make important contributions, but he needs to exercise some humility, for his world view is circumscribed by folkways that militate against recognition and acknowledgment of scholarship beyond his disciplinary frontier. Urban geographers, thank heavens, are not so afflicted.

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