Editorial

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Editorial to the Meric Gertler special issue

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In this editorial, it is not our intention to provide a comprehensive overview of Meric Gertler's academic work that has inspired and guided the select group of scholars who contributed to this special issue. Many others have also drawn on Meric's scholarship in developing ideas of how to study and explain economic action and its differentiated outcomes in space and time related to their own research agendas. Instead, we present a personal story of how Meric's development as a scholar has co-evolved with his academic voyage and how this is linked to the topics covered in this special issue.

1 Formative years (Gordon's story)

I first met Meric when he was a third-year undergraduate student at McMaster University. At the time, I was a PhD student in geography and a teaching assistant in an advanced undergraduate class devoted to regional economic development. In each session, I was required to provide help in answering questions based on the lectures given by a professor in the Department of Geography. My revision class, which was held each week, attracted a large number of students partly because I enjoyed teaching. Meric stood out amongst these students, along with his friend Mike Mulvale, as particularly engaged and thoughtful.

Our friendship took off when Shirley, my wife, and I were invited to an undergraduate party at one of the student dormitories. There we were introduced to his friends as well as the 'concept' of a pink lemonade bath-tub – that is, a bath-tub full of grain alcohol given a pink hue by vegetable dye (I hope). By our standards, very unusual! At another party we also met his (to be) wife Joanna. She was a visiting student from Melbourne at Brock University located in St. Catherine's, close-by.

It will not come as a surprise to learn that Meric was an outstanding student. He was also enthusiastic about the academic project informed, no less, by his father – Professor Len Gertler, who was one of Canada's leading scholars in urban-regional planning and policy with a specific interest in economic development. Through Meric, I met his father and mother Anita. They were very generous with their hospitality at their home in Waterloo. As he was completing his undergraduate degree, we talked about his plans for a Master's degree at Berkeley. I was very enthusiastic.

Meric went to Berkeley, and I went to Harvard University as a newly-minted assistant professor. My colleague at Harvard – Professor Brian Berry – ran the PhD program in urban planning. He and I sought out really good students for the program including Meric. As I recall, his Berkeley friends were shocked when one of their best students finished-up his Master's degree and went to the east coast. I served on his supervisory committee along with Brian Berry and William Alonso and became the supervisor of his PhD thesis. He finished his PhD in three years. I had the honor of formally presenting his PhD diploma on the Harvard graduation stage – a thrill for both of us!

During our time at Harvard, along with other PhD students we developed a research program on regional economic growth and development. In doing so, we took aim at the neoclassical paradigm which dominated North American economics, related programs in city and regional planning, and regional science. In retrospect, it is surprising that our colleagues and mentors amongst the professoriate accepted and encouraged this research program, which sought to turn upside down the neoclassical synthesis. One explanation of their tolerance is that there was no group or single individual powerful enough to impose orthodoxy. But, it is entirely possible that mutual regard and tolerance allowed us to flourish. This was a time when the young 'turks' of the Harvard economics program were setting-out their own research agendas. The MIT crowd were less tolerant notwithstanding support from Bennett Harrison. As it turns out, the University of Chicago was quite hostile to breaking with neoclassical conventions.

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In large part, our project on regional growth and differentiation was sustained by the latest techniques in time-series analysis. Here, Victor Solo, an assistant professor in statistics, was our guide to new ways of modelling time series which left behind time series regression in favor of stochastic models. We were also helped by data made available by colleagues at the US Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Meric concentrated his PhD research upon capital. His thesis was very much informed by the debate about capital at the time driven by Joan Robinson and others at Cambridge (England). If unorthodox, his research along with that of John Whiteman and Takatoshi Tabucci was the basis of published papers and our 1986 book *Regional Dynamics*.

2 Capitalist change and interactive learning (Harald's story)

Upon graduation, Meric left Cambridge (Massachusetts) for Toronto where he became an assistant professor and later associate professor, professor, Dean of Arts and Sciences, and President – in subsequent order at the University of Toronto. He was offered opportunities elsewhere – but stayed at Toronto and built research and teaching programs of national and international significance. He also led the university with the same ambition and commitment – his sense of responsibility for the future of higher education in Canada and beyond is commendable. Few academics can translate intellectual excellence into such effective leadership. And few North American university presidents have had such a long and successful tenure.

I met Meric (and later separately Gordon) at a conference of the Canadian Association of Geographers in the early-1990s when I was working on my Habilitation (post-PhD thesis) in Germany in an academic setting that was then still much inward-looking after World War II. What brought us together was our joint interest in the fundamental changes that were occurring across the industrialized world, associated with what was named the Fordist crisis and its varied geographical manifestations. This crisis posed fundamental challenges to mass producing industries; crisis tendencies in formerly booming regions; and led to broad-based regional and industrial restructuring. Meric's 1988 paper on the limitations of a future era characterized by flexible specialization and production was an important milestone at that time and led to a broader discussion, involving for instance Erica Schoenberger.

Both Gordon and Meric became interested in studying the German economy and we began exchanges on several issues. In progressing his work on industrial restructuring and capitalist dynamics, Meric began to investigate how firms in mature industrial regions were modernizing their production systems. He found that Ontario industries often bought sophisticated manufacturing technologies from German machinery producers; yet, they had ongoing problems and were not able to use this machinery as effectively as their German counterparts. As laid out in his 1993 paper in *Regional Studies*, Meric conducted in-depth research on machinery producers in Germany with North American customers to better understand the underlying causes of this mismatch. In some of this empirical work, I accompanied Meric where we would conduct interviews at the German sites of these firms.

This research had two important effects. On the one hand, it renewed my interest in studying industrial and institutional change in European regions. This eventually led me to investigate the conditions wherein regional industrial clusters develop and grow and how they reproduce themselves. This also linked to the work of Peter Maskell in Copenhagen (Denmark) and Anders Malmberg in Uppsala (Sweden). Prior to this research, I had a quantitative background and no experience with qualitative research, which – thanks to Meric – opened an entirely new set of options to conduct intensive interview-based work in the following years.

On the other hand, this research linked Meric's work with the work of Bengt-Åke Lundvall and others on producer-user innovation, interactive learning, and national innovation systems. It also allowed Meric to apply the varieties of capitalism conceptualization, developed by Peter Hall and David Soskice in the early 2000s, to economic geography – expressed, for example, in our joint editorial of a 2005 *Economic Geography* special issue and a paper with Tara Vinodrai. Meric found that German and North American firms operated in different institutional contexts and that the rigid regulation of North American workplaces and a lack of constant training could not provide workers with the freedom and skills to operate their machinery as effectively as in the German context.

This research resulted in numerous, highly influential papers since the mid-1990s, especially a contribution in 1995 in *Economic Geography* wherein Meric concluded that German machinery producers initially did not fully grasp the needs in their North American markets given the different institutional conditions in Germany. He also showed that they needed to "be there" and establish subsidiaries in foreign markets so as to sustain their links with customers.

3 Knowledge, being there and innovation (Meric's landmarks 1)

By the 2000s, Meric was one of the most recognized and highly-cited economic geographers. His work was very much centered around an interest in the role of knowledge and the processes whereby knowledge is acquired and shared among firms and across space. This is particularly obvious in two standout papers in the *Journal of Economic Geography* on the role of tacit knowledge and the importance of geographical context (2003) and the ways in which knowledge, learning, and institutional formations intersect (2001). The latter paper was part of the inaugural issue of the journal where he served as one of its founding associate editors. At one level, the journal can be seen to be a spin-off of the co-edited *Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography* (first edition 2000) which was an interdisciplinary project joined by leading scholars across the social sciences and from around the world.

His 2003 paper on knowledge was quite significant for economic geography and together with his research during the 1990s formed basis of his 2004 book *Manufacturing Culture* with Oxford University Press and his later work on institutions (for instance in his book chapter in the second edition of the *Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography* in 2018). The 2003 paper remains a highly-cited paper to this day, a testament to its originality and continuing salience. In the introduction to the paper, he refers to research on the knowledge economy, arguably a new form of capitalism quite distinct from the industrial capitalism which had been inherited from the years leading up to World War II and through to the late 1990s. He focused upon the well-known distinction between tacit and codified knowledge and introducing this literature with a deeper, nuanced understanding of related concepts to the field of economic geography.

While recognizing the importance of behavioral psychology and understanding how people think, he also argued in favor of explanations embedded in context, including culture. In his account, making knowledge is as much a social practice as it reflects our psychological dispositions. He puts to one side issues such as consciousness and language to focus on the making and deployment of concepts that have economic value in context. In this respect, he gives pride of place to human agency and what Kenneth Arrow amongst others referred to as learning-by-doing. He recognized that the management problem for many firms is that of mobilizing tacit knowledge to realize stated objectives whether framed collectively and/or by organizations' leaders. In doing so, he takes the reader through standard approaches to the problem and focuses upon the production of tacit knowledge, its appropriation by decision-makers in ways relevant to the problems they face, and the sharing of tacit knowledge within and between firms that rely upon one another.

In doing so, he noted that economic geographers analyze these issues by reference to the advantages of "being there" rather than being distant from each other or, in some sense, being disembodied socially and geographically. He takes the reader through the various ways in which economic geographers have conceptualized solutions to translating tacit knowledge into economic value by sharing this knowledge and turning it into practice. In many respects, he is a realist in the sense that the observed world is not easily reduced to a concept or theory that "solves" the problem of explaining difference and differentiation. He is neither an idealist about context nor is he one-eyed about what context means (as in its empirical form). More specifically, he argues in favor of understanding tacit knowledge through the lens of culture, organizations, and institutions. These building blocks of life take specific geographical forms and functions – and in this respect, have a distinct impact on local decision-making.

His paper is widely cited for three reasons. First, it begins with settled arguments about the importance of tacit knowledge and seeks to unpack those arguments in ways that give fresh insights as to the contingency of tacit knowledge in theory and practice. Second, he highlights key issues often set aside in the rush to canonize communities of practice. He opens the research program rather than closes it by reference to an ironclad orthodoxy. Third, his paper is critical and constructive providing a bridge between competing threads of scholarship and argument. It is not surprising his paper and the related research program was taken-up by scholars able and willing to cross-over disciplinary boundaries to engage in the world experienced and observed (geographically). This work also formed the basis for Meric's collaboration with Bjorn Asheim and their book chapter on the geography of innovation, in 2006, in which they discussed different knowledge bases and their linkages to regional innovation systems.

4 Cities, universities and creativity (Meric's landmarks 2)

The social and economic dynamics of city-regions and his fascination for the vibrancy of urban life have been drivers of and ongoing themes throughout Meric's academic career and were front and center in his research during the 2000s. They were as much part of his work as a scholar, as they

were central to his life in Toronto and, later, his agenda as University President.

Related to his interest in industrial development in Canada and urban-economic clustering processes in Ontario, Meric joined with David Wolfe from the Department of Political Science to co-launch a six-year major collaborative research project on the social and economic dynamics of cities in Canada. This was based on the recognition that the comparative advantage of regions in the knowledge economy rests on their social characteristics, as much as on their economic assets. The success of this research program, which brought together leading Canadian and international social scientists, resulted in a second six-year major collaborative research initiative, again co-organized with David Wolfe. At this point, Harald joined the University of Toronto and became part of the research initiative with a project on Kitchener-Waterloo that he had studied since the late-1980s, now supported among other graduate students by Dieter Kogler and Andrew Munro. While the initial research program was focused on urban clusters and clustering processes in Canada, the subsequent program covered more broadly innovation and governance questions and the economic transformation of urban economies in Canada, resulting in a four-volume series of edited books with the University of Toronto Press published in the mid-2010s, with Meric being especially engaged in the 2016 book on *Growing Urban Economies*.

By this time, Meric had become closely involved in administrative tasks and commitments at the University of Toronto. After nearly a decade in the Dean's office, Meric became President of the University of Toronto in 2013. When he was elected, this was not a surprise to those who knew him because he has a unique ability to engage with people, listen to them, and take their concerns seriously in developing problem solutions. Not everyone was enthusiastic, however, about his election as this meant that with Meric's new commitments his engagement in research would weaken over time and the global community of economic geographers would no longer benefit as before from his ongoing research agenda.

His extensive research on the urban dynamics of Canada and Europe clearly influenced his term as University President. In his installation address as President, he emphasized key themes for the future: namely leveraging the University of Toronto's urban location more fully for the mutual benefit. This focus reflected key insights from his research with David Wolfe, namely that locational advantages of city-regions likely become even more important to the success of educational organizations, such as the University of Toronto, in the future. It also draws from his collaboration with Richard Florida and others on the creative class, noting that attractive cities with successful universities attract key workers and businesses that form the basis of a dynamic urban economy.

Meric's work was also influenced by urban analysts such as Jane Jacobs and her plea to recognize the diversity and creativity in urban environments. Driven in part by her observations about Toronto's Kensington Market area, Meric's academic work in the mid-/late-2000s shifted from knowledge bases and innovation toward supporting and sustaining urban creativity and generating wider networks between city-regions. This is expressed in the 2014 co-edited volume with Carlotta Melander, Richard Florida and Bjorn Asheim on *The Creative Class Going Global*.

Related to this work, one of the most important initiatives of his presidency was the formation of the School of Cities. Once established, the School of Cities received core funding from the University and was recognized in the University's institutional strategic initiatives. Meric actively promoted the expansion of teaching on urban issues across departments, with major urban programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels now established across all campuses. Similarly, he was an active supporter of the University's engagement with regional municipal governments, especially in the cities that host the University of Toronto's three campuses.

Meric's role as President of the University was not always easy as he had to deal with conflicts and problems between faculty, graduate students, and the University, as described in an article by Calvi Leon in the Toronto Star (June 16, 2024). In unprecedented times with social media attacks and unrestrained hate speech, this could have taken its toll. It may explain why he was very careful and did not want to spread information too early about the Meric Gertler Conference that we planned to celebrate his accomplishments.

5 Quo vadis?

Meric is by disposition and analytical bent unconventional. Notable in this regard has been his analysis of corporate strategy and the role of knowledge in different and oftentimes competing jurisdictions across the developed world. Closer to home, he has studied the factors that enable the mobilization of tacit knowledge in firms and other organizations and those factors that dampen its development and its application across different geographies. By his account,

tacit knowledge is important just as how it is mobilized, transferred, and ultimately monetized has a great deal to do with the context in which related activities are embedded and the formal and not-so-formal institutions that govern its ownership and deployment.

How has he sustained such an intellectually unconventional career? Why has he persisted with an analytical perspective that other mainstream social scientists have either ignored or rejected in favor of convention? Answers to these questions are important if only for younger academics seeking their own paths through the thickets of convention whether expressed in the opinions of anonymous referees (sometimes reflecting their own frustrations), the hiring and promotion practices of major universities (that are often not transparent), and the shifting sands of long-term success (that is contingent in nature). We would suggest that his role models, beginning with his father and extending to his collaborators and students, have played important roles in sustaining his view of the world. As well, his vantage point at the University of Toronto has provided a view of the world shorn of the miasma that pervades many institutions south-of-the-border. And lastly, his quiet confidence in the value of long-term research programs has realized insights that few others can match.

Meric Gertler is one of the leading economic geographers of his generation. His academic qualities and search for excellence have also found expression in his role as President in ways that have added a great deal to the University of Toronto and the academic community at large. His willingness to listen, assess arguments, and bring forward solutions to knotty problems reflect well on his seriousness of purpose. His work is engaged with the world and has mobilized academic research for the betterment of community and country. Equally, his seriousness of purpose has enabled him to look through problems to their resolution in favor of the best principles and practices of academic scholarship.

The various papers that follow in this special issue directly relate to Meric's research agenda and build on the key tenets of his work, as highlighted in this editorial. These papers were selected from the Meric Gertler Conference that we organized at the University of Toronto at the end of his time as President of the University. The event took place over May 27-28th, 2025 at University College with leading scholars to reflect upon his academic achievements. These papers are testament to a lasting impact of his work in the fields of economic geography, planning, and public policy. Meric Gertler values academics and rigorous research deeply. He values the intellectual project. And he understands the project to be one of framing and mobilizing collective solutions to problems that have global significance.

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