Preface

Individuals share information; we self-select into social groups; most of us live and work in close proximity in cities and firms, both important features of modern economic life. Economists, influenced by other social scientists and recognizing that disciplinary boundaries are sometimes arbitrary, have developed new theoretical models and empirical tools for understanding the social interactions that underlie interpersonal and community life.

This book offers a synthesis of research on the economics of social interactions, a body of knowledge made up of strands from several areas of economics. My goal is to provide a set of tools that can be used to structure empirical investigations and to interpret empirical findings in ways that make recent research in economics accessible as a tool to scholars in other social science disciplines. In other words, the book is designed to enrich our set of metaphors for understanding and modeling the fabric of communities, their neighborhoods, and their consequences for studying larger regional and national economies. Identifying and measuring the importance of social interactions is a challenging task because of the inherent difficulty in separating personal, social, and cultural forces from purely economic ones. Social interactions have important impacts on phenomena ranging from the diffusion of norms to how students learn from one another, and from causes of urban decay to explanations for economic growth.

The concept of social interactions has already shown its value in exploring many facets of interdependence between actors in the modern economy. In economics, social interactions are defined as direct agent-to-agent interactions that are not mediated by price. My overarching theme in this book is proximity in all of its dimensions and its impact on interactions among individuals and firms in society and in the economy. Chapter 1 introduces highlights of the significance of social interactions. Chapter 2 sets out the basics of the analytical language that I then use throughout the book to describe social interactions. The subsequent chapters use that analytical language. Chapter 3 examines location decisions of individuals and emphasizes the study of neighborhood effects in housing markets and their interaction with the role of prices in rationing admission to communities and neighborhoods in market economies. Chapter 4 looks at the impact of interactions on firms’ location decisions, focusing on the effects of proximity to other firms, the size of the total urban economy, the availability of a suitable labor force, and risk pooling. Chapter 5 builds on the foundations laid down in earlier chapters when economic agents interact in physical space. It examines how the interactions of individuals and firms in their vicinity and in broader communities help
us understand the spatial structure of cities as self-organization by agents. Chapter 6 documents spatial patterns in productivity, wages, and incomes and addresses the origin of the idea that spatial concentration causes higher productivity. The chapter starts with aggregative spatial measures, such as economic activity at the level of states, regions, and counties, and moves to the smaller scale of cities and their neighborhoods. In chapters 7–9 the city is ultimately the unit of analysis. Those chapters address urban structure, industrial specialization and diversification, and urban growth in the context of national economic growth. Each chapter provides its own microfoundations and moves progressively from static settings to dynamic economies in steady states, such as the model of labor market turnover in chapter 7 and the empirics of urban evolution in chapter 8. Chapter 9 explores models of long-run growth with factor accumulation and endogenous technological change.

Finally, chapter 10 speculates about the prospect of a deeper understanding of social interactions in urban settings, introducing broader sets of tools for describing the entire social fabric. I cogitate about ways the interplay of actors in the physical, economic, and social space allows interactions to make the global local. It tends by comparing individuals and their social interactions to an archipelago. Components of the urban economy and social structure interact in numerous ways, sometimes reaching far and other times concentrating locally as they react to economic and social forces. The models can allow an economy to self-organize in the face of vicissitudes within an ever-changing environment, as adverse shocks alternate with payoffs from increasing returns.

My goal is to emphasize that our knowledge of social interactions rests on data, on the empirical findings that derive from them, and on the applied economics that made those findings possible. It also reflects my view that the only way to do justice to the empirical findings is to present their theoretical underpinnings. Each chapter interweaves original material with syntheses of the existing literature, going back and forth between theory and empirics.

The book comes at a time when a torrent of new research has become available. Among several particularly elegant new books, those by Glaeser (2008), Jackson (2008), and Zenou (2009a) stand out. My goal is to provide a synthesis for economist and noneconomist readers that organizes the interacting areas of this very active research topic. Of course, I hope that others will build on my synthesis.

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