Pluralizing labor geography

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Introduction: constructions of labor geography

There are few issues that illustrate the differences between the generally heterodox field of economic geography and the more orthodox world of geographical Economics than the treatment of labor. In orthodox terms, labor principally appears as an abstraction, traded on labor markets at a price, the wage, which in turn is taken as a measure of human-capital endowments and the balance of supply and demand. In contrast, once economic geographers opened up the black box of the production function, starting after the late 1970s to venture into the workplace itself, labor would no longer be seen as a disembodied “factor” of production. Having begun to pose the “labor question,” economic geographers soon found themselves on the terrain of class and gender relations; they were dealing with politics and institutions, with industrial disputes, and more. This was the beginning of “labor geography,” the non-linear trajectories and shifting concerns of which are the focus of this chapter.

Necessarily selective, the chapter cuts a path through a variegated and evolving body of work that amongst other things has mapped the shifting politics of production, together with old and new forms of labor organization; that has problematized the workplace, as a site of struggle and as a place for the performance and (re)production of social identities; that has tracked the restructuring of labor markets, as spaces of socioinstitutional stress and regulatory transformation; and that has utilized labor (and labor relations) as a diagnostic, as the key to understanding different (local) varieties of capitalism, economies of care and reproduction, and alternative modes of socioeconomic organization. In as far as it is possible to generalize, these more social, political, and cultural treatments of employment, labor, and work do not equate labor-power (the socially shaped and institutionally regulated capacity to work) with a
commodity, but recognize labor’s pseudo-commodity forum, as Polanyi called it (Peck, 1996). They understand labor to be different because production and reproduction entail social relations; labor itself is a social process. But if this has been the “take,” broadly speaking, labor geographers have always been tracking moving objects … and subjects; its projects are always in motion.

While a kind of labor geography got its start in the late 1970s, not until almost two decades later did “Labor Geography” take shape as a distinctive (and named) project, one that embraced as its central problematic the active roles of workers and workers’ organizations in remaking the landscapes of capitalism (see Herod, 1997). This line of work has been especially productive in opening up issues around the politics of (re)organizing labor, and around the causes and consequences of workplace-cum-community struggles. But what is sometimes styled as Labor Geography “proper” has been but a particular moment in a broad and multifaceted engagement with issues of work, employment, and labor in the subdiscipline of economic geography. Foundational for these efforts was work on the political economy of “restructuring,” which spawned concepts like the spatial divisions of labor (see Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Storper and Walker, 1983; Massey, 1984; Clark et al, 1986; Scott and Storper, 1986). Subsequent lines of inquiry would delve into the gendered character of industrial restructuring and service-sector growth, “locality effects,” and local cultures of employment, moving on to explore the uneven advance of “post-Fordist” economies, and the formation of new industrial districts. Some of these concerns would later coalesce around the problematic of labor “regulation,” including the production of new workplace and employment norms, and the social and institutional (re)organization of labor markets (see Storper and Scott, 1992; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Peck, 1996; Storper, 1997).

If the (industrial) restructuring rubric of the 1980s had morphed into concern with questions of social regulation by the 1990s, the arrival of Labor Geography proper was associated with a sharper focus on activism and resistance, responding to what were seen as the limitations of “capital logic” (and by extension, “regulatory logic”)
accounts by sampling purposefully in favor of labor’s agency (see Herod 1998, 2001; Wills, 1998, 2001; Rutherford and Gertler, 2002). A crucial contribution of this work has been to analyze, in real time, the “reorganization” of the labor movement, rarely with any ambiguity as to which side it is on. After a decade of intensive case-study work, the project has entered a phase of reflection and re-evaluation (see Castree, 2007; Tufts and Savage, 2009; Rutherford, 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Meanwhile, new rounds of small-l labor geography have been appearing, variously complementing and supplementing these long-standing concerns with restructuring, regulation, and reorganization. Especially notable amongst these has been the growing concern with the “reproduction” of work (and the work of reproduction), including care economies, contingent employment, and the dynamics of contracted-out capitalism (see Wills et al, 2010; Green and Lawson, 2011; Doussard, 2013; McDowell, 2014).

Framed in these terms, this chapter offers a sympathetic rereading of what might be called pluralist labor geography in its various and evolving forms. Echoing one of economic geography’s most cherished metaphors, that of sedimented layers (or “rounds”) of investment, each marked by its own priorities and practices but at the same time interacting with what went before (cf. Massey, 1984; Scott, 2000), the roughly successive rounds of research on restructuring, regulation, reorganization, and reproduction are presented here not as competing efforts or independent initiatives, but as moments in a cumulatively assembled palimpsest of analytical sensibilities and practices. Contemporary labor geographies are not (and cannot be) all of these things simultaneously. But they invariably do bear the imprint of what has been a productive series of past endeavors, shaping how labor geographers engage with the “restructuring now.”

Restructuring

The emergence of labor geography—in substance and in spirit if not in name—can be traced to the crisis-driven restructuring of the manufacturing economies of North America and Western Europe during the 1970s, the advent of deindustrialization in
what had complacently been labelled the advanced capitalist countries, and the waves of job losses and plant closures that followed in its wake. “Restructuring,” in this context, initially represented a concrete object of inquiry, although it would later spawn a distinctive analytical method. In the United States, Bluestone and Harrison (1982) had shown that blue-collar job losses across what would subsequently be known as the “rustbelt” could not be attributed to some sudden collapse of labor productivity or enterprise viability, but instead were the result of corporate strategies for profit restoration by way of relocation (or its effective threat), fuelled by a determination to rewrite, or withdraw unilaterally from, the postwar social contract with organized labor. These were uniquely testing times for Bluestone and Harrison’s allies in the labor movement, as “runaway shops” were seen to be heading for anti-union enclaves, notably the “right to work” states of the U.S. South, and to yet lower-cost production sites in Latin America and Asia. And while Bluestone and Harrison remained focused on opportunities for progressive reform (involving industrial retention efforts, workforce investment measures, fortified employment rights, and strategies for reindustrialization), there were clear indications, in these early Reagan years, that some kind of ruptural transformation was under way—if not the beginning of the end for the New Deal labor settlement (Peck, 2002). Not surprisingly, this was a time when “[e]conomic geography, and the questions of industrial location and labour markets in particular, took on a new political salience” (Lovering, 1989: 216).

Across the Atlantic, Massey and Meegan (1982) had been likewise convinced of the need to dig beneath the statistics on redundancies and factory closures to identify the drivers of employment change in their work on the industrial transformation of the United Kingdom. The framing of their analysis was clearly more Marxist in inspiration, but hardly of the conventional sort. Abstract tendencies like the deskilling of labor through workplace automation, or downward pressure on the rate of profit, were not finding singular or consistent expression in concrete outcomes, but were shown to be sectorally and geographically specific. These general tendencies were mediated and even transformed by an array of conjunctural, contextual, and contingent
circumstances—hence the need to bring to light what Massey and Meegan called the “anatomy of job loss.” Tracing the (differentiated) dynamics of investment, productivity, and employment across dozens of industrial sectors, they concluded that the ostensibly amorphous category of “job loss” was in fact an outcome of the operation of three, analytically distinct mechanisms, understood as a “repertoire” of restructuring strategies: the productivity-enhancing intensification of existing production systems; various forms of investment-driven technical change, involving the reorganization of these systems; and the rationalization of employment and capacity. These were the intermediate steps, rendered as mid-level concepts or “mechanisms,” through which the abstract categories of Marxian political economy were rendered tractable and meaningful at the level of workplace restructuring.

To borrow the language later used in Massey and Meegan’s (1985) influential compendium of research practices in industrial geography (as the field was still known), there would be implications for both politics and method. On the politics side, the Greater London Council and a network other of municipal-socialist councils across the UK were actively engaged at the time in developing local economic strategies under the slogan “restructuring for labor.” On a collision course with the neoliberal program of the Thatcher Government, which would ultimately prove fatal for this suggestive cluster of left-progressive innovations, restructuring for labor involved the development of detailed strategies for the full span of (local) economic activities, from domestic labor and cultural work to more conventional industrial sectors like electronics, textiles, and defense (see Boddy and Fudge, 1984; Cochrane, 1986; Lovering, 1988). Understood as a method, on the other hand, “restructuring” implied a non-reductionist mode of analysis oriented to the creative and somewhat open-ended exploration of the local political economies of employment change, corporate transformation, and strategic interventions. Informed by critical realism in the United Kingdom and by the tradition of progressive pragmatism in the United States, the restructuring approach was simultaneously skeptical of the positivist proclivity to infer causality from empirically observed patterns and of those styles of Marxian abstraction reliant on reductionist
readings of capital logics and transformational tendencies. Instead, after having broken “into the chain of causation at the level of the [capitalist] system as a whole” (Massey and Meegan, 1985: 6), the favored approach was to identify and then intervene in local arenas of restructuring—understood in grounded and granular terms, as a socially shaped and politically contestable phenomenon. Counter to the view that these manifestly turbulent economic geographies (understood as shifts in the “spatial structures” of production) were either trending towards equilibrium, that they were the result of “natural” or otherwise inevitable evolution, they were seen to be both plastic and political. These geographies were “established, reinforced, combatted and changed through political and economic strategies and battles on the part of managers, workers and political representatives” (Massey, 1984: 85).

Understandably, this did not lend itself to parsimonious or singular accounts of economic-geographical transformation, but rather to up-close analyses of the construction, contingency, and contestability of restructuring pathways, regional-adjustment models, together with explorations of (potential and actual) strategies for labor and for the local state (Storper and Walker, 1983; Clark et al, 1986; Lovering, 1989). As such, the restructuring approach was not associated with direct or deterministic theory claims, while its method was more about practice than procedure, although it was arguably no less potent or productive as a result. Likewise, the master concept of the spatial division of labor was often evoked in an almost metaphorical way (cf. Sayer, 1985; Warde, 1985), in the form of a methodological heuristic or political-economic imaginary. Its central motif was the deepening separation between conception and execution, which was expressed both socially and spatially—between disaggregated and decomposed elements of the labor process, like assembly work and R & D; between the branches and divisions of “stretched out” corporate hierarchies and supply chains; and between peripheralized regions and centers of concentrated control.

The resulting economic geographies and reorganized power relations were to be understood together, in relational terms. Operationally, the spatial division of labor approach facilitated explorations of restructuring dynamics at the level of specific
industries, or around new “rounds of investment;” and it enabled investigations of the diverse outcomes, mediations, and responses to these restructuring processes at the local scale, within “localities.” As a sensibility, this approach directed attention, then, toward the particularities of restructuring forms and dynamics; to non-repeating patterns across cases; to the unique positionality of these cases, as sites of restructuring; and to the fundamental character of restructuring as a contestable social and political process.

The heyday of restructuring studies, as John Lovering (1989) later reflected, was a relatively brief one. Their original remit may have been focused on a series of tightly bounded questions concerning the nexus of accelerating industrial transformation and workplace changes in technology and labor utilization, but soon this had expanded to encompass shifts in household organization, gender relations, local politics and culture, and a range of other “locality effects.” Even if these wider concerns were licenced (and in some respects necessitated) by the foundational concept of restructuring—which problematized qualitative transformations in the organization of the capitalist economy, including its (social) reproduction—they implied a research agenda that was by its nature dissipative. The charge that the restructuring approach, and the locality studies that it would later inspire, represented an “empirical turn,” away from abstraction and towards local detail (Harvey, 1987; Smith, 1987) may have been overdrawn, but it coincided with an apparent loss of theoretical edge and programmatic momentum. The project that in so many ways had been a product of the turbulent politics of the 1980s—the ascendancy of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, and singular events like the year-long coalminers’ strike in the UK—did not survive that decade intact.

**Regulation**

Axiomatic for the restructuring approach was the claim that employment relations, workplace transformations, and the “labor factor” were diagnostically significant, both for shifts in the sociospatial organization of capitalism and for the moving terrain of politics. “Restructuring,” after all, was never simply about cyclical change or
incremental adjustment. And although the language at the time had been more about Ford than Fordism, as the coming wave of regulation-theoretic treatments would have it, the earlier intuition that some kind of rupture was occurring seemed to have been confirmed. In the United States, deindustrialization threatened the long-run viability of once-prosperous working-class communities, to be superseded by a neoliberalized mode of growth rooted, along with widening inequalities (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Harrison and Bluestone, 1988; Peck, 2002). In the United Kingdom, there was a parallel sense of historical dislocation, accentuated by the polarizing stridency of the Thatcher Government, its break with the postwar consensus on industrial relations and macroeconomic policy. Out went the commitments to full employment, regional policies, and public-sector investment; which had reached their apogee with the social-democratic modernization projects of the 1960s. In their place, after the turbulent decade of the 1970s, in came the neoliberal doctrine of monetarism, along with the prioritization of entrepreneurship, finance, and the market.

The terms of the debate of the “modernisation” period of the sixties were now reversed. This was not just in the most obvious senses, from Welfare State and public sector to cutback and privatisation. The attack on State expenditure and on public intervention was partly enabled by reworking the distinction between “productive” and “non-productive” parts of the economy. In the sixties the productive sector was pre-eminently manufacturing; services were relegated to second place ... A decade later the distinction had come to mean something completely different; it was the market (private) sector which was productive, the public which was the parasitic dead-weight ... The periods of modernisation and monetarism were not just different because the wider economic situation had changed so dramatically, because “the requirements of accumulation” were different; they were also dramatically contrasting in the dominant political interpretations of what those requirements were (Massey, 1984: 265-266).

By the early 1990s, a decade after these words were written, the political trajectory described by Massey had been consolidated and the dominant concerns of transatlantic economic geography had shifted too. The restructuring moment of the 1980s had transformed the field in at least one fundamental way: the concerns of economic geographers would from now on move, in more or less real time, with the constantly shifting economy itself. This carries with it the virtues of social relevance and grounded engagement, but also certain risks associated with what is often a “presentist”
disposition, including a preoccupation with historical novelty over evolutionary continuity and with “turns” to new frameworks rather than the adaption or elaboration of existing tools (see Scott, 2000; Barnes et al, 2007; Sheppard et al, 2012). Allen Scott (2000) portrayed economic geography in terms of an uneven process of sedimentation, in which traces of previous concerns and practices invariably linger, in non-systematic patterns of accumulation and habituated modes of analysis, while others are overwritten or forgotten. This culture of selective retention and open innovation would be revealed as the locus of concern began to shift from restructuring to regulation.

The restructuring analytic had tended to focus on the (contested) workplace, positioned within transforming industries, framed in the first instance in national terms (as in Bluestone and Harrison’s concern with the U.S. steel industry, or Massey’s work on British coalmining), as distinct from “foreign” competition, “overseas” investment, or the “internationalization” of production systems. The regulation optic, while in some senses internalizing many of these same concerns, tended to frame them in macroinstitutional and more explicitly historical terms. The analytical routines of regulation theory, especially in the Parisian variant that was most influential in economic geography, had been forged through studies of the eclipse of the Fordist-Keynesian mode of growth, which in North America and Western Europe had entered its protracted crisis in the 1970s (Aglietta, 1979; Lipietz, 1986). This body of work had been concerned with the structural coupling of “regimes of accumulation,” patterned on the mass-production methods of the Fordist factory and the norms of mass consumption on which they were predicated, and “modes of social regulation,” a coevolving complex of social, cultural, and political institutions indexed upon varieties of the Keynesian welfare state (Tickell and Peck, 1992: Peck, 2000). While there was some engagement with the attendant “big geographies” of macroeconomic and macroinstitutional transformation, the most sustained and consequential of these efforts took the transition from Fordism as a contextual frame, moving on to explore a range of distinctively post-Fordist dynamics at the regional and local scales (see Scott, 1988; Storper and Scott, 1992). The
new motif was that of flexibility—and flexibly-specialized production systems, flexible firms, flexible labor markets, and flexible accumulation.

If economic geography had experienced a moment of political relevance and interdisciplinary salience during the earlier moment of restructuring studies (Lovering, 1989), in some ways it would repeat the feat, albeit under very different circumstances, a decade later. In the ensuing post-Fordism debate, the focus of attention moved from the bleeding to the leading edges of capitalist transformation, and to the upsides of restructuring through growth, in the high-technology industries, in advanced business services and finance, and in resurgent forms of craft production. This was also the occasion of an ontological shift, from a firms-within-industries approach to a nodes-and-networks orientation (see Amin and Thrift, 1992), in part as a reflection of the redundancy of the old, “standard” industrial classifications, which looked increasingly archaic in a world of business-to-business subcontracting, vertical disintegration, and service-sector growth, and in part as a recognition that an historically distinctive set of ordering principles seemed to be at work across the frontiers of the new economy (Barnes et al, 2007; Sheppard et al, 2012).

The concern was less with industrial sectors, like engineering or auto manufacture, in the throes of restructuring, and more about new logics of growth and development, realized through multi-functional clusters and heterogeneous networks. About this time, there was something of a tonal transition too. The target of restructuring studies had most often been big firms getting bigger and badder, and the pursuit of defensive or countervailing strategies on the part of organized labor and its allies. The fast-growing industrial districts, on the other hand, were just as likely to be celebrated for their productive efficiency, adaptive capacity, and institutional superiority; stories from the flexible workplace were about responsibly autonomous work teams, cooperative upskilling, and the management of segmented workforces, rather than class conflict and industrial-relations strife; and in place of the earlier emphasis on corporate hierarchies, running from the centers of coordination and control out to the peripheral branch plants and “runaway shops,” there came a rather
more benign analysis of globalizing networks. Characteristically, there was continuing debate around these issues, although it is revealing that critical correctives called upon some of the old restructuring-studies reflexes in emphasizing the “limits” of the post-Fordist vision and the “dark side” of flexible production (see Gertler, 1988; Harrison, 1992, 1994).

But the various sides of the post-Fordism debate, even as they reached out to questions of social and institutional transformation, still tended to be rather productivist at their explanatory core. Moving to enlarge the field of the analytically visible, Linda McDowell was amongst the first to call attention to the gender orders within which these “old” and “new” systems of production were embedded, raising questions of work, labor, and employment beyond the immediate confines of the restructured or flexibilized workplace, and indeed beyond the sphere of waged labor (McDowell, 1991, 2014). In a similar spirit, Hanson and Pratt (1995) made and demonstrated the case for exploring what they called “dynamic dependencies” between households, (waged) workplaces, and local communities, reaching across the labor market as a space of analysis and intervention. Since women had, in important respects, always been “flexible” workers, and since they continued to shoulder most of the burden of domestic labor, transition models predicated on shifts in waged employment told only part of the story.

Furthermore, the ongoing feminization of the labor market speaks to more than the secular growth in the service sector (and in part-time jobs), but also to mutually conditioning shifts in employment and gender norms. These processes, as Hanson and Pratt (1995: 1) revealed are often intricately geographical in form and function: “social and economic geographies,” they argued, “are the media through which the segregation of large numbers of women into poorly paid jobs is produced and reproduced.” The supply of labor—its quantity and quality—is not mechanically determined by market demand, it is socially produced and regulated, as the complex outcome of cultural norms, state policies and programs, household structures, gender relations, educational socialization, racial coding and discrimination, and much more. It follows that the labor
market is a social institution, an irreducibly complex outcome of a host of relatively autonomous and often conflicting social forces, (but) one dimension of which is the production and reproduction of waged employment; beyond the factory gates and the office car park, the labor market too a site of political struggle, social negotiation, and institutionalized compromise (Peck, 1996).

If socioeconomic formations like labor markets are not unilaterally structured according to the needs of capital, and neither do they meaningfully resemble an idealized commodity market, then it follows that a wide array of demanding questions are raised concerning processes, practices, and patterns of regulation, governance, and institutionalization. These are questions that regulation theories had explored, in characteristically “macro” terms, through a reading of Atlantic Fordist capitalism(s) that was anchored in the wage-labor nexus, although it would later be suggested that the contested crux of this crisis-prone system has since migrated to the nexus of finance capital, with significant consequences for social inequality and employment security (Boyer, 2000). Labor geographers, for their part, have been rather less concerned with these big geographies, and instead have explored transformations in regulation and governance, often at the local and regional scale, in dialogue with mid-level conceptions of contingent work, labor control, workfare, and forced labor (see, for example, Jonas, 1996; Peck, 2001; Kelly, 2002; Peck and Theodore, 2001, 2008; Strauss, 2012). Much of this work has been concerned with active moments of regulatory transformation, particularly at points of social stress in the job market, where the drivers of change are often traced to disciplinary state policies or exploitative business practices, and their neoliberalized combination (Peck and Theodore, 2010). These incursions are often resisted—sometimes defensively and sometimes more proactively—but in general this line of work has been more inclined to “sample” on moments of regulatory transformation than on moments of resistance per se. this has been the domain of Labor Geography “proper.”

Reorganization
Labor geography found its name, and in a sense also its voice, in the late 1990s. In a decisive intervention, Andrew Herod (1997: 3) drew a distinction between “geographies of labor,” those neoclassical and Marxist analyses that in different ways conceived of the landscape of work, workers, and employment as secondary to enterprise decision-making and the calculus of capital, and “labor geographies,” signifying a concern with the active roles, visions, and strategies of workers and workers’ organizations as the would-be makers of worlds “in their own image.” What would become the self-identifying project of Labor Geography was consequently defined in an orthogonal (and to some degree oppositional) relationship to those capital-centric economic geographies that had gone before. While practically and normatively a project of the left, and therefore more sympathetic in its critiques of different currents in Marxian and neoMarxian economic geography than in what amounted to a rejection of neoclassical market reductionism, it is nevertheless revealing that in the inverted optic of proper-noun Labor Geography approaches as varied as those of August Lösch, Walter Isard, David Harvey, and Doreen Massey were marked by a shared failing, that of capital centricity. Articulated against this composite foil, a self-consciously labor-centric Labor Geography would take as its license and its problematic the question of how workers “actively produce economic spaces and scales in particular ways … as they implement in the landscape their own spatial fixes,” understood as a “corrective to accounts that present workers as … inherently powerless and condemned only to follow the dictates of (global) capital” (Herod, 2001: 46, original emphasis).

This call would resonate strongly with a rising generation of activist-scholars in and around the subdiscipline of economic geography, and it would do so in the context of yet another moment of political salience. In the wake of the “Battle in Seattle” and the millennial wave of protests against the institutions of the Washington Consensus, new energies were being channelled through various movements for global justice, many of which also gelled with a rising tide of locally-based and/or networked initiatives, including those for migrant-worker rights and living-wage ordinances, along with experiments in service-sector organizing, community unionism, and alternative
economic development. On the “inside” too, the project of Labor Geography was embedded in a changing subdiscipline.

Economic geography was continuing to move with the churning political-economic landscapes that are its object of study. Intellectually and sociologically, the field was also becoming more diverse and decentered than ever before. In contrast to the restructuring-and-regulation phase, which was marked by dominant and somewhat enduring centers of analytical gravity, engaged with a broadly shared methodological toolkit, the new orientation tended towards a diversity of parallel projects and proliferating sources of theoretical inspiration (see Peck, 2005, 2012). From the mid-1990s, the often taken-for-granted centrality of some of the old concerns—its industrial-productivist gaze, focused on privileged forms of waged work—was increasingly being questioned (and indeed transcended) from several quarters, including from feminist geographers, through poststructuralist interventions, and from those engaged in various cultural, institutional, and relational turns (see Gibson-Graham, 1996; Lee and Wills, 1997). By definition, the resulting intellectual milieu is not associated with a dominant analytical locus or singular direction of change. A “largely unplanned” and somewhat spontaneous development, the emergence of Labor Geography reflected these environmental conditions (Castree, 2007: 854; Rutherford, 2010). As economic geography has cut its rather zigzagging course, so the palimpsest of ingrained habits and emergent practices has been repeatedly remade.

It was in this context that, from the late 1990s, Labor Geography took on the character of a “project,” with a unity of purpose took a simultaneously normative and analytical form. Normatively, it was reflected in an alignment with progressive currents within a (re)organizing labor movement, favoring (community) organizing and political mobilization models over more traditional (workplace) membership and representation-based approaches, and reaching out to those that by virtue of race, ethnicity, gender, generation, or occupation had been marginalized (or excluded) from blue-collar unionism. Analytically, allegiance to the shared project of Labor Geography established lines of connection between what amounted to a series of quite disparate case studies
of generally successful organizing campaigns and hard-won battles. These combine acute analyses of (often local) disputes and campaigns with assessments of their potential as labor-movement demonstration projects (see Walsh, 2000; Savage, 2006). The fact that these victories were being registered, as it were, against the grain of history—on the heels of long-established patterns of union-membership decline across the most densely organized countries, an ideologically entrenched anti-union posture on the part of many governments, and some devastating strategic defeats for labor—certainly added to their symbolic resonance if not (necessarily) their predictive significance. Nevertheless, a proclivity for sampling on positively realized expressions of workers’ agency, or what have been portrayed as “success stories” (see Lopez, 2004; Coe et al, 2008; Tufts, 2009), tended to result in somewhat circular affirmations of Labor Geography’s founding charge.

As the project of Labor Geography entered its second decade, it would become animated not so much by propulsive, catalyzing case studies and more by reflective essays and stocktaking exercises, a recurrent theme of which has been the cumulative consequences of documenting constructive lessons for a reorganized labor movement in the face, materially, of unrelenting systemic pressures on unions and, analytically, the challenge of situating labor’s agency (see Castree, 2007; Herod, 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). To be sure, the imperative of recovering labor’s agency was never conceived in naively unilateral terms, but its recovery as an antidote to capital centricity nevertheless produced a tendency to abstract from the wider political economy of restructuring. Furthermore, while an atmosphere of (sometimes inescapably grim) realism pervaded the restructuring studies—not only ontologically but also politically—there has been more than a whiff of idealism in the embrace of Labor Geography’s mission. “Many studies of labour union renewal,” as Tufts (2009: 981) pointed out, have been “largely prescriptive and often ‘idealize’ labour transformation as an antithesis to the stagnant and defensive actions of retrenched business unionism.” The combination of an agency-oriented ontology with a best-practices selection strategy was never intended to yield a “representative” reading of the actually existing state of the labor-
movement, but it has also led to an affinity for affirmative sampling. This is more than a matter of pessimism of the intellect. The localized mobilization of labor’s agency, as Sweeney and Holmes (2013) have shown, may in some cases be detrimental to the wider strategic interests of the labor movement, or may undermine bargaining positions in other locations.

As Labor Geography entered a more reflective phase, recognition of the need to situate, contextualize, or “re-embed” labor’s agency has prompted calls for the simultaneous analysis of the strategies pursued by (fractions of) restructuring capital and (branches of) the reregulatory state, indeed for a recovered appreciation of structural constraints of different kinds. Yet none of this should detract from an appreciation of the productivity of the Labor Geography project, both in its own terms and in opening up new lines of dialogue with cognate fields like labor history, industrial relations, and working-class studies. The project can also be credited with broadening, once again, the field of the analytically visible, rejuvenating political imaginaries in economic geography (and beyond) at the same time. Certainly, “[i]n the early days, labor geographers had their eyes fixed firmly on paid employment and production issues,” particularly in the Global North (Castree, 2007: 855), beyond which new rounds of research have since begun to reach (see Bergene et al, 2010; McGrath-Champ et al, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Coe, 2013). Like its predecessors, this too has become an expansive project.

Reproduction
Issues of (social) reproduction have been a recurring presence across all stripes of labor geography, although often at the edges of the field of vision. Beyond the utilitarian construction of labor as “variable capital, an aspect of capital itself” (Harvey, 1982: 380-381), there has been a recognition that, unlike other factors of production, labor returns home at night (Harvey, 1989), although less emphasis on the household as a place of work, as a space of politics, or indeed as a theory-making site (cf. McDowell and Massey, 1984; McDowell, 2014). Spatial divisions of labor was one of the first sustained efforts
to explore the implications of the gendering of the “reserve army of labor” for the geographies of industrial restructuring, albeit in rudimentary terms: in Cornwall, for example, “A married woman ... was less likely to be ‘just’ a wife and housekeeper to a ‘breadwinner’ [than in the coalfields] and more likely to be involved some form of non-domestic labor; keeping a bed-and-breakfast boarding house, maybe, or doing (paid or unpaid) work on the ‘family’ farm” (Massey, 1984: 225). The female workforces that were being targeted, at the time, by branch-plant firms seeking “green” (compliant and nonunionized) labor exhibited pronounced geographies of their own, which in turn reflected spatially differentiated histories of patriarchal relations and gendered divisions of labor, waged and unwaged. These geographies of labor supply (again, not just a matter of skills and wages, but extending to structures of social reproduction and embedded patterns of socialization) establish (pre)conditions for the creation and maintenance of different labor processes—just one of the ways in which localized social geographies shape the form and spatiality of labor demand (Peck, 1996).

A principal concern for Hanson and Pratt (1995: 122, 155) was with the “remarkable rootedness of many people’s (and especially women’s) lives,” along with its consequences for “limit[ing] women’s employment chances and [for the reproduction of] sex-based occupational segregation.” This was an impetus for studies of suburban “pink-collar ghettos,” for conceptions of the household as a “boundary institution” of the labor market, and for explorations of the role of the sphere of social reproduction as a site of socialization and segmentation (England, 1993; Peck, 1996). Since the commodification of labor is a necessarily incomplete process, labor’s “pseudo-commodity” form is inescapably social, and a joint product of the interaction and mutual conditioning of the waged economy and the domain of social reproduction. Social reproduction must therefore be understood as “a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension,” Katz (2001: 711) has explained; by the same token, the abstraction that is the sphere of social reproduction also refers to the “fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life.”
An analytical vision that embraces what Mitchell et al (2003: 429) have called “life’s work” necessarily includes a host of activities (and social relations) that might be conventionally labelled as “nonwork,” from caring to learning, while also “blurring” the boundaries between production and reproduction, paid and unpaid labor, and “work” and its others. Against the accusation that this amounts to an all-inclusive, catchall warrant for the study, as it were, of everything but the kitchen sink, there is the countercharge that to do otherwise is to “desocialize” labor, to strip it of its inescapably human character, while also detaching the analysis of waged labor and (commodity) production from the circumstances of their existence and the circuits of their reproduction. The conditions under which labor is reproduced, on a daily and intergenerational basis, actually do include the kitchen sink, and properly so.

At least since the “domestic labor” debates of the 1970s, the household has been recognized not only as a hidden abode of reproductive work and unmeasured labor, but also as an alternate site of value creation (see Molyneux, 1979; Humphries and Rubery, 1984; Folbre, 2001). If the domains of domestic labor and household reproduction were once considered (very) local matters, no longer is this the case: the work of social reproduction and the connections made by so-called “care chains” both exhibit an increasingly global reach. Feminist labor geographers have been at the forefront of a recent wave of work on (globalizing) care economies, many of which are simultaneously feminized, racialized, privatized, and (re)marginalized (see McDowell, 2004; Lawson, 2007; Massey, 2007; Wills et al, 2010; Pratt, 2012). Unhiding the economies (and geographies) of care reveals the social and institutional preconditions for the functioning of normalized economic subjectivities, like the rationally calculating, atomized, individual of neoclassical theory (“economic man”). It demands an answer to the question, how is rational economic man reproduced? The answers invariably involve a great deal of female labor, and work that is (consequently) constructed as peripheral, secondary, and marginal, and as a result both undervalued and underpaid. The often-invisible labor of social reproduction, in turn, is a prerequisite for the high-performance, high-pressure, and individualized workplace that is so often celebrated in
these after-Fordist times (see Henry and Massey, 1995; Ross, 2009). “Marginalizing care,” Victoria Lawson (2007: 5) writes, “furthers the myth that our successes are achieved as autonomous individuals and, as such, we have no responsibility to share the fruits of our success with others.”

Questions of social reproduction therefore problematize political constructions of (productive) work, as well as the gendered and institutionalized “boundaries” that are conventionally established around workplaces, labor markets, households, and economies, with all their implications for socially differentiated processes of valuation, remuneration, and inclusion/exclusion. In turn, these processes shape the measurement and meaning of “economy” itself, from the calculation of national accounts (which exclude unpaid domestic work) to the production of un/employment statistics (which exclude those not actively seeking waged employment), just as they frame and distort orthodox understandings of phenomena like labor-market change or globalization. Social reproduction, it has been observed, is the “missing figure” in globalization debates, while feminized care workers are amongst its missing subjects (Katz, 2001; Nagar et al, 2002). “Globalized capitalism has changed the face of social reproduction worldwide over the past three decades,” Cindi Katz has argued, “enabling intensification of capital accumulation and exacerbating differences in wealth and poverty.”

The demise of the social contract as a result of neoliberalism, privatization, and the fraying of the welfare state is a crucial aspect of this shift ... The flip side of the withdrawal of public and corporate support for the social wage is a reliance on private means of securing and sustaining social reproduction—not just the uncompensated caring work of families, most commonly women, but also a shunting of responsibility, often geographically, that has clear class, race, and national components. For instance, the social reproduction of a migrant workforce is carried out in its members’ countries of origin. When they are employed elsewhere, this represents a direct transfer of wealth from generally poorer to richer countries. Variable capital produced in one site and tapped in another is no less a capital transfer than the extraction of raw materials, debt servicing, and the like. Yet this transfer seems to be of no moment to most theorists of globalization (Katz, 2001: 710).

The postwar social contract that prevailed across the Fordist-Keynesian countries—and which institutionalized a “social wage” of nonwage benefits, services, and supports, yielding mutual adjustments in the organization of households, enterprises, and the
public sector—has been variously deconstructed and disaggregated through several decades of neoliberal transformation. Tasks of social reproduction have been privatized, contracted out, and devolved (back) to households, to faith-based, nongovernmental, to “shadow state” institutions, and to an array of for-profit organizations. This, in turn, has been associated with a significant transformation of the labor market, as women workers have been on the front lines not only of the rollback and restructuring of public services, including health care, education, and childcare, but also the secular expansion of private-consumer services—now itself one of the largest employers, economy-wide (see Bowman et al., 2014; McDowell, 2014). All of this has pushed new costs, risks, and stresses onto households. In the context of real-wage stagnation, growing precarity, and the normalization of “flexible” work norms (including multiple job holding), women have often been confronted by double or triple burdens in “feminizing” wage-labor markets. “The need for multiple wage-earners in a household,” Linda McDowell (2004: 150) has written, “means that all the work of social reproduction must be squeezed into a shorter and shorter time or redistributed among other networks.” In the process, under a particular configuration of historical and geographical circumstances, employment and gender norms are being transformed—along with the boundaries (and patterned relationships) between enterprises and families, households and states, public and private, and production and reproduction.

**Conclusion: intersecting labor geographies**

This chapter has highlighted the plurality of approaches to questions of labor, work, and employment in post-1970s Anglo-American economic geography—before, during, and perhaps “after” the moment of Labor Geography proper as an explicit and named project. The relationship between what have been rather distinctive currents in pluralized labor geography—from restructuring through regulation and reorganization to reproduction—has not been one of competition or simple succession, however. There has always been a degree of cross-fertilization. Yet while these (and other) strands and projects of labor geography have existed for the most part in a state of
comradely cohabitation and intermittent communication, they have also displayed some of the characteristics of self-referential “cells” of activity, latterly with closer relationships to extra-disciplinary than to sub-disciplinary communities (see Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Peck, 2012). They have also been arrayed more-or-less sequentially across the recent history of (critical) economic geography, and as such reflect a series of context-specific (if also somewhat cumulative) encounters with various forms of Marxism, feminism, institutionalism, poststructuralism, and so on. But for all of economic geography’s “turns,” and for all its theoretical promiscuity and magpie-like eclecticism, traces of these earlier encounters invariably remain, in some form another, in the diversity of contemporary practice.

In these circumstances, it may not be too fanciful to anticipate that some of the next moves for a pluralized labor geography might be integrative and intersectional, as opposed to additive or alternative “turns” in different directions. There is still to be realized potential for dialogic deepening across the beyond these various modalities of small-I labor geography, excavating the combinational potential of which would amount to much more than turning inward or turning back. After all, even if they have not always been in deep dialogue, the various strands of actually existing labor geography have generally not been advanced through scorched-earth critiques of their various precursors and alternatives. None can claim a monopoly: each has yielded a distinctive analytical optic, along with characteristic principles of theoretical pertinence and methodological priority.

The restructuring approach sought to connect the dynamics of capitalist restructuring with the particularities of workplace change and local social relations at a time of macroeconomic dislocation, with an emphasis on class and gender. Regulationist studies built from similar foundations, but placed more emphasis on the macro patterning of institutional transformations, extending (down) to considerations of localized governance and projects of reregulation. The advent of Labor Geography proper was marked by a defining concern with labor as a collective political actor, with its own rationales of action and organization, extending beyond the workplace and into
local communities and transnational arenas. And explorations of the realm of social reproduction have sought to broaden both the field of vision and prevailing definitions of “work,” deconstructing the boundaries between the capitalist labor process and the household economy, between waged and unwaged work, and between production and reproduction. Arguably, the last of these moments has been the most encompassing, although none is fully a substitute for the others.

In the three decades that have passed since the publication of *Spatial divisions of labor*, the terrain of labor geography has been mapped and remapped—perhaps not exhaustively but in a cumulative sense quite comprehensively. Since economic geography has proved itself to be an almost spontaneously proliferative field, there is little doubt that productive boundary work will continue, not least through extensions of the social and spatial reach of various permutations of labor geography. The projects of labor geography began by reaching into the contested terrain of the industrial workplace before reaching out, more or less successively, into local communities and into postindustrial workplaces, into the (de)regulatory folds of the state, into the collective institutions of the labor movement, and into the domains and circuits of reproduction. After three decades of development, there is reason for the diverse community of labor geographers to work across as well as out, and to enrich what ought to be mutually adaptive conversations. Pluralized labor geography has acquired a wide reach, maybe its next challenge should be to consolidate its intersectional grasp?
References


