**Uneven regional development**

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**Abstract**

A foundational concept in political-economic geography, as well as a stubborn fact of life, uneven regional development refers not just to geographical inequality but to the mutual interdependence of localized growth and decline, to exploitative relations between regions of the core and the periphery, to conjuncturally specific positions within spatial divisions of labor, and to qualitatively differentiated modes of dis/connection to global value chains. The origins of the concept of uneven development can be traced to the political theory of Leon Trotsky. After some decades in the wilderness, the concept was rediscovered and repurposed by Marxian geographers, who called attention to its necessary (but far from predictable or singular) role in capitalist development. Recognition of uneven regional development, both theoretically and empirically, has in different ways acquired almost canonical status across the pluralist field of economic geography, having even earned a more circumscribed place in orthodox geographical economics.

Keywords: capital, capitalism, economic development, economic geography, economy, employment and unemployment, industrial geography, multinational corporation, radical geography, regional development, regional geography, regionalism, restructuring

Uneven development is a foundational concept in political economy, especially its Marxian variants, where it denotes asymmetrical and exploitative relations between classes, companies, and countries, all of which are understood to be endemic, not transitory, features of capitalist development. When referring to the subnational scale of cities and regions, uneven development signifies an out-of-equilibrium economy, characterized by the dynamic coexistence of regionalized growth and localized decline, by “slash and burn” logics of political-economic colonization and abandonment, by unequal interactions and asymmetrical power relations between cores and peripheries, and by qualitatively variegated forms of dis/connection to the matrix of transnational economic development. Specific patterns and forms of uneven regional development are always historically and conjuncturally contingent, but the production of uneven regional development itself, as a generalized condition, is a recurring and indeed systematic phenomenon. Political economists recognize this to be a defining (necessary) feature of capitalist development. Orthodox economists, while they use neither the term nor the concept, have found it increasingly necessary to accommodate the fact of uneven spatial development (albeit in the more depoliticized terms of agglomeration economies and path dependence).

It was Leon Trotsky who first invoked the notion of uneven development, which was central to his understanding of “permanent revolution.” Trotsky rejected simplified stage models of capitalism (and socialism) for their “pedantic schematism,” insisting instead that “[u]nevenness [is] the most general law of the historic process” (Trotsky [1932] 2008, 5). This called attention to the complex (and mutually constitutive) relations between leading and lagging economies, connecting the advanced (or accelerated) political-economic development of some regions to the exploitative underdevelopment of others. Ernest Mandel (1979, 34) suggested that this “innovating idea” was later “widely assimilated,” including into more orthodox scholarship, but as Neil Smith and others have since reflected, the notion that (geographical) difference is everywhere is easily trivialized, sometimes purporting to account for practically everything while actually explaining almost nothing. The concept uneven development, Smith (2006, 180) pointed out, had been “subject to a remarkable lack of serious analysis” in the half-century after its premature inauguration as a “law” of Marxist theory in the 1920s; for all its enigmatic allure, the idea seemed to have “passed into arcana.” Jon Elster (1986, 56), for his part, took the view that the concept belongs to that “class of Marxist notions who suggestiveness is equaled only by their elusiveness.”

Elster had failed to take account of developments in radical geography, however, where much more was being made of this suggestive concept, especially by those who had since the late 1970s been working to "spatialize" various currents of Marxian theory. Amongst other things, this line of work was opening up questions of uneven development at scales other than the national. Specifically, the notion of uneven *urban and regional* development, which was treated no more than obliquely in the founding texts, would be the focus of sustained (and productive) attention (see Harvey [1982] 2006; Dunford and Perrons 1983; Massey [1984] 1995; Smith [1984] 2008). This included fundamental work on spatial divisions of labor and the fast-changing geographies of industrial restructuring; on the extra-regional causes of "regional problems" like structural unemployment and long-run economic decline; on gentrification, suburbanization, and metropolitan transformation; and, in more abstract terms, on the contradictory logic of capital switching, devaluation crises, and the dialectics of fixity and motion in the accumulation process.

In economic geography, in particular, the idea that political-economic transformations, capitalist and otherwise, are necessarily and inescapably characterized by uneven spatial development would later acquire something approaching foundational status, even if this was (sometimes) observed no more than implicitly, as a condition of existence for studies of localized economic formations, processes, and practices. Here, the received view that (real-world) economies vary significantly (and sometimes systematically) across space—rather than tending towards a convergent, universal, or transhistorical form—is broadly shared, not to say axiomatic. The widespread utilization, across this field, of urban and regional (i.e. subnational) case studies and units of analysis, of network-based understandings of distantiated-yet-connected nodes and modes of development, and of now-basic concepts such as the spatial division of labor, with its implications for moving landscapes of profitability, employment patterns, social regulation, wealth, and socioeconomic calculation—all can be seen to reflect a generalized ontological presumption of uneven development, and a geographically differentiated world of distinctive "local" economies with constitutive outsides, variously positioned in relation to one another.

This loose consensus around the issue of uneven spatial development (either as an active analytical proposition or as a "background" condition for localized studies) is one that holds across most of the heterodox and eclectically pluralist field economic geography today, although it tends to occupy a more awkward (and relatively marginal) position in orthodox economic theory (as it does, for that matter, in neoliberal policymaking). In the latter, more mainstream discussions, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, there is continuing faith in the universal reach of singular economic "laws" and market forces, in equilibrating tendencies and long-run dynamic efficiencies, and in the role of global integration as a source of (upward) convergence, typically married to a commitment to remove political "obstacles" and institutional "barriers" to what should otherwise be a freely functioning market economy. Empirically, uneven regional development must be acknowledged, of course, but it is understood to reflect a transitory state, linked to inherited (or natural) endowments, which in the long run will be eroded (away) by competitive tendencies for the equalization of factor returns and convergence towards more "balanced" and efficient development. Geographically inclined economists are now exploring the economics of spatial agglomeration and "clustered" forms of (industrial) development, although they tend to do so by relaxing only some of these orthodox assumptions.

In comparison, where they are embedded in political-economic theorizing, notions of uneven regional development are more disruptive, more unsettling; they index conflict and contradiction, inconstancy and inequality, discontinuity and divergence. They also raise a host of political questions, about imperialism and colonialism, about the interconnections between wealth creation and poverty generation, about the problems of "external control," about exploitative or "dependent" modes of development, about the causes and consequences of localized "underdevelopment" and the (re)production of "regional problems," about the role and responsibilities of global cities, about free-riding suburbs and bankrupt inner cities, about unsustainable environmental exploitation, about the distributional outcomes of different growth models or policy paradigms, and about sociospatial equity and global social justice. In contrast to the empty promises of competitive convergence through market exchange and lift-every-boat models of neoliberalized growth, this is anything but a smooth ride.

**Unevenness in theory**

Critical of Stalin's notion of "socialism in one country," Trotsky's ideas about what he called "uneven and combined development" positioned trajectories of socialist revolution within the context of capitalism's emergent world system. Contrary to the view that transitions to socialism were more likely to emerge from (political conditions in) "advanced-stage" capitalist countries, propelled by deepening economic contradictions and prompted by the limits of reformism, Trotsky argued that the volatile circumstances of so-called backward countries like Russia were potentially more conducive to revolutionary change. (He saw no common evolutionary pattern, and no universal stage model that could be applied to each and every society.) The progressive *but uneven* integration of the world capitalist system meant that different countries (or regions) would exhibit qualitatively distinctive trajectories of development, their political and economic prospects being shaped through mutual interdependencies and interactions of various kinds (for example, involving trade, geopolitical relations, technological diffusion, and cultural ties), both with one another and with the emergent totality of the world system, duly reflected in particularized patterns of class power and politics. Nonlinear "leaps" and orthogonal turns are consequently (always) possible, if rarely predictable.

> Capitalism … prepares and, in a certain sense, realizes the universality and permanence of man's (sic) development. By this the repetition of the forms of development by different nations is ruled out. Although compelled to follow after the advanced countries, a backward country does not take things in the same order … Savages throw away their bows and arrows for rifles all at once,

> without traveling the road that lay between those two weapons in the past. The European colonists in America did not begin history all over again from the beginning … The development of historically backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process. Their development as a whole acquires a planless, complex, combined character (Trotsky [1932] 1980, 4).

These conditions were held to bestow an ironic "privilege of historic backwardness" on some countries with a "slow tempo" of development, in the sense that lagging economies, those "coming along at the tail end of the European nations," might find themselves in the vanguard of a stage-hopping leap from capitalism to communism (Trotsky [1932] 1980, 5, 74). Even if some of Trotsky's formulations sound crude today, and even if their political context may strike some as idiosyncratic or even anachronistic, they appeal to a sophisticated, dialectical understanding of uneven development as a relational phenomenon. Countries (and regions) have their own, distinctive trajectories and histories, often combining the old with the new, but these are shaped through mutual interaction and long-distance connectivities with other places. And they occupy conjuncturally specific positions within (while at the same time recursively shaping) the evolving world system, understood as an emergent totality rather than a pre-formed container, or source of top-down determination.

Trotsky's first-hand observations on the historical geographies of Russia at the turn of the Twentieth Century were instrumental in shaping this understanding of uneven *and combined* development. At the time, the country contained a few islands of relatively advanced industrialization, mostly confined to the big cities (and often linked to various forms of military production, financed by European powers). Yet these were located in a sea of feudal underdevelopment, as Russia remained a largely peasant society, its relatively weak bourgeoisie existing as an adjunct to the Czarist state. This conjuncture was characterized as an unstable "amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms," the combination of "backward cultures" and uneven capitalist integration prompting alternating surges and setbacks, festering political-economic tensions, and all manner of contradictory frictions, further stressed by the "whip of external necessity" (Trotsky [1932], 2008, 5). Under these conditions, Trotsky reasoned that social transformation would be led not by Russia's nascent capitalist class, by virtue of its lack of political independence from the autocratic state, but by a revolt originating in the urbanized workforce. (It was the sprawling Putilov works in St. Petersburg—a complex of railway, artillery, and steel factories which employed more than 20,000 workers—that duly became the epicenter of a wave of strikes, organized by the Petrograd Soviet, that were the seedbed for the Russian Revolution of 1917.)

The Petrograd Soviet retains its place in history, in the pantheon of "urban-based class struggles," from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the wave of civil-rights, anti-capitalist and anti-war protests in 1968, and from the Prague Spring to Occupy Wall Street (Harvey 2012, 115). These highly uneven geographies of localized insurrection are hardly predictable, needless to say, but neither is their spatiality entirely random. Historically, cities have served as vital basing points for the intertwined territorial (re)organization of capital accumulation, social reproduction, and state capacities; they are also sites where the pressures of intensified growth and restructuring periodically reach boiling point. These concerns have been central to David Harvey's long-term project of constructing an historical-geographical materialism, grounded in Marxism but at the same time amplifying and elaborating what he sees as the distinctive spatalities of capitalism—uneven development being understood to be, simultaneously, a motor of the system, an expression of some of its most dogged contradictions, and a trigger for both reformist policies and disruptive politics. If the period 1898 to 1917, and the purview of Trotsky's initial analysis, might be regarded as "the birth of uneven development proper in the global political economy" (Smith 2006, 185), the experiences of the following century would lay to rest the notion that geographical unevenness was merely the disorderly residue of a pre-capitalist past, subject to erosion into historical irrelevance by the modernizing diffusion of market relations. As the work of David Harvey, Neil Smith, and others has demonstrated, (historically) new forms of uneven spatial development were being produced by capitalism itself, layered on top of inherited spatial inequalities, and not by accident or happenstance, but in accordance with the "moving contradictions" of profit-driven accumulation (Harvey 2014).

It was Harvey who first worked out a "capital logic" understanding of uneven development in his *Limits to Capital* (1982). Here, he demonstrated that, through the ceaseless ebb and flow of the accumulation process, the mass of fixed capital tends to build up over time, relative to circulating capital, piling up in place in the form of relatively fixed infrastructures, such that the conditions for profitable expansion in one phase may hamper development in the next. In a précis of his argument, Harvey (2014, 155) has explained,

> Capital has periodically to break out of the constraints imposed by the world it has constructed. It is in mortal danger of becoming sclerotic. The building of a geographical landscape favourable to capital accumulation in one era becomes, in short, a fetter upon accumulation in the next. Capital therefore has to devalue much of the fixed capital in the existing geographical landscape in order to build a wholly new landscape in a different image … [C]apital creates a geographical landscape that meets its needs at one point in time only to have to destroy it at a later point in time to facilitate capital's further expansion and qualitative transformation. Capital unleashes the powers of "creative destruction" upon the land.

Capitalism was birthed into a world of uneven development, in the prolonged transition from feudalism, but it would inhabit and remake this world, increasingly, in its own image. Having originally encountered a "variegated geographical environment … encompass[ing] great diversity in the munificence of nature and in labour productivity," the forces unleashed by capitalism would "attack, erode, dissolve and transform much of the pre-capitalist economy and culture" (Harvey [1982] 2006, 416). These sources of inherited (or "imported") uneven development had been earlier explored by Rosa Luxemburg, who maintained that capitalism was destined to remain contradictorily codependent on its "outside," those extra-capitalist (socio-ecological) worlds that precede and exceed the accumulation process, while at the same time providing a less than completely manageable source of raw materials, labor, and markets for a crisis-prone accumulation system. Increasingly, imperialism would become the primary means to annex the non-capitalist world, Luxemburg believed, the ravages of which marked out not only the "new frontiers" of production but ultimately the final frontier of capitalism (like Lenin, she saw imperialism as the highest but also terminal stage of capitalism). Any "leveling" effects of capitalism would, for Luxemburg, be attenuated by the fact that the accumulation system must live off *and through* its "non-capitalist surroundings" (Luxemburg, quoted in Smith 2006, 184).

It has been Harvey's distinctive contribution to reveal how uneven geographical development is "actively produced" by forces intrinsic to capitalism, in the sense of being integral to both the logic and the contradictions of the value form: just as the "accumulation of capital and misery go hand in hand, concentrated in space," so also the fastest-growing cities and regions are prone to rising costs, negative externalities, and restive class politics, generating (counter)tendencies for spatial dispersal (Harvey [1982] 2006, 416, 418), wherein the non-repeating cycle continues. On the basis of a searching examination of these interrelated dynamics of capital deepening (in place) and dispersal (through space), Harvey proposed his "third cut" theory of crisis formation, which recognized the systemic normality of relentless restructuring, place-specific devaluation, and localized capital flight, revealing that bust in one location and boom in another are both manifestations of the same macro dynamic.

These are drivers of creative destruction as a geographical process. Capital's insatiable need for "spatial fixes" results in a susceptibility not only to inertia but to stagnation, against which ever more violent "switching crises" seek to effect an exit from despoiled locations, where profit and productivity growth had hit their limits, opening up new fronts of accumulation. "Crises build, therefore, *through* uneven geographical development," being not so much alleviated as displaced, "mov[ing] capital's systemic failings around from place to place" (Harvey [1982] 2006, 431, emphasis added; 2014, 161). Outward displacement consequently reflects but does not suspend inherent crises in the value form; the problems may be moved around, from region to a region, resulting in temporary fixes, but the contradictions go all the way up.

If Harvey always regarded his spatialization of Marxian theory in *The Limits to Capital* as "incomplete," he would credit his student, Neil Smith, with taking the next steps. Smith's *Uneven Development* sought comprehensively to resuscitate the titular concept, cutting a new theoretical path between a Marxian tradition that had come to rely on underdeveloped (if not bourgeois) conceptions of space, and received approaches in "academic geography," which acknowledged spatial differences but had a habit, at the same time, of evacuating these of meaningful historical and political content. His would be a sustained theorization of uneven geographical development, not as the fount of deterministic laws, but as a contradictory driver-cum-dynamic of the accumulation process. "Uneven development," for Smith ([1984] 2008, p. 206), was "social inequality blazoned onto the geographical landscape," a condition that was not simply encountered by an always-expansive capitalism, but which was systematically exploited by and reproduced through capitalist social relations. Hi analysis entailed, in particular, an understanding of the *scaled* nature of uneven spatial development (from the regional and the intralocal to the global and the international) as a vital dimension of capitalist development. Echoing Harvey, Smith maintained that uneven spatial development should could not be reduced to a transitory stage, en route to competitive convergence, as in "flat earth" versions of the orthodox globalization narrative, and it was also much more than a mere byproduct, or unfortunate side-effect, of capitalist growth. More than just a "container" for the otherwise-standardized operations of the capitalist accumulation process, space and scale were *themselves* seen to be continuously restructured, as arenas of political struggle, and as the means and media for accumulation dynamics themselves. Taking cues from Henri Lefebvre, Smith understood space and scale to be actively (re)produced through the dynamics and contradictions of capitalism.

Smith was writing at a time, the early 1980s, when the perverse logics of capital accumulation, devaluation, and spatial switching were being exposed in especially vivid ways. The "Fordist" model of accumulation, based on the integration of mass production and mass consumption, which had been dominant for three decades after the Second World War within the "advanced capitalist" countries, had begun to unwind. This threw the gears of industrial growth into reverse, as "capital flight" to low-wage, deunionized locations in Latin America and Asia, by way of the extension of production chains and the reorganization of multinational capital, left behind deindustrialized regions in new “rustbelts” across the US Midwest and Northwestern Europe. Parallel (and interrelated) processes were also at work across the (shifting) scales of metropolitan capitalism, taking the form of suburban economic growth, racialized patterns of inner-city decline, and “frontier” struggles over gentrification—as simultaneous moments of displacement and revalorization. These dynamics were taken to represent, at the same time, a manifestation of capital’s never-ending “restructuring of geographical space,” and the historical specificities of a particular moment of crisis, as one pattern was violently displaced by another. “Capitalism is always transforming space in its own image,” Smith explained, expressing its restlessly dialectical logic in constantly evolving and contradictory forms:

> The logic of uneven development derives specifically from the opposed tendencies, inherent in capital, toward the differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production. Capital is continually invested in the built environment in order to produce surplus value and expand the basis of capital itself. But equally, capital is continually withdrawn from the built environment so that it can move elsewhere and take advantage of higher profit rates. The spatial immobilization of productive capital in its material form is no more or less a necessity than the perpetual circulation of capital as value. Thus it is possible to see the uneven development of capitalism as the geographical expression of the more fundamental contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. [The resulting pattern] in the landscape is well known: development at one pole and underdevelopment at the other … at a number of spatial scales (Smith [1984] 2008, pp. 208, 6).

In what Smith would disarmingly present as his “seesaw” theory of capitalist dynamics, the movements of profit-seeking capital were seen, simultaneously, to be producing *and exploiting* the shifting “profit surface,” constantly recalculating, reorganizing, and then flowing in the direction of the highest returns—a phenomenon especially evident at the urban and regional scales. Like a plague of locusts, capital would descend on a place, devour everything of value, and then move on. Meanwhile “in the process of restoring itself after one plague the region makes itself ripe for another” (Smith [1984] 2008, p. 202).

A parallel concern with the vagaries of profit-led accumulation and abandonment at the regional scale can be found in Doreen Massey's influential formulation of the spatial division of labor. Here, however, the focus was less on the singular dynamics of capitalism as an integrated system, and more on the variety of restructuring strategies exhibited by different fractions of capital (or sectors, like electronics, finance, and garment manufacturing), along with the diverse array of regional conditions, "problems," and conjunctures that is both an empirical outcome of, and a causal factor in, these ceaseless geographies. Massey's conception of the spatial division of labor owed a debt less to Harvey than to a different strain of Marxian scholarship (after Hymer 1972), in which the evolving corporate structure of the multinational (and therefore "multilocational") firm found a spatial analogy in the unequal and asymmetrical relations between headquarters regions, back-office sites, and branch-plant locations. More fundamentally, Massey's approach also spoke to a more intricately "relational" understanding of capitalist spatiality, which took the specificities of contingent variation, in identified localities and regions, as more than empirical particularities, or "noise" around common structural tendencies. For Massey, spatial divisions of labor were "more than just new patterns, a kind of geographical re-shuffling of the same old pack of cards," because they entailed much deeper forms of restructuring, along with "whole new sets of relations between activities in different places, new spatial patterns of social organisation, new dimensions of inequality and new relations of dominance and dependence" (Massey 1984, 8).

For Massey, regions occupy unique positions within wider divisions of labor, their political cultures and class and gender profiles reflecting (in "sedimented" form) the cumulative effects of the succession of historical roles that those places had played in different production networks, corporate hierarchies, industries, investment portfolios, and "rounds of accumulation." Each round of accumulation (or pattern of investment in, say, heavy engineering or business services) is associated with particular, emergent geographies of (profitable) production and employment. This framework allows, simultaneously, for the situated analysis of regional economies (in relation to local histories as well as interregional relations) and for a geographically sensitive understanding of sectoral change (in relation to the specificities of technological innovation, employment relations, and managerial strategies in different industries). In one inventive (re)formulation, the spatial division of labor framework is represented not as a pack but as a game of cards (Gregory 1989), where the four suits refer to different rounds of investment, while the hierarchy of (local) functions, from low-skill assembly work through professionalized research and development to managerial control, is indicated by the number of pips. Each (local) player must work the odds as best they can, with the hands that they are dealt, the succession of hands adding up to what amount to winning or losing runs. On its face, each card is unique, though at the same time its value and role in the game reflect the (complex combination of) relations with the other cards.

Massey positioned her argument against the kind of "two-dimensional" analyses of industrial and employment change found in neoclassical economic geography (where the geography of jobs was correlated with the geography of wages or skills, for example), maintaining that "space is not a passive surface on to which the relations or production are mapped," and calling instead for the conceptualization and interrogation of what she called the "spatial structures of production," recognizing the inextricability of the social and the spatial, of production and politics (1984, 68). She also sought to differentiate the approach in *Spatial Divisions of Labour* from "'mechanistic Marxist' insensitivity" to particularity, and from styles of analysis that

> look at the world as if it were merely the pre-determined product of a set of laws and tendencies. Such approaches leave little scope for real conflict and struggle, still less for surprise and setback … [T]he geography of industry is an object of struggle. The world is not simply a product of capital's requirements (1984 70, 6-7).

Relative to the more abstract treatments of Harvey and Smith, Massey's invovled a closer-focus analysis of shifting class, gender, and employment relations in the British economy, enabling her to draw out the particularities of uneven geographical development associated with (Keynesian) modernization in the 1960s and (neoliberal) monetarism in the 1980s. She was writing, from a position of active political engagement, during a wrenching period of accelerating deindustrialization, resulting in waves of factory closures and massive job losses, especially in the North and West of the country, and culminating in signature political events like the coalminers' strike of 1984-85 and the abolition of the municipal-socialist Greater London Council in 1986.

This was also a time, however, when alternate geographies of class relations and new models of economic growth were being forged, which was reflected in the overlayering of new spatial divisions of labor, favoring sectors like business and financial services, and regions like London and the South East in particular. The "savage harvest" of what David Harvey ([1982] 2006, 429) had earlier portrayed as capital's inherent contradictions was there for all to see, but neither the form nor the contradictions of what became known as "restructuring" were being worked out in singular form. This meant that there was not one but a range of localized consequences—for labor unions, for community groups, for economic-development agencies—and not one but a range of potential political openings and opportunities, as well as threats. There were consequently both political and analytical reasons to take "localities" seriously. Anticipating a theme that Massey ([1984] 1995, 326) would explore in subsequent work, this attention to the specificities of local and sectoral change was part of an effort to "think the politics of place and uneven development in a different way."

**Problematizing regions**

"Region" may be one of the most unstable signifiers in human geography. Around the middle of the Twentieth Century, the field was practically defined by its preoccupation with regions, and the kind of ideographic descriptions typical of regional geography in which uniquely local characteristics stood for themselves, if they were not being implicitly explained by other (uniquely) local characteristics. The positivist search for "spatial laws" in the 1950s and 1960s represented a reaction against this long-established tradition, in the sway of which peopled places were reduced to spaces of rational economic calculation and cost minimization, as the field was brought closer to neoclassical economics. In human geography, the subsequent turn towards Marxism and then to a wider array of critical social theories, from the 1970s, placed "the region" in question once again, (re)politicizing the region at the same time (see Dunford and Perrons 1983).

Even in Harvey's early formulations, regions mostly appeared as epiphenomena of the deeper currents of uneven geographical development under capitalism, being reflected in the relative fixity of the built environment, the territoriality of social infrastructures, and so forth. He was not one to deny the play of "human sentiments" in the animation and aggravation of regional (class) conflicts, but his initial concern had been with the "material basis" of these recurrent conflicts, as reflected in the "circulation process of capital itself" (Harvey [1982] 2006, 419). As Ray Hudson has argued, however, it is one thing to point out that the production of "problem regions"—like his own home region of the North East of England, with its history of coalmining, shipbuilding, heavy engineering, and steel production, all in long-term decline—is "inscribed into the inner logic of the capitalist mode of production," it is quite another to account for concurrent factors, such as state policy, let alone the array of embedded and acculturated sociopolitical conditions, as expressed *and experienced* in actual regions.

> Although Harvey's analysis shows that there will inevitably be "problem regions" … because of causal mechanisms that are an integral part of the process of uneven development, it does not and can not reveal *which* regions will become "problematic." This is a contingent matter, as the switch in the position of the North East from "core" to "periphery" in the world economy and the emergence of this aspect of uneven development as a *political* question exemplifies (Hudson 1989, ii).

Hudson's point was not simply that politics can never be reduced to, or "read off from," the dynamics of uneven capitalist development, no matter how acutely analyzed, but also that the contradictory spatialities of the state exhibited relative autonomy too. The state is not just a manager but also a maker of uneven spatial development, or what has been called "state space" (see Brenner 2004). Even if, as a matter of methodological principle, "chaotic conceptions" like the region should not be objectified, even if the meaning and significance of regions should be emergent from (rather than presupposed by) a theorization of uneven geographical development, they are nevertheless subject to objectification by state policymakers and by other political actors. Clearly, the state was acting in, *and on*, "problem regions" like Hudson's North East, the vacillating fortunes of which have been profoundly shaped by a barrage of regional policies and spatially targeted interventions.

These questions around the politics of uneven regional development, state policy, and political responsibility had earlier been posed most emphatically by Doreen Massey in her seminal article, "In what sense a regional problem?" It was here that Massey first introduced the concept of the spatial division of labor, "in order to make a point," the point being that problems of capital should not be (mis)represented as problems *of* particular regions, due to workforce deficiencies of some lack of entrepreneurial spirit: historically, since capital accumulation has always involved the "opening up of some areas, and the desertion of others [then] the 'regional problem' is not a problem produced by regions, but by the organisation of production itself" (Massey 1979, 234, 242-243). "Solving" the regional problem, then, could not be reduced to a question of spatial distribution or some technical matter of building a better policy mousetrap, in the manner of Keynesian reformism, since regionalized unemployment had deeper roots in aggregate demand deficiency, technical change and the deskilling of labor, the intensification of international competition, and the restructuring of multinational production systems.

In what sense, in other words, a *regional* problem? The commonplace tactic of blaming (problem) regions for their own plight confuses regionalized effects with endogenous causes, evading (rarely innocently) the real answer to Massey's rhetorical question, "who pays?" Then there are the related questions of who benefits, and where? As subsequent analyses of regressive social and spatial redistribution under Thatcherite neoliberalism and its stealth program of "privatized Keynesianism" would reveal, there were arguably more compelling reasons to characterize the affluent South East of England as "England's problem region" (John, Musson, and Tickell 2002), in light of its ill-regulated financialization, its overheating housing, commercial, and labor markets, and its overburdened infrastructures and governance failures (Peck and Tickell 1995; Allen, Massey, and Cochrane 1998). The privileging of regions like the South East was also sapping the developmental potential of the English provinces, and its so-called "problem regions."

In few places are these questions of the costs and consequences of regionalized economic growth—not to say the contradictions of uneven regional development—being played out more dramatically than in contemporary China. It was Mao who said that "[n]othing in this world develops absolutely evenly" (quoted in Smith 2006, 182), a truism that few would have questioned during his time at the head of the Chinese Communist Party (1945-1976), but which has been strongly reaffirmed in the dramatic forms of uneven development that have accompanied China's subsequent embrace of globalizing capitalism. The country's ongoing transformation from Maoism to marketization has been associated with spiraling inequalities, expressed in both social and spatial terms, and in historically new forms of uneven geographical development—both planned and unplanned. China's post-1980s growth model has been predicated on uneven regional development, the management, containment, and reform of which has latterly become a political priority.

Under reformist Premier Deng Xiaoping (1982-1989), China initiated the historical process of substituting one (stage) model of development with another. The declaration that China remained in the "primary stage of socialism" foretold a gradual departure from policies deemed appropriate for "mature" socialist societies, such as the Soviet bloc. The alternative, "socialism with Chinese characteristics," sought to accelerate economic development through concentrated capital investment, selective liberalization, and export-led growth in Beijing's very own favored regions, the Pearl River Delta and the Southeastern seaboard, on the coattails of which the lagging regions of the rural interior and West were supposed to catch up in accordance with the “ladder-step” (*tidu lilun*) doctrine of market-led modernization. The ladder-step concept is a Chinese variant of orthodox growth-pole theory, which holds that economic development is enabled through the spatial concentration, localized agglomeration, or regional clustering of key industries and activities, the benefits of which are expected to trickle down (or out and back) to less-developed regions, sometimes via secondary growth poles, over time. In the Chinese case, accelerated development along the Southeastern coastal areas was facilitated by geographically targeted, experimental reforms (including in Special Economic Zones like Shenzhen, Shantou, and Zhuhai), which were to produce, in addition to cheaply manufactured goods for global markets, demonstration and backwash effects for less-developed regions.

China’s (market-friendly) plan was therefore to achieve the historic goal of “higher” and more egalitarian development by means of an intensification of uneven regional development. These means have certainly been exploited to the full, but the historic goal has remained elusive:

> By endorsing “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and emphasizing efficiency over equity, Deng became a major force behind the reversal in regional policy. He support[ed] the concept of “stage of development,” which legitimizes uneven regional development as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development process. Once the stigma about uneven regional development is removed, [Chinese policymakers were] then free to advocate comparative advantage, regional specialization, regional division of labor and export-led economic growth (Fan 1997, 632).

The fact that coastal development in China has been reliant on a vast “floating population” of migrant laborers, impelled by virtue of rural underdevelopment and economic displacement to seek work in the factories of the coastal growth zone, a population mostly stripped of not only workplace rights but residency rights (which attach to home regions under the *hukou* or household-registration system), underscores the point that the country’s explosive rates of economic growth since the 1990s have been achieved through uneven regional development. Looming threats not only to economic sustainability but to social and political stability are surely not unrelated to the official embrace, since the late 1990s, of compensatory efforts to bring about a reduction in regional inequities, including massive programs of urbanization and industrialization across the Western interior. The often-overriding imperatives of capital accumulation, however, continue to drive spatially concentrated patterns of growth in China, often compounding the advantages of the first-mover regions on the top rung of the ladder. In this geographically differentiated context, regional growth models have been proliferating under a mode of regulation that combines centralized political control with devolved institutional experimentation, models that each seek to maximize the profit-making potential of distinctive positions within evolving international divisions of labor (Zhang and Peck 2014).

In contrast to many other "transition" economies, China has never been compelled to accept the policy advice of the multilateral development agencies like the World Bank; it has not been subject to externally imposed "structural adjustment." China has fashioned its own path towards marketization, in the context of a significant degree of state integrity. Yet ironically, some will now invoke the country's experience as proof of the benefits of "free-market" agglomeration. Policymakers are now being urged to make the most of the growth-accelerating effects of deregulated urbanization and concentrated investment—uneven regional development being represented as a natural stage on the path to more advanced (and ultimately convergent) forms of economic development. This echoes the long-standing contention, derived from classical economics, that trade-driven specialization and spatial concentration hold the key to long-run, dynamic efficiencies. These arguments have acquired newfound legitimacy in the field known as New Economic Geography—as practiced by the likes of Masahisa Fujita, J. Vernon Henderson, Paul Krugman, and Jeffrey Sachs. By relaxing neoclassical assumptions with respect to increasing returns and perfect information, the New Economic Geographers account for the persistence of uneven spatial development and entrenched core-periphery patterns by reference to scale economies, comparative advantage, natural endowments, and the cumulative effects of path-dependent growth. Uneven regional development has duly been accommodated anew within mainstream policy orthodoxies.

While somewhat less idealized than the most parsimonious strains of neoclassical theorizing, the New Economic Geography once again invokes an almost featureless, rational-actor world, largely devoid of social institutions, politics, and power relations. No surprise, then, that this offshoot of orthodox economics has generally been at odds with the temperamentally heterodox field of economic geography "proper" (Peck and Sheppard 2010), where a range of political-economic, cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic theories continue to hold sway, and where uneven regional development is rarely equated with a rationalist path to prosperity, or with stage models, but instead stands as a reminder of the contingent, contradictory, and ultimately always incomplete character of profit-driven accumulation. Consistent with their closer acquaintance with the granulated realities of actually existing economies, uneven regional development remains, for economic geographers, not only a recurring empirical fact but a principled theoretical axiom.

SEE ALSO: Branch plants and local development, industrial restructuring, imperialism, international division of labor, location and multi-plant firms, Marxist geography, neoliberalism, power and development, regional inequalities/disparities, spatial division of labor

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