SPACE, CLASS AND WORKER PRAXIS

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“The taken-for-grantedness of space is indeed a political issue.”


Space is on the agenda!

How does workers’ spatial embeddedness shape their actions and how do they engage with the unevenly developed geography of capitalism?
Since the 1970s critical Anglophonic geographers have been interested in matters of space and power.

Significantly, two of the major theoretical influences upon much early work in this regard came from two French theorists:

Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre
Michel Foucault

Focused upon institutions’ physical layouts and how they have often been designed with the purpose of controlling the behavior of those contained within them.

- Enclosing and dividing spaces

“Space is fundamental in any exercise of power”

“Discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space”
Henri Lefebvre

More interested in the broader connection between capitalism and its geography

“Every society produces a space, its own”

“Space is a (social) product...[It] serves as a tool of thought and of action...[I]t is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.”
Capitalism has a particular geography to it

This geography is central to how capitalism functions

“Capitalism has found itself able to attenuate (if not resolve) its internal contradictions for a century, and consequently, in the hundred years since the writing of *Capital*, it has succeeded in achieving ‘growth.’ We cannot calculate at what price, but we do know the means: by *occupying space*, by *producing a space*.”
For Lefebvre, there is a dialectical link between the MOP and its landscapes – socio-spatial dialectic

“New social relationships call for a new space, and vice versa.”

Any social “revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses.”

For a social transformation to be “truly revolutionary in character, [it] must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space”
Early Marxist geographers and uneven development

- Effort to understand how dynamics of capital accumulation shape the making of landscapes, and how the making of landscapes shapes capital accumulation.

- Historical-geographical materialism
David Harvey: Idea of the ‘spatial fix’

- Capital must ensure the landscape is made in particular ways: capital must flow into the built environment to produce those structures necessary either for production to take place (factories, roads, etc.) or for consumption (housing, sidewalks, shops, and the like).

- Capital “represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image...it builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it [through disinvestment], usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time.”

- The geography of capitalism is an integral part of the accumulation process, though it cannot simply be “read off” from understanding the accumulation process.
Neil Smith: the social production of uneven development

- Effort to “denaturalise” the idea that uneven development is a natural phenomenon, the result of the impossibility of “even development”; challenge to neo-classical economics and “equilibrium theory”

- Argued that industrial capitalism inherited a feudal landscape that was largely shaped by Nature and has reshaped it according to the necessity of capital accumulation

- Capital is caught between the need for fixity and for mobility
  
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  “uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital.”
the geography of uneven development “derives specifically from the opposed tendencies, inherent in capital, towards the differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production.” What capital “achieves in fact is the production of space in its own image.”

“Space is not a dead ‘factor’...[Instead, it] comes alive neither as a separate thing, field or container but as an integral creation of the material relations of society”

Consequently, the fundamental question is “not just...what capitalism does to geography but rather...what geography can do for capitalism [and how] the geographical configuration of the landscape contribute[s] to the survival of capitalism.”
Doreen Massey and spatial divisions of labour

- Idea of spatial division of labor:
  - The spatial division of labor inherited in one era shapes subsequent patterns of investment
  - “geographical path dependence”

- “[t]he geography of a society makes a difference to the way it works.”
Non-capital-centric approaches: Labor Geography

- Idea that economic geography of capitalism is struggled over – “spatial praxis” (workers viewed as active geographical agents)

- Workers may need a different spatial fix to ensure their daily and generational self-reproduction
  
  Capitalists and workers are likely to have different visions for how the geography of capitalism should be made

- Workers’ and capitalists’ and the state’s “ideal” fixes may be in conflict w/ each other; different segments within these categories may prefer different spatial fixes
“Workers make their own geographies, but they do not make them just as they please; they do not make them under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The landscapes made by all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”
5 interconnected elements have dominated Anglophonic Labor Geography’s research agenda

1) Explorations of how workers’ spatial embeddedness and/or entrapment shapes their social praxis
   ➢ defending place versus defending class

2) Workers must engage with the unevenly developed geography of capitalism
   ➢ some places have specific physical conditions
   ➢ some places may be underdeveloped whilst others have an abundance of capital investment
3) Workers often seek to make new geographical scales of their own social organization which brings spatial challenges

- e.g., efforts to develop national bargaining involves balancing different geographical interests

4) Spatial context and social identity

- workers’ topophilia (their love of place) means that many workers identify very strongly with particular places and this shapes their behavior

5) Changing spatialities of capitalism and new labor organizing models

- e.g. J4J shifted from a focus upon building-by-building organizing to organizing across office markets in LA
- UNITE shifted from focusing on spaces of production to spaces of consumption
Summary

- Social actors are geographically embedded and this shapes the possibilities for their social action;

- For both capital and labor, negotiating the tensions between the needs for spatial fixity and for geographical mobility is a process which drives much of their economic praxis – capital must constantly look for new places of profitability even as it must be fixed in place so as to facilitate accumulation, whereas labor must determine whether migrating to new locations is worth abandoning current places of work and residence;

- Different sets of social actors are differentially tied into local, regional, national, and transnational relationships, and this shapes their political and spatial praxis;
different sets of social actors will often have quite different spatial visions with regard to how they wish to see the geography of capitalism made and these varying spatial imaginations can result in significant political conflicts;

the making of new geographical scales of political and economic organization (local versus national bargaining) is often central to workers’ political praxis;

how social actors behave geographically shapes how landscapes are made, with the result that landscapes are contested social products;
- landscapes are not merely a reflection of social relations but are also constitutive of them (socio-spatial dialectic); and
- analyzing workers’ political and economic practice requires an approach grounded in historical geographical materialism.