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A dialogue on uneven development: a distinctly regional problem

Jamie Peck^a , Marion Werner^b  and Martin Jones^c 

ABSTRACT

Uneven development is back and high on academic, policy and political agendas. Resurgent sociospatial inequality and national discourses are a timely illustration of this enduring feature of the capitalist space economy. Building on an in-conversation Regional Studies Association (RSA) webinar, leading researchers discuss what the current conjuncture of capitalism and its historical geographical specificities mean for uneven spatial development. They reflect on how they encountered the issue of uneven development, how treatments have changed over time from a ‘heyday’ in the early 1980s to the present day, and set out an agenda for where uneven development research needs to go next.

KEYWORDS

uneven development; combined development; conjunctural analysis

JEL B5, N90, O1

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1. INTRODUCTION

Regional uneven development is an enduring feature of capitalist economies. Indeed, some geographers have argued that uneven development is genetically encoded within the social relations of a capitalist economy and as such the issue is not whether the ‘regional problem’ exists but rather the particular form that it takes in given circumstances. Moreover, the institutionalisation of regional uneven development as ‘the regional problem’ has been an equally enduring feature of the political economy of capitalism over much of the world. (Hudson, 2004, p. 3)

MJ: Uneven development – broadly defined as the relationships between places that (re)produce inequalities in wealth, power and resources – and the complex of responses to this are running high on policy and political agendas. For instance, there is an emerging body of international evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing inequalities in employment, wealth, health, housing, education and the wider access to lifetime opportunities. Research by the United Nations demonstrates the global extent of this and reveals the exacerbation of existing divides in civil society, especially around the interfaces between race, gender, discrimination and disadvantage, and it maps the reactions to this (United Nations, 2021). In a European context, Herod et al. (2022) have looked

specifically at employment and inequality and discussed new labour geographies. These geographies of inequality can be seen between regions, but they also exist within regions (Blundell et al., 2020). Illustrating this in the UK, the ‘Build Back Fairer’ report noted that the Manchester city-region has experienced widening inequalities particularly for young people, alongside worsening health inequalities, with damaging longer term economic and social effects from a combination of local and national factors (Marmot et al., 2021). Alongside this, again drawing on UK developments, the government has reacted by evoking ‘levelling up’ political narratives. Audaciously claimed to ‘break the link between geography and destiny’ to ‘end the geographical inequality’ and ‘where by staying local you can go far’ (HM Government, 2022, pp. xii, viii, xi), contra the insistence of Hudson (2004), the geography of uneven development does not matter; there is opportunity for all, everywhere (King & Ives, 2019). The evidence on the challenges of levelling up ‘left behind places’ could not though be further from this experience (Martin et al., 2021).

These social dislocations and political controversies require academic communities to urgently reflect and engage in a dialogue on the nature of contemporary socio-spatial relations and the role uneven development research plays in this. As Martin (2021, p. 143) puts it, ‘progressive–melioristic’ turns in regional studies, based around a

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'transformative vocation' committed to the 'pursuit of equitable and just regional outcomes', increasingly matter. A fundamental characteristic of human geography and indeed central to the history and chronology of regional studies, uneven development is located and evidenced at global, national, regional, urban and suburban spatial scales, such that it is combined and compounded for some people and places more than others. Patterns and processes of uneven development indeed mark the times and spaces of capitalist development and have provided the rich basis for theoretical developments. Indeed, the *Regional Studies* community has engaged with 'regional problems' and 'problem regions' for many years, most notably with the interventions of Massey (1979), Hudson (2007, 2016) and others.

The formulation and debate on 'uneven spatial development' (Brenner, 2019, p. 257) was very much a product of the late 1970s and early 1980s, derived initially from Marx's foundational accounts of capital circulation in *Capital* and supplemented with the work of key thinkers on the left such as Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin and Trotsky, and expanded by the likes of Mandel (Harvey, 1982). Key interventions by geographers heightened our attention to spatial divisions of labour, industrial restructuring, crisis and crises formulation, patterns of urbanization and regionalization, and gentrification (Anderson et al., 1983a; Dear & Scott, 1981; Duncan et al., 1988; Storper & Walker, 1989), with, as Brenner (2019) adds, sociospatial theorists developing new ways of conceptualizing the production and continual reorganization of geographical differences under modern capitalism (Soja, 1985). A particular high point was Smith's (1984, 2010) attempt to capture the 'see-saw' movement of uneven development and resultant geographies of scale and rescaling, adding to the spatial lexicons of place and locality deployed by Massey (1984, 1995). Interests in uneven development have waned since then. Macroeconomic geographies and comparative studies of locality have been superseded with 'the nodal, the near and the networked', and with empirical and theoretical interests focused on generating understandings of clustering, networks and instances of creativity (Peck, 2016, p. 307). Backdrops of poststructuralism and complexity theory have provided a stage for challenging 'panoramic visions of society' in favour of 'the detailed exploration of social assemblages' (Tonkonoff, 2017, p. xii). Mirroring these analytical shifts, Boschma and Martin's (2010) 559-page *The Handbook of Evolutionary Economic Geography* does not have an index entry or any chapter titles/section headings for 'uneven development'. Instead, theories of spatial economic evolution have been absorbed into contingency, path dependence and notions of self-organization.

In this article, leading researchers in their respective fields, Jamie Peck (JP) and Marion Werner (MW), reflect on what the current conjuncture of capitalism and its historical geographical specificities mean for uneven development and the geography of regions therein. Drawing on a panel convened by the Regional Studies Association (RSA) entitled 'Whatever Happened to Uneven

Development', chaired by Martin Jones (MJ), each presents their thoughts on prominent topics on/in uneven development and how they have approached them. The dialogue is concerned with: how they encountered the theme of uneven development in their own work; how treatments of uneven development have changed in economic geography and regional studies since its 'heyday' in the early 1980s; how uneven development is being considered presently; and setting out agendas for where research needs to go next to understand enduring and emerging patterns and processes of uneven development. To stress the processual nature of their thinking and theorizing on uneven development, both were encouraged to reflect on their own biographical and theoretical trajectories. The two panellists provide clearly situated, positioned and stimulating contributions, which should provoke readers of *Regional Studies* to think again about uneven development differently and multiply, opening up new lines of investigation, enquiry, experimentation, and debate within and beyond academia.

2. ENCOUNTERING UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Uneven development as a 'fact of life'

JP: If I think back to when I started my graduate studies, which was in Manchester in the mid-1980s, the sense was that uneven development was right there, all about, and everywhere; it was not just an atmosphere, or some dusty concept, but a fact of life. You did not have to spend time in the library to understand that uneven spatial development was something to be taken into account. This, after all, was Margaret Thatcher's second term, London-centric project that it was, which was already starting to feel like an *-ism*. It was the time of the miners' strike, the battles for (and then over) municipal socialism, and the rise of the 'new urban left'. It was a time when Britain's so-called North-South divide was not just something reserved for seminar rooms but stitched into everyday life. It was a 'structure of feeling', to recall Williams' (1977) term, before it was a question of theory or method. Uneven development was a visceral, experiential condition. It was 'in your face'. It was constitutive of the time, the place, the culture.

This was also a time and a place where the 'restructuring approach' (Lovering, 1989), pioneered by Massey (1984), Andrew Sayer (Morgan & Sayer, 1988), and others, began to occupy the 'critical mainstream' in regional studies and economic geography (or industrial geography, as it was conventionally known at the time in the UK). It was as if this approach had been made for this moment of political-economic dislocation, and in many respects it had. 'Restructuring' signalled a real-time mode of analysis, focused on spatially variegated forms of economic transformation typically engaged through the regional or local scale, through *place*. This was an approach more than it was a theory per se. It was an approach that had been built and operationalized at a time when both the form and intensity of change itself

appeared to be shifting – as entire industries and their associated regional economies were lurching into long-term decline, as (regionalized) unemployment had become a mass phenomenon again, and as the terms of employment and social contracts were being renegotiated by corporations and the state. In this respect, ‘restructuring’ signalled more than change, or even accelerated change; it signalled a realignment of structural *relations*, such as those articulating market conditions, workplace norms, local politics, gender relations and geographical configurations. These were understood to be intricately related, even if they did not move together in a mechanical fashion.

Restructuring signalled an approach, and an approach to methodology and conceptualization, that took uneven development seriously, albeit more as a condition of existence for what were often deeply contextualized and place-specific enquiries. Massey’s ‘spatial division of labour’ (Massey, 1979, 1984) approach had set out the conceptual map, but most of us, I think it is fair to say, were working in just one or other corner of this wider framework. It felt like it was more than OK to be working ‘locally’, because not only was this the scale at which economic geographies of the time were being practiced, it was the locus for a new generation of local economic strategies, pioneered in left-leaning cities like Sheffield and through the work of the Greater London Council (where Massey herself was an important presence). There was plenty happening at the local scale, and research at that scale reflected an at-least-tacit understanding of places as the sites of intersecting social forces and differently articulated social relations. The local scale/site was where things were seen to be coming together – or coming apart. But, of course, there was no such thing as a ‘typical’ locality (or a typical experience of restructuring). And because localities were all differently positioned (and unique in at least this respect), the corollary was that uneven development was always ‘there’, somewhere, as a structuring condition of existence.

It was often at the local level that economic geographers like me ‘cut in’ to research questions, even as these were understood to be deeply connected to all manner of ‘wider processes’, such as the transformation of the state or the vicissitudes of international competition. Speaking for myself at least, I do not think that the ‘maps’ of those wider worlds were particularly closely drawn or even studied; the local typically came first, the local was encountered first, and uneven development, the new international division of labour (NIDL), the world system and all of that tended to come a rather distant second. There was a sense, in other words, that our favoured concepts and empirical investigations were living ‘inside’ a world of uneven development, even if the structure, constitution and dynamics of that world itself were often secondary concerns.

The other thing to say about these (close) encounters with uneven development is that, in addition to being somewhat visceral and experiential, they were also in their own way parochial. Being in the North of England in the 1980s certainly felt like being at the sharp end of some far-reaching (and perhaps even historic) processes

of change; it felt like a transformative moment in which the stakes were high. But in relation to what, exactly? I remember reading articles and books about new industrial spaces and new models of growth, but at the time these seemed like ‘Hollywood’ treatments, with little or no relevance to circumstances in the deindustrializing North of England. There was a tendency to dismiss or reject them, as if they had nothing meaningful to say about what restructuring was *really* about, which in these parts seemed to be a much more nefarious enterprise. Optimistic readings of ‘post-Fordism’ (such as Scott, 1988) felt like they were a million miles away, and in a sense they *were* a long way away. There was an implicit mental map of sorts, one that positioned restructuring regions on the receiving end of capitalist schemes and Thatcherite reprogramming. This was a situated and clearly quite particular perspective on ‘uneven development’. Practically speaking, it was only comparative in a rather constrained, intranational sense, and it certainly was not cosmopolitan. Uneven development may have been understood as a fact of life, but the actual facts of its many lives were a different matter. I may be exaggerating a little, but this is how I ‘remember’ encountering the question of uneven development in the 1980s, as a phenomenon understood (no more than partially) from not only the Global North but from England’s ‘national’ North.

2.2. Reviving uneven development as a core concept

MW: Jamie’s account articulates so clearly the sense of what uneven development meant in the heartland where it eventually gained academic and policy currency, the North of England. I came to uneven development from a very different place and in a different time, the late 1990s. Around the time of the Seattle protests against the WTO [World Trade Organization], I moved to Central America to work on labour rights issues with workers sewing clothes for leading US brands. Based in Guatemala City, it was a tumultuous period of change and some optimism. The Peace Accords had been signed a couple of years beforehand in 1996, finally ending the country’s brutal 36-year civil war. But violence and intimidation against unions and progressive movements were not a thing of the past. My evenings and weekends were spent in the homes of garment workers, mostly indigenous and *mestiza* women, who sewed clothes for export. Upstart migrants settled from the countryside in the swelling peripheries of the city; these workers shared stories with me about their struggles for dignity and to make ends meet while working gruelling hours for low pay. Workers were organizing committees and trying to form unions. But supervisors and managers wielded the legacy and people’s experiences of state and para-statal violence to intimidate workers, many of whom bravely continued to organize. Factory owners definitely had the upper hand with respect to workers, although US brands ultimately set prices. Permissive labour and investment regulations facilitated the frequent closure and reopening of these factories to evade union organizing efforts, or to dodge other

obligations like taxes or severance pay. A regular churn of both workers and factories could be observed. When unionizing efforts were blocked, workers negotiated with their feet in a system that trucked in their disposability, as Wright's (2006) work would later powerfully illustrate. Factories moved in and out of neighbourhoods and shifted to smaller cities and towns to bust organizing drives and to seek lower cost labour. As global trade rule changes eliminated export quotas in Asia in the early 2000s, many garment factories eventually moved out of the region altogether. In short, I observed uneven development in real time before I had a language to think and write about it.

In a sense, then, my enquiry started from a particular place – peri-urban Guatemala City – but connections to the macrostructural – NIDL, the world-system and all that – were front and centre. *Global Displacements* began as an effort to understand these tectonic, macrostructural shifts through the lens of Caribbean garment workers' experiences (Werner, 2016). By this time, I had started to do more work in the Dominican Republic, where there were a small number of unions in the trade zones trying to organize to save these jobs or to support workers left jobless in the wake of disinvestment. My fieldwork there, together with world-systems theory, agrarian studies, and postcolonial and feminist theories, led to an argument for 'reviving' uneven development as a core concept. It is not that the concept was dead exactly, but it was marginalized in two, related ways. Development scholars with Marxist sympathies critiqued it for entrenching a rigid core-periphery model. This binary approach, as Sheppard (2012) put it, was a fixed framework for a quasi-equilibrium analysis of unequal exchange. But if the models associated with uneven development underdetermined core-periphery dynamics, much of development studies had overcorrected on the heels of real-world 'take-off' in East Asia. Scholars were following commodity chains and capital investments to new places and new workforces, in what we called an 'inclusionary bias' (Bair & Werner, 2011). These studies generally ignored the places excluded and peripheralized as part and parcel of capital's moves, like the garment workers of Central America and the Caribbean at the centre of my work. This proximate process of exclusion in the region was clearly part of a *longue durée* of peripheralization. Contra orthodox Marxist presumptions, however, this process was not static at all. Instead, these were relational geographies of uneven development with roots reaching back well before the advent of Fordism, articulating colonial legacies with remade, contingent agrarian *cum* racialized and gendered relations. These historical trajectories produced a particular region's position with workers' livelihood strategies made in and through it. Feminist geographers were important for my thinking here, particularly Massey (1995) and Hart (2002). Their work helped me to understand that just as hierarchies of labour are not fixed but rather made through conjunctural articulations of racial, ethnic and gendered forms of social difference, so too are places

dynamically reproduced in contested ways, not 'slotted in' to global value hierarchies determined functionally by the needs of capital. What emerged was a regional story, centred upon the North of the Dominican Republic, that wove smallholder relations through new patterns of accumulation, to form a particular culture and position of relative privilege with respect to other parts of the country and the Caribbean with strong plantation legacies. Anthropologists in and of the Caribbean had long identified this pattern of uneven development called the plantation/peasant complex. So, my wager was to theorize uneven development from the Caribbean – empirically, historically and epistemologically – in an effort to enrich wider frameworks and also unsettle their Anglo-American centrism.

2.3. Uneven development as an outlook on the world

JP: While of course it would be silly to expect otherwise, what strikes me here is that (all) encounters with uneven development are themselves particular and indeed conjunctural. In this respect, it may be as much a sensibility as a 'theory' per se, more an outlook on the world than some ready-made theory of the world. The 'restructuring' rubric of the 1980s, in retrospect, felt like an initial attempt to open up modes of enquiry and lines of investigation. Those of us who were working locally were often doing so in a somewhat provincial way, and working mostly on the 'inside' and with received (albeit critical) understandings of the positionality of these places in wider worlds – rather than problematizing and engaging these more-than-local relations more explicitly. In this respect, Marion's *Global Displacements* marked an important turn, because one of the things that it did was to trace the effects of sociospatial difference and uneven development 'all the way out', from the intimate and close-focus spaces of daily life to 'structuring conditions' understood in a more dynamic and contradictory way (Werner, 2016). The approach is more reflexively conjunctural than so much of the 'first generation' work on restructuring. Back then, we *thought* we knew, more or less, where we were in the world, like we knew where our places were on the regionalized map that was the cover image for the first edition of Massey's *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1984). Of course, the map was never intended to be fixed or pre-given, but the theoretical consciousness felt more constrained than it is now. Even if uneven development still tends to signal an outlook, or analytical sensibility, more than it does express commitment to a particular theory or method, there seems to be a more acute understanding of the fact that 'global capitalism', the interstate system, the web of productive networks and supply chains, and the inclusions and exclusions that these entail, are *themselves* also in motion. And even if we still often choose to begin with the local, the regional or the proximate, our enquiries need to spiral out of these sites, into worlds and *restructuring* conditions beyond.

3. UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT THEN, UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT NOW

3.1. From 'pitched battles' to 'damaging silences'

MW: Our first encounters with uneven development just discussed in many ways reflect the two parallel debates on uneven development circulating in the 1980s. Marxist development scholars were split over the legacies of dependency theory and the structural constraints thrown into sharp relief by post-Second World War decolonization in Asia and Africa, along with the collapse of democratic, national development efforts in Latin America. On the one hand, world-systems theory (WST) posited uneven development as a rigid hierarchy. If WST had a spatial dimension, it was one of scope – which countries were included in different positions in the global hierarchy. Sympathetic critics argued that uneven development entailed 'encompassing comparisons', to draw on McMichael (1990) in particular here, which presumed the 'whole' (i.e., the world-system) to determine its parts (i.e., societies in core and periphery positions). On the other hand, Marxist anthropologists and anticolonial scholars were embroiled in the 'modes of production' controversy, where they debated how to understand the coexistence of, and connections between, capitalist and non-capitalist development at the level of society. The premise of multiple modes of production was a non-starter for world-systems theorists, however. Stuart Hall would eventually make a definitive intervention that effectively carved a path between the two positions through his reworking of the concept of 'articulation' (Hall, 1980). But the question of what sort of totality is global capitalism, and what to make of capitalist outsides and capitalist 'others', would continue to animate Marxist feminist and postcolonial Marxist scholars of uneven development in these fields.

Geographers in the Anglo-American academy were not particularly engaged in these debates on decolonization and the limits of Third World national development projects in its wake. Instead, uneven development reached its apex with the so-called localities debates in the UK. The embers were good and cold on that debate by the time I entered the discipline, but I came to understand its importance as I developed my research. The localities debates raged between structuralist, Marxist approaches (most closely associated with David Harvey and Neil Smith) and post-structuralist, but still Marxist, formulations, most clearly associated with Massey's *Spatial Divisions of Labour*. Rather than a 'mosaic' of spatial difference, geographers mobilized Marx, Lefebvre and, in Massey's case, Althusser, to posit relations between places of accumulation and sites of devaluation. But they understood these relations quite differently. For Harvey and Smith, these relations were an expression of the tendency of capital to resolve its crises through internal spatial differentiation. For Massey, in contrast, they constituted layered, historical, contingent and contested trajectories (Jones & Woods, 2013; Peck et al., 2018). It bears

repeating that the Third World was largely an untheorized exterior to the dynamics of northern urban and regional uneven development at the centre of this debate; uneven development was seen as a process of differentiation internal to capitalism, not in some sort of relation with an external periphery or an 'outside'. One contribution that helped me to see connections between Marxist development debates (i.e., WST and articulations) and these uneven development debates in geography and regional studies is a recent chapter by Hart (2018a). Hart explains that Massey's arguments about the influence of historical trajectories and political settlements in relation to rounds of investment and subsequent industrial restructuring resonated with her own work on agrarian change in rural Java, which could not be understood through nation-state-centred development models. Hart, like Massey, advanced an understanding of place that was constituted through relations. Both would turn to Gramsci's formulation of the conjuncture, in dialogue with Hall (and his thinking around articulations), to focus on the politics that shaped uneven development.

In the 1990s, pitched battles raged between scholars who celebrated high-road development through 'flexible specialization' and those who decried regional abandonment in the wake of Fordist crisis. The 'win-win' ethos of New Regionalism, with its focus on select cases of endogenous, regional success, took over academic and policy discourses and sidelined uneven development perspectives. It took me a while to realize that New Regionalism suffered from an 'inclusionary bias' that was similar to that of global value chain and production network studies. Hadjimichalis and Hudson's (2014) paper in *Regional Studies* on the damaging silences in New Regionalism really clarified this. Their paper elegantly expressed the political costs of rendering uneven development an inert, staid, marginal concept.

3.2. From 'in your face' to 'behind your back'

JP: There was a sense that conceptions of uneven development in the 1980s, at least from the particular position described above, were pretty much baked in to received (critical) understandings of capitalist restructuring; they were part of the package. But also, in the Anglo-American literature at least, there seemed to be two rather different tracks, or takes on this question, as Marion has also noted. There were, on the one hand, the more abstract formulations of Harvey (1982) and Smith (1984), which identified tendencies for uneven geographical development in the fundamental dynamics of capitalism. Capitalism was seen to be transforming space 'in its own image', tendencies for uneven development being linked, integrally, to the driving forces of profit-driven accumulation, the dull compulsion of competitive relations, and the moving matrices of exploitation, inequality and crisis. Here, uneven development was understood to be systemic, ontological and in a sense metatheoretical. On the other hand, there was the approach of Massey (1984), the (mainly British) critical realists and followers of the restructuring

approach, where the action was located much closer to the particularities of situated places, which were inescapably mediated and contextualized, being read through midlevel epistemological frameworks like the spatial division of labour.

If, for the sake of argument, these can be seen as top-down versus bottom-up takes on uneven development, they were not necessarily incompatible, nor were they mutually exclusive. However, by the early 1990s it was almost as if they had become just that, after a series of rancorous debates (around the localities research programme and the politics of urban theory) led to a sort of polarization and a picking of 'sides', the space of dialogue and debate subsequently being vacated from both sides. Active theorization of uneven development seemed to fall off quite dramatically, and the issues themselves receded from foreground to background. It was not that researchers in regional studies and economic geography ceased to 'believe' in uneven development, but it would assume a more taken-for-granted status as the focus shifted to the dynamics of growth (and growth regions), to the economics of agglomeration, clustering, and institutional performance, and to the networked capacities of global corporations.

In economic geography and regional studies, so much of the most influential work that was produced during the 'long 1990s', from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008, was concerned with the various 'upsides' of uneven development, the front-of-stage action of which centred on growth dynamics, successful regions, corporate networks, endogenous institutions, and so forth (Peck, 2016). Uneven development itself had hardly disappeared – after all, so much of this work was predicated on a received (if often taken for granted) understanding, while uneven development is of course a condition of existence for localized economic success, so-called, no less than for 'rustbelt regions' or 'places left behind'. But at the same time, when the locus of concern shifted to the upside of restructuring, it felt like uneven development had receded to the analytical and indeed political background, as localized growth, productive institutions and global integration became the overarching stories. If uneven development had been 'in your face' in the 1980s, it seemed to be 'behind your back' in the decade that followed. Hadjimichalis and Hudson (2014) have called out the (academic) politics of this shift. In Hadjimichalis's pointed critique of 'third way' theorizing in economic geography and new-regionalist policy advocacy, the proximate outcome is a 'depoliticization' of uneven development (Hadjimichalis, 2017).

Whatever the underlying reasons (and there were many, including a desire to establish safe distance from the divisive localities debates of the late 1980s), the paths that were clearly *not* taken were those that might have been carved out somewhere 'between' the Harvey/Smith and the Massey/Sayer positions on uneven development. There was almost a retreat from this conceptual territory altogether, including on the part of the original protagonists. The foundational arguments, as a result,

remained stranded in the 1980s, and became increasingly inert. Harvey and Smith had uncovered recurrent tendencies for uneven development in the laws of motion and crisis tendencies of capitalism, while Massey and Sayer engaged conjunctural and contingent formations more concretely, as spaces of politics and as the synthesis of multiple determinations. These alternate takes on uneven development echo the differences commonly attributed to the early Marx of *Capital 1* compared with the late Marx of the *Grundrisse*, which of course would be more productively staged as an 'and/also' dialogue, rather than an 'either/or' choice. Similarly, the paths not taken between more abstract, capital-logic accounts of uneven development and more grounded, conjuncturalist treatments of same would ideally not have entailed the denial or dismissal of one at the expense of the other, but instead would have involved finding (new) ways to zig-zag between. Interestingly, Smith would later reflect, in his 2003 book on Roosevelt's Geographer, Isaiah Bowman, that while his *Uneven Development* had been:

a book of heavy abstractions and theory, economic logics, and grand geographical processes, with little human touch inspiring even the geographies it sought to explain, *American Empire* was very much *the other side of the same coin*. It is light on logics and abstractions [and] heavy on historical detail and human drama.

(Smith, 2003, pp. xxi–xxii, emphasis added)

Something similar, perhaps could be said about the relation between Harvey's (1982) *Limits to Capital* and Massey's (1984) *Spatial Divisions of Labour*; they were not counter-projects, but alternate sides of (and approaches to) the same problematic.¹ After the bruising debates of the late 1980s, the coin was effectively frozen in mid-air for more than a decade. Today, it seems to be spinning again.

3.3. Dialoguing requires both/and not either/or

MW: Yes, the long 1990s was a nadir for thinking on uneven development. Even if geographers generally heaped scorn upon Fukuyama's (1992) 'end of history', it was a pervasive sentiment, a structure of feeling that gained currency by sidelining and delegitimizing the visceral social responses to regional disinvestment and abandonment. In Anglo-American geography, the bruising localities debates created a professional atmosphere of malaise around uneven development. But the political context of left defeat and defeatism surely had much to do with it as well. Progressive political positions – not only in Anglo-American contexts, but also in Latin America and the wider Global South undergoing the first round of debt-imposed structural adjustment – were marginalized: 'there is no alternative' added insult to the injury of 'the end of history.'

Seen in hindsight, a lot of energy around the localities debates appeared to be rechannelled into another bruising dust-up in geography, between scales and networks (MacKinnon, 2011). Going back and reading these

debates, it strikes me that the social construction of scale, following Smith, was a way to operationalize uneven development and to bridge its political dimension with the geography of capital accumulation. But this approach was refracted through emergent frameworks on capitalocentrism and actor-networks at the time. It became a foil against which scholars asserted networks and relations as alternatives to an apparently rigid, structural approach to scale. My sense now is that the *realpolitik* that had driven uneven development debates in the 1980s was off the table in the Anglo-American context, and this largely internal, academic debate took its place. If we take a 'late Marx' approach seriously as Jamie suggests, then the point is not to abandon structural determination as overly rigid, but rather to understand structures through the lens of the 'complex concrete', as a conceptual procedure building from the abstract. This is what Hall meant famously with his notion of 'Marxism without guarantees': one must interrogate Marx's cardinal premises, the materialist and the historical, and how they combine (Hall, 1980; see also Hall, 2003; Hart, 2018b). So, again, we are in the terrain of both/and not either/or. Indeed, this sort of 'open dialectical' approach is not anathema to network frameworks at all, but rather takes more seriously how those connections are stabilized through their contingent exclusions as part of structural relations of uneven development that are always in the making.

4. THEORIZING UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT TODAY

4.1. Catching up rather than leading the way

JP: What is particularly striking about the wave of post-financial crisis theorizing of uneven development, it seems to me, is that it is so much more diverse and (as a result?) less prone to polarization, even as it runs the gamut from radical approaches to ethnography through postcolonial Marxism to transhistorical international relations theory. Considering the contributions of Alexander Anievas, Lesley Gill, Gillian Hart, Sharryn Kasimir, Don Kalb, Fouad Makki, Kerem Nişancioğlu, Justin Rosenberg, etc. these are hardly of a piece, even as in their different ways they all (re)engage questions of uneven development. It would be difficult to identify a central tendency in this body of work, marked as it is by so much productive diversity. In recent years, it has felt like economic geography and regional studies have been catching up with this vibrant literature, rather than serving as its principal staging ground. I do not think there is anything wrong with that, or much to be regretted. It has meant that questions of spatiality and geographical constitution are being taken up in (and across) fields where these questions are not necessarily 'baked in', like anthropology and international relations. The result is a much richer, more multi-layered and post-disciplinary field of enquiry within which issues like social difference, race and gender, (post)colonial relations, and more are all receiving greater attention than was the case in uneven development 1.0.

While noting these differences, it may also be the case that there are some underlying similarities in these two, historically distinct surges in theoretical innovation. Both moments – the deindustrialization/new international division of labour (NIDL) moment of the 1970s and 1980s, and the post-financial crisis moment since 2008 – were times when the political-economic zeitgeist was unsettled, if not disorientated. One of the reasons for the turn towards the active theorization of uneven development at the beginning of the 1980s was the pervasive sense that the very gestalt of the capitalist world was shifting, like the ground moving under your feet. More than this, though, there was a sense that once-hegemonic ways of organizing and understanding the world were reaching their limits, or rupturing. Four decades and more later, the world is very different. But in the extended aftermath of the GFC, there are also echoes as well, even if there cannot be repetitions – echoes reflected in an almost existential sense of rupture, dislocation and inchoate recomposition. The self-destructive contradictions of financialized and neoliberalized growth in its Anglo-American form were exposed in its very power centres. China has not only continued its global ascent but has begun to define and play by its own rules, rather than assimilating into the liberal world order; and once-hegemonic ways of organizing and understanding the world have been manifestly reaching their limits, or breaking down, from the carbon-based economy to orthodox globalization theory and American imperialism.

The reactivation of uneven development theorizing during what has been another long decade since the GFC is not really reducible to a single story. Its origins are diverse, its heterodoxy still quite inchoate. For myself, I do not think I ever really gave up on theorizing uneven development (or perhaps it was the mud in which I remained stuck), even during the lean years of the long 1990s. In some respects, the projects that I have been involved in that have sought to theorize capitalist variegation and variegated neoliberalism have both been concerned to animate these questions (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2007, 2012). And they both underscore the point that uneven development cannot be left to languish, as a 'downstream' source of empirical complications, because in fact this problematic reaches deeply into 'upstream' questions of conceptualization, positionality, theory-building and ontology.²

Among the issues that follow from these, three have been preoccupying me lately. One concerns the potential of conjunctural modes of theorizing and conjunctural methods, which in principle are well-suited to the problem of animating uneven development, on the 'inside' of our research designs, case studies and modes of enquiry. Elusive and weakly codified, conjunctural analysis nevertheless has the potential to bridge some of the binary divides between the macro and the local, the structural and the everyday, the historical and the quotidian. A second set of issues concern the too-often silent 'C' that is 'combination' in the complete formulation that is uneven *and combined* development. To problematize, explore and

theorize ‘combination’ is to move beyond established approaches to one-sided abstraction, ideal-typical theorizing, and the side-by-side comparison of discrete entities like regional economies, since the questions that are raised are those of multiplicity rather than singularity, coexistence rather than separation, simultaneity rather than sequentiality, and relationality rather than atomism (Leitner et al., 2020). And third, there is that matter of the gestalt. In psychology, a gestalt formally refers to an ‘organized whole’ that is understood or perceived to be more than the sum of its parts. In political economy, one way to think of globalizing capitalism is as a ‘disorganized whole’, the emergent properties of which exist in dialectical relation to moving parts like geopolitical blocs and regional economies – the result being neither more nor less than the simple sum of those constituent parts, but something coproduced, *qualitatively different* and no less ‘real’. My sense is that there is a lot of work to do to build a conceptual vocabulary for thinking about *part-whole relations in economic geography and regional studies*, where prevailing theory-cultures are almost reflexively sceptical of ‘the macro’ jumbo concepts, and systemic formulations, as if ‘disaggregation’ or localization is always the move to make. It can be, and good work was certainly done in bringing orthodox conceits like globalization to ground, but this can also engender methodological localism and recourse to internalist explanation, which can be limiting and problematic in their own ways too.

MW: The long decade since the GFC has seen a revival of scholarship on uneven development in geography and beyond. We have a set of conceptual tools to interrogate fundamental changes in global hegemony observable through the divergent recovery paths of China and the United States following the GFC. My research continues to look at this through the lens of production networks, arrangements that change – extend or reshore, integrate or outsource – as reflections of and mechanisms to reproduce uneven development. In the ‘top layer’ or anti-market, to draw on Arrighi (1994), Chinese capital vies directly with US and European monopoly capital over platforms and patents. But these contests have important cascade effects for Global South countries, effects that are not simply derivative of them. Production networks are a principal mechanism through which these capitalist dynamics work themselves out. Many Latin American and Southeast Asian countries, for example, experienced declines in the manufacturing portion of their exports, accompanied by increases in their commodity exports over the long decade following 2008. This trend can be traced through up/downgrading, organizational transformations and geographical shifts in global production networks. And we can marshal these empirical findings into reconstructing our analytical understanding of uneven (and combined) development in the current period.

Conjunctural understandings of uneven development hold much promise here. Taking our cue from Smith and Massey, we know that scales and regions are not pre-determined. The scalar remit of uneven development is part of the analytical challenge; so too is ‘the region’.

We are forced to ask what territorial form uneven development takes, and how core and periphery relations are (re)produced, not only synchronically but also through time and the social relations that shape historical trajectories. Conjunctural approaches to uneven development are not new of course, but I mention them because of how effectively they are currently being mobilized to understand the trend of increasing commodity exports – what is called *reprimarización* in Latin America – post-GFC. Scholars such as Andrea Marston, Thea Riofrancos, Nancy Postero and Felipe Irarrázaval point to the significance of indigenous movements, worker organizing, regional elites, and the formation (or not) of cross-class and cross-interest coalitions as central to determining the parameters of extractivist-based regional development and its social and environmental outcomes. If we are to get a handle on the shifting geographies of uneven development today, a conjunctural approach is necessary to avoid ‘encompassing’ comparisons, where we slot places into their core or periphery positions. This approach also wards off resource determinism, which is not only an analytical cul-de-sac but a political one too.

4.2. Taking risks: animating uneven and combined development in regional research

JP: We are broadly on the same page in seeing a series of productive pathways, in principle at least, illuminated by Massey, McMichael, Hart, Arrighi, Harvey, and so on, and snaking through the ‘new’ literatures on uneven and combined development. More of a challenge, though, are the next steps, concerning *how* we do this, in terms of methodological practices and research programmes. Relative to its sister disciplines in the social sciences and in heterodox economic studies, economic geography and regional studies can hold their own when it comes to methodological creativity and inventiveness, but if I can generalize, they tend to fall short when it comes to cultures of transparency and reflexivity. De facto, economic geography and regional studies are going to be carving out distinctive positions in contemporary debates around uneven development, one of their comparative advantages being a proclivity for being among the ‘first on the scene’ in dynamic and contested sites of restructuring. The collective memory associated with earlier skirmishes around the theorization of uneven development should also be an asset of sorts. This said, there are some really demanding questions concerning how to ‘animate’ uneven development in our research designs and practices, how to disturb what so often becomes a kind of ‘background’ status, and how to connect (and interrogate) the relations between the local, here and now, both with other locals and with the more-than-local, out there and elsewhere.

Responding to these demanding questions requires that we find (better) ways to engage ‘bigger’ issues and concepts – like the transformations associated with platform capitalism or with a China globalizing in apparently new ways – without defaulting to the assumption that localized cases and modes of enquiry are somehow always appropriate or superior. Of course, these issues *can* be

engaged locally, and productively so, but our methodological registers need to be less constrained. Platform capitalism, for instance, while hardly remaking the world in its own image, has certainly been shaking up and redefining extant regimes of production, consumption, distribution and employment, involving far-reaching interactions with (and implications for) financialization, neoliberalization, markets, monopolization, offshoring and reshoring, and more (Peck, 2017; Peck & Phillips, 2020). In terms of uneven development, this seems to be more than moving things around within an existing grid of spatial difference, within received geographical and scalar parameters; the parameters themselves are changing. And the transformations associated with ‘global China’ are likewise prompting new and sometimes confounding questions about what we thought were once (relatively) settled questions. Having once been convinced, quite emphatically, that reform-era China was on some kind of (*sui generis*) path towards neoliberalized capitalism, Harvey now agrees with his old friend, the late Giovanni Arrighi, that it may be ‘too early to tell’ whether China is even capitalist, let alone neoliberal (Red Emma’s, 2008; Harvey, 2021). These are among the ways in which the gestalt of capitalism (and perhaps the gestalt of more-than-capitalism) is shifting, practically in real time, in the process reconfiguring the moving map of uneven geographical development. ‘Local’ enquiries will surely help us understand what is going on, but much of the action is in the interregional domain – indeed, in the domain of the truly global. Navigating these worlds is going to require methodological innovation, and probably some risk-taking.

5. NEW HORIZONS WITH UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

5.1. Dialoguing through relational and conjunctural approaches

MW: Given the flexibility of the concept, it may be hard to identify a clear research agenda or single trajectory for uneven development. Nonetheless, let me offer some key themes. Recall Coronil’s (1997) rightly famous observation that the international division of labour exists in a unitary, dialectical relation with the international division of nature. My own thinking on this question of nature has been influenced by Moore’s (2015) work on world-ecology, which offers a remarkable synthesis of world-systems theory with political ecology and socialist feminist work on unpaid labour (e.g., Mies, 1986). Uneven development as viewed through the prism of world-ecology is a particularly powerful framework since it internalizes questions of ecological surplus, relations between exploitation, appropriation and extraction, and the continuous sociospatial project of reworking nature’s metabolism through formal and real subsumption. This work must remain relational in my opinion, attending to connections and differences across places and attuned to how political conjunctures, social hierarchies, and ecological dimensions shape uneven development geographies (Werner, 2022).

I am not signalling where the research agenda may be moving exactly, but rather pointing to opportunities for it to develop in dialogue with debates on socio-natures. Interest in plantations, land grabs, etc. has exploded over the last decade, for example, but the relationship to uneven development remains to be fully explored. We might build out that relationship through the type of analysis offered in Clyde Woods’s now classic book *Development Arrested* (1998). Clyde Woods’s powerful synthesis of plantation studies with uneven development offers an analysis of the Mississippi Delta through the combined perspective of coloniality, political ecology and economy, and deeply rooted forms of African-American resistance and resilience that are irreducible to capital, what he calls ‘the Blues epistemology’. He keeps a conjunctural approach front and centre. The reader can never just presume the Delta’s peripheral position but is forced to engage with the myriad forces that have continually reproduced that position and the fissures and cracks in that violent project. With Woods and many others, uneven development emerges at the contested nexus of capitalist exploitation and appropriation, or expropriation if we follow Fraser (2016). And here we have a non-reductionist approach to thinking about the geographies of uneven development through the dimension of ‘race’ which ‘distinguishes free subjects of exploitation from dependent subjects of expropriation’ (p. 172).

5.2. Capacious concepts

JP: Like Marion, it is not entirely clear to me where research agendas around uneven development might be moving next, not least because they are hardly moving in unison. It might help me if some of them moved in the directions that I have been talking about here, but it is more important that that they move in several directions at the same time, explore different registers, and so on. Harootunian (2009, p. 58) has described uneven development as an ‘active and unwritten law of capitalism from which no region can claim exemption’. What I like about this formulation is that it evokes the idea of part-whole relationality in which regions retain a distinctive presence while at the same time being constitutively coproduced through more-than-local relations, more and different to the sum of those interacting parts, shaping an emergent totality (if I dare use the word) conditioned by actually extra-local phenomena like fiscal discipline, multilateral systems, competitive pressures, environmental constraints and uneven development itself, of course. What is perplexing about uneven development is that not only is its ‘law’ unwritten, it is by definition unwritable. As Sewell (2008) has argued, uneven development is rather like the business cycle in the sense that it is apparently always with us, grinding away in its inherently unpredictable, non-linear fashion. Yet even though uneven development, like the business cycle, won’t just cease to be one day, or resolve itself into some happy ending of planetary equilibrium, what is also certain is that the concrete expressions and interactive consequences of uneven development will keep changing, in never-repeating patterns.

So any attempt to write a law of uneven development is bound to fail.

The scepticism of grand theories in economic geography and regional studies is in this respect very well founded. And the exploratory methods that these fields have made their own – working as they often do in ‘restructuring time’ – also have important roles to play in the interdisciplinary conversation around uneven development. But problematics of uneven development present challenges to received practice in these fields as well. The disaggregation reflex that I mentioned before often translates into ready critiques of overly capacious concepts – such as those associated with financialization and neoliberalization – that seem to encompass bucketloads of contradictory elements and widely variable circumstances: if neoliberalism can be said to be present inside World Bank structural adjustment programmes, for example, does it really make sense to give the same name to projects of state-facilitated marketization in rural China? Rather than ‘overstretch’ the concept of neoliberalism, so the ready arguments tend to go, better to do away with the concept (too baggy and capacious), or to concede a role for a more limited concept (OK, maybe it fits the World Bank, but it has no place in China). I have never been persuaded by these arguments and would (still) make the case for more capacious – rather than ‘tight fit’ – concepts, those that take account of sociospatial difference and uneven development up front and, conceptually speaking, on the *inside*. This is what, I would say, emergent concepts like variegated neoliberalism try to do. Rejecting reductionist, essentialized, or tight-fit models of neoliberalism, they problematize the cross-contextual, interactive, and different-to-the-sum-of-the-parts character of this transformative process, which is not reducible to a one-dimensional story of markets running amok, or generalized Thatcherism, or cultures of competitive individualism, or structural adjustment and practices like privatization, or party-state marketcraft, but *all of these things (together)* and considerably more. Now, this is not the same thing as saying that neoliberalization is somehow a blanket process or that it is trending toward unity or completion. In fact, it is the opposite of that. Maybe this could be what it means to bring uneven development into the ‘interiors’ of our concepts?

6. CODA

6.1. ... and don't forget the concept's political history

MW: In whichever direction research on uneven development proceeds, scholars should remain cognisant of the concept's political history as well as its scholarly arc from its 1980s heyday to long 1990s stasis to its post-GFC rejuvenation. While we can safely discount any ‘law of uneven development’, 40 years of geographical enquiry has produced a set of conceptual tools and analytical categories to unpack the ‘moving map’ of uneven development. And such an exercise is necessary if we are to get our heads around the contemporary period of massive flux

and political stakes that (at a minimum) rival those of the end of the first liberal period.

We started off our dialogue describing the different places from which we began to think about uneven development, and that might be a good place to end. Those grappling with the visceral, wrenching restructuring of post-industrial regions in the Global North, and those thinking through subordinate incorporation of the Global South, too often talk past one another. But the concept of uneven development – including its legacy in Marxist politics, its centring of questions of place-based development in relation to the larger capitalist whole, and its steadfast refusal of teleology – can continue to serve as a bridge for thinking across these diverse and differently diverging contexts of late capitalism.

MJ: The past, present and futures of uneven development remain of considerable importance within and beyond the *Regional Studies* community. Keeping these intellectual and policy concerns alive is key because it is clear that the creation of uneven development remains a ‘cumulative process’ (Anderson et al., 1983b, p. 3) and there remains work to be done to understand how a ‘neoliberalism in crisis will not bring an end to uneven development but its opposite, an intensification’ (Smith, 2010, p. 266). Uneven development is indeed back in the spotlight and there is an opportunity for the *Regional Studies* community to see if we have answers.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. For Massey's (1995) revelatory take on this issue, see the reflective chapter at the end of the second edition.
2. Harvey once reflected, more than two decades after writing *The Limits to Capital*, that ‘a decent theoretical understanding of uneven geographical development still remains to be written. ... To do this requires, in my judgement, that the issues of spatio-temporality ... are integrated into the argument at the very start rather than at the end of the analysis’ (Harvey, 2004, p. 545), as he had found it necessary to do in *Limits*. Once again, there is a pertinent contrast with Massey's project, which in a sense did actually *lead* with uneven development.

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