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***Addressing the Regional Problem:
Changing Perspectives in Geography and on
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**Addressing the Regional Problem:
Changing Perspectives in Geography and on
Regions**

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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. Somewhat unusually in the context of policy analysis, the time and place at which “the regional problem” emerged onto the governmental policy agenda can be identified quite precisely - 1928 in the UK. This marks the moment of transition from regional uneven development being regarded as a ‘natural’ and unavoidable, if undesirable, feature of capitalist economic development to it being seen as a specific political problem that required explicit attention by the national state. Thus it marked the emergence of a new governmentality through which the “regional problem” was made visible and regions defined as objects of policy. Despite periodic attempts to deny that it is significant, the regional problem has proved remarkably persistent and regularly re-emerges on political agendas. There also is a long history of geographers analysing and engaging with “the regional problem” and they have often been at the forefront of academic debates addressing regional problems, although other social sciences have increasingly emphasised the centrality of spatiality and spatial differentiation to socio-economic development and organisation.

In this paper I want to address three sets of inter-related issues:

1. Changing conceptualisations and theorisations of regional uneven development and the regional problem;
2. Some issues of evidence, of what is seen as constituting valid evidence, and of the relationships between evidence and theory;

3. Relationships between theory, evidence and public policies to address the regional problem – does theory lead policy, or vice versa?

From empiricist description, to spatial science to Marxian political economy

During the period from the 1930s to the 1960s geographers were active in a variety of ways in studying particular ‘problem regions’ and the regional problem. Much of this geographical work was cast in an empirical descriptive mould and produced some detailed and insightful analyses of particular regions (for example, Daysh and Symonds, 1951). From the 1950s, however, geographers became increasingly concerned to explain rather than simply describe spatial patterns and this was reflected in the ways in which they addressed regional uneven development and the regional problem. They began to use the then-novel methods of spatial science to try to explain regional uneven development and its relationship to regional policy (for example, Chisholm and O’Sullivan, 1973; Keeble, 1976). There were, however, severe explanatory - and so policy – limitations to such approaches. This led to attempts to conceptualise and understand “the regional problem” in fresh ways.

Recognition that spatial science approaches assume a seriously under-socialised conception of the processes that generate spatial patterns (Hudson, 2001) led human geographers to explore alternative epistemological and theoretical positions in explaining regional uneven development and “the regional problem”. From the late 1960s, geographers increasingly turned to political economy, especially Marxian political economy encompassing powerful concepts of structure and the social structural relations of capitalist societies, in their search for more powerful explanations of regional inequality. This offered a powerful challenge to the “spatial fetishism” (Carney *et al.*, 1976) of spatial science and enabled geographers to conceptualise regional uneven development and the “regional problem” as integral to processes of

capital accumulation (Carney *et al.*, 1977). This marked a (first) radical conceptual break in thinking about the regional problem and the causes of regional uneven development.

The conceptual advances in addressing the regional problem involved two related moves. The first involved a rigorous re-conceptualisation of historical-geographical materialism and revolutionised thinking about spatially uneven development, rigorously demonstrating why it was an integral and necessary feature of capitalist economies (Harvey, 1982). However, because it was constructed at a high level of theoretical abstraction, it necessarily left unanswered the critical question of *which* regions became problematic, which successful, within an overall mosaic of regional uneven development. The second move involved analysing how the specific socially produced features of regions intersected with more general trajectories of capital accumulation and particular corporate strategies for production. This became the focus of the “spatial divisions of labour” approach (Lipietz, 1974; Massey, 1984; 1995a). This encompasses a more spatially nuanced approach, building upon the critical insights of Marxian approaches in ways that recognise the central formative role of spatial differences in the constitution of capitalist societies. In particular, it sought to explain why different parts of the overall production process are located in different regions in response to variations in regional labour market conditions (see also Carney *et al.*, 1980). It drew attention to the strategies of capital, labour, national states and local communities in seeking to shape geographies of economies and the anatomy of the regional problem and stimulated more subtle and sophisticated empirical research into formative processes (for example, see Morgan and Sayer, 1988). Which regions grew and prospered, which declined and became problematic in various ways, is clearly an issue of both considerable intellectual interest and great practical significance to people living in these regions and to policy makers charged with responsibility for managing “the regional problem”.

The varying fates of regions raise issues of for whom and in what sense “the regional problem” *is* a problem and the reasons as to why this is so, of the criteria used to define regions as “problematic” and “non-problematic”

(Massey, 1979). These questions are critical in terms of understanding the rationale for Government involvement with “the regional problem”. There is a permanent tension between corporate and territorial development logics. The former defines regions as locations in which, for a time, to make profits, the latter seeks to ensure that regions remain locations in which people can find paid work to enable them to continue to live and learn there. As such, there is an unavoidable tension between regions as places to which their inhabitants are attached in complex ways and as locations in which capital seeks to make profits.

Regional policies are one mechanism through which Governments seek, for a time, to keep these tensions within tolerable limits, and at the same time preserve their own legitimacy and head-off challenges to their authority. However, geographers also came to emphasise that other Government policies can have significant and unintended regional consequences. This raises important questions about the links between regional policies seeking to contain “the regional problem” and other policies that may have emergent, “unintended” and “undesirable” regional effects. Such policies may be sectoral (such as defence policy, nationalised industry policies or welfare state and public service sector policies) or spatial (for example, urban or rural policies). This highlights the need to focus on the regionally differentiating effects of *all* Government policies and public expenditure patterns, and not just those officially categorised “regional policies”. This emphasised the need to take account of qualitative as well as quantitative difference between regions. This requires a more sophisticated theorisation of the state and its diverse involvement in economic and social life.

New theoretical perspectives on the state and “the regional problem”

Recognition of the unintended regional consequences of aspatial policies emphasised the tangled and contradictory pattern of state involvement as

both proximate cause of and solution to the “regional problem”. In response, geographers turned their attention to theories of the state, regulation and governance in an attempt to comprehend why state activity took these conflicting forms and to understand better the relations between the intended and unintended effects of state policies in relation to “the regional problem”.

In particular, crisis theories of the capitalist state (Habermas, 1976; O’Connor, 1973; Offe, 1975) proved to be particularly helpful in this regard. These theories took their point of departure in a recognition that there were unavoidable economic crisis tendencies structurally encoded within capitalist relations of production and manifest – inter alia - in profitability crises. State policy interventions seek to address these problems but cannot abolish economic crisis tendencies and instead displace them into the spheres of the state and civil society, from which they emerge in due course in new forms. In particular, they emerge as rationality crises, defined by a chronic disjunction between the stated aims and intended outcomes of state policies and their actual emergent effects, many of which are “unintended” and unwanted. Such disjunctions may in turn trigger legitimation crises, as the authority of the state to act in particular ways is called into question precisely because state policies fail to meet their stated objectives. For example such a legitimation crisis erupted in France in relation to regionally concentrated cutbacks in the steel industry in the late 1970s and 1980s (Hudson and Sadler, 1983). At the same time, growing pressures on state finances and the threat of a fiscal crisis of the state prevents expansion of the boundaries of state activities, because of the threat of capital flight in response to rising corporate taxation and inflation.

Thus geographers began to interpret the retreat of central Government from regional policy as part of the general reduction of the scope of State involvement in national economy and society. Intensifying processes of globalisation weakened the capacity of the national state to steer the national economy. The dangers of fiscal crisis, with its implications for large-scale capital disinvestment from national territories, took precedence over those of a possible legitimation crisis. There was growing emphasis on national

economic performance and securing the place of the national economy in dominant circuits of global capital and often this meant prioritising growth in already economically strong regions.

A new international division of labour, new conceptions of “the regional problem” and development and new policy responses

For several decades, inward investment was regarded as central to “solving the regional problem”. As a “new international division of labour” (Fröbel *et al*, 1980) emerged as part of increasingly internationalised economic relationships, the emphasis increasingly switched to inward investment by foreign multi-nationals (Hudson, 1995b). However, such branch plant investment was seen as potentially problematic, creating new forms of externally dependent regional economies (Firm, 1975) composed of Taylorised “global outposts” (Austrin and Beynon, 1979) with little connection to the rest of the regional economy. Such factories were seen as vulnerable to closure due to corporate decisions made in HQ offices in other countries. Consequently, by the mid-1970s branch plant disinvestment and “capital flight” were increasingly regarded as a proximate cause of ‘regional problems’ over much of the developed world rather than as necessarily part of their solution as companies switched the location of routine production activities in search of cheaper production locations and/or to establish capacity within foreign markets as part of emergent new international divisions of labour. One effect of this was that the emphasis switched from manufacturing to services as a potential source of new employment growth in “problem regions”, although often this simply reproduced a service sector version of an economy of global outposts.

However, the changing configuration of the international economy and the emergence of new forms of corporate organisation also offered opportunities to re-think the character of “the regional problem” and devise new ways of

tackling it via inward investment in manufacturing. This led to renewed emphasis on inward investment as a way of reviving regional economies and of modernising managerial practices and working methods in large swathes of manufacturing via the demonstration effect and example of more efficient “lean production” and associated managerial practices (Hudson, 1995a). This re-positioned many “problem regions” in new ways within an evolving international division of labour while simultaneously seeking to re-position national economies within that division of labour, again raising questions as to how “development” was to be understood in a context of resurgent neo-liberal globalisation.

This re-assessment of “development” was partly linked to claims about the beneficial impacts of new forms of inward investment upon ‘problem regions’. In particular, it was claimed that there was now an alternative to the old “low road” to regional development via branch plants offering only unskilled assembly work and with little connection to the surrounding regional economy. This alternative new “high road” centred on “embedded” performance plants, offering more skilled work in factories closely tied into the regional economy via their supply chains. However, while this became increasingly seen as central to a new regional development orthodoxy, encompassing ideas of clusters, there were evident dangers of re-creating regional economies that would be very vulnerable to changes in demand for a narrow range of products. Furthermore, while many branch plant investments could not be simply classified as ‘global outposts’, nor did they correspond to the specification of performance plants. Instead, they constituted formative elements in a new form of enclave economy, linked in complex ways into both regional and global economies and wider corporate geographies which challenged the “new orthodoxy” of cluster-based development (Hudson, 2003a).

The re-assessment of the nature of “development” was also linked to an emphasis upon small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as the new basis of regional policy and of regional economic well-being. SMEs were seen to offer a way of diversifying regional economies around a wider range of firms

and products, spreading the risks of economic change and turbulence more widely within a region. This was not without its inconsistencies, however, especially as the interest in SMEs led to a fascination with industrial districts. These districts were understood as successful regions of SME growth, in which the traditional problems of small firms growth – marginalised companies with a very precarious existence – were largely overcome as co-operating networks of small firms flourished in particular niche markets, based on quality and flexibility of products. 'Furthermore, in some cases such districts transformed themselves into dynamic "learning regions" (Morgan, 1995), or "technology districts" (Storper, 1993), with competitive success based upon product innovation and strong Schumpeterian competitive strategies of market disturbance (Hudson, 2001). However, it also became evident that many formerly successful industrial districts were "hollowing out" – as had similar regions in the past - in response to extra-regional political and economic changes, calling into question the validity of this particular developmental model (Hudson, 2003a).

This focus on the re-discovery and reconstruction of regional economies was also linked with growing attention to non-economic relationships that were seen to underpin regional economic success. As well as the traded interdependencies of the supply chain, geographers also began to emphasise the significance of the untraded interdependencies of non-economic social and cultural ties within an associational economy (Storper, 1995; 1997) and of concepts such as social capital and "trust". This was one element in broader cultural and institutional "turns" in analyses of spatiality and regional development (Amin, 1998). "Institutional thickness" (Amin and Thrift, 1994) denotes not simply the number and density of institutions within a region but the intensity and quality of their interactions. Many of the economically successful regions of contemporary capitalism were seen to possess an appropriate forms of social capital and institutional thickness, which underpinned and supported economic activities located within the region and helped reproduce regionally-specific tacit knowledge and trust, seen as critical determinants of continuing economic well-being. Conversely, however, an inappropriate institutional thickness, often a relict form from an earlier era

when it was supportive of regional economic success, can act as a barrier to moving a regional economy onto a new and more promising developmental trajectory (Hudson, 1994), revealing “the weakness of strong ties” (Grabher, 1993).

Furthermore, the recognition that some regions prospered whilst others declined, and that some formerly successful developmental models were becoming problematic led to intriguing intellectual questions with manifold practical implications as to the circumstances in which such developmental models were possible and successful. It raised questions about the possibility of transferring appropriate institutional arrangements and forms of “institutional thickness” and “best practice”, enabling economically declining problem regions to learn from the success of more successful regions elsewhere (Dunford and Hudson, 1996). Such hopes proved false, however, based on a fundamental mis-understanding of the possibilities of transferring policies and “best practice” from one regional context to another and of the “limits to learning” as the basis for corporate and regional success (Hudson, 1999). As a result, SME policies generally reproduced precisely the sort of vulnerable small firm economy that industrial districts were seen to avoid. Equally, while giving rise to the occasional performance plant and a rather larger number of new forms of enclave development, as often as not inward investment policies continue to re-produce vulnerable economies based around “global outposts” in both manufacturing and service sector activities and business functions such as call centres, and so subject to corporate (dis)investment decision often taken in other continents (Hudson, 1998).

The growing emphasis on regional institutions in explaining regional economic success and failure became closely linked to debates about new systems of multi-level governance and the “hollowing out” and “re-structuring” of national states (MacLeod, 1999). These debates originated in claims that the national state was being emasculated by processes of globalisation and counter-claims that accepted that the role of the national state was (again) changing but that disputed that this heralded “the death of the national state” (Anderson, 1995). Rather than the national state ceasing to matter in

economic policy formation and in tackling “the regional problem”, the ways in which it did so were changing as it took on an “enabling” role alongside its existing market facilitating and interventionist roles (Hudson, 2001). In this way, via the construction of a new mode of governmentality, the national state sought to keep “the regional problem” within acceptable limits as part of a new architecture of governance and regulation. This encompassed new supra-national organizations such as the EU and sub-national institutions – so that regions became subjects as well as objects of policy - as well as national Government and institutions in civil society as well as the state itself. Importantly, national states retained a powerful influence in shaping those activities that it shifted to other spatial scales.

In summary, another (second) radical conceptual break occurred in thinking about the regional problem and the reasons for regional uneven development in the 1990s as cultural, evolutionary and institutional approaches developed. Previously, there had been considerable emphasis on external processes as both the causes of (for example, via transnational disinvestment) and solution to (notably by central government regional policies) regional problems. Comparatively little attention was paid to conditions within regions and to endogenous processes as explanatory factors. The ‘new’ economic geography of the 1990s, in contrast, highlighted endogenous processes and conditions within regions. Reflecting broader cultural and institutional “turns” in human geography and the social sciences, it also placed considerable emphasis upon non-economic processes and institutions that were claimed to underpin regional economic success and lie at the heart of regional economic failure and decline.

While a useful corrective to the emphases of earlier approaches, in certain respects these more recent developments also proved problematic. For some the growing explanatory emphasis upon cultural influences and “soft” institutions led to conceptual “fuzziness”, which in turn weakened the links between regional analysis and regional policy (Markusen, 1999). However, it by no means follows that such cultural and institutional analyses are inevitably “fuzzy” (Hudson, 2003b). Nonetheless, the links between non-economic and

institutional influences and processes and economic success often seem to be asserted rather than convincingly demonstrated. For others, the problems lay more in the tendency to focus attention on endogenous processes to the exclusion of considerations of broader political-economic processes and the constraints that these impose upon the scope for regional autonomous action as the route to solving “the regional problem”. One consequence of this was to encourage inter-regional competition as the solution to problems of regional uneven development, on the premise that all regions could pull themselves up by their bootstraps and engage in “win-win” scenarios, if only they put in place appropriate intra-regional institutions. However, this effectively denied the character of capitalist development as unavoidably uneven and that there were necessarily “losers” as well as “winners” as a result of such competitive processes (and in all probability many more of the former than the latter). This is a point of immense significance in the context of future regional policies.

The problem of evidence, conceptions of theory and policy relevance

Given the co-determination of concepts, theory and evidence, the changes in theoretical emphasis in the analysis of the regional problem have been reflected in the weight placed upon different forms of evidence.

Consequently, evidence can – and I’d argue, must - take a variety of forms, qualitative and quantitative and there has certainly been an increased emphasis upon qualitative methodologies and associated forms of evidence as a consequence of the cultural and institutional “turns”.

This has led to claims – some would suggest assertions - that “our standards of evidence seem to have slipped dramatically in the last decade” (Markusen, 1999, 872). This alleged slippage in the quality of evidence has increased “policy distance” and decreased the relevance of academic research addressing “the regional problem”. In particular, Markusen associates this alleged decline in standards with a decline in the use of quantitative evidence,

especially that which would lead to a one-to-one modelling of the relationships between a concept and empirical evidence. For example, she argues that “It is common to hear scholars refer to a divide between the quantitative people and the theorists ..”, a remark that for many regional analysts evokes memories of some of the mindless empiricist data dredging of past spatial science approaches to regional analysis. Even so, for Markusen theory construction seemingly *necessarily* requires quantitative data. This leaning towards a particular sort of evidence is, however, symptomatic of something much more serious - a preference for a particular conception of ‘traditional’ (as opposed to critical: Horkheimer, 1972) theory. “Traditional” theory rests on a belief that there are underlying regularities to be revealed by some combination of inductive empirical analysis deploying extensive methodologies (Sayer, 1984) and deductive theorising. As a result, as is well known, inherent to such a conception of theory and predictive power as the test of its validity is the potential for social control (Lewis and Melville, 1977). However, for critical theorists and critical realists, concerned to change the world for the better via engagement with policy and political communities, predictive power is not a central issue in assessing the validity of a theory. While the potential for social control contains immanent dangers to democratic process and practice. Consequently, given Markusen’s professed concern to contribute to the development of progressive policies, her preference for “traditional” theory is odd.

In addition, a corollary of privileging quantitative evidence is that qualitative methods and case studies are, for Markusen, relegated to a supporting role. This is as much as they can provide. They can “enrich” an understanding derived from the construction of ‘traditional’ theory based on quantitative evidence and a particular conception of “statistical representativeness”. This is clear from her complaint that “authors of qualitative accounts often fail to make the case that the particular case study is representative or that the findings from it are generalizable” (Markusen, 1999, 872). It is certainly the case that they may not be representative in a statistical sense – that is be a representative randomly drawn sample of some putative underlying population, to which the results of analysis may be generalised, with a given

probability of error. They may, nonetheless, satisfy the criterion of representativeness required from the perspective of critical realism, and be representative of key causal processes and mechanisms. As such, they may well be much more valuable than yet another statistical or quantitative analysis of spatial pattern in revealing the social processes that underlie regional development, in revealing the ways in which causal mechanisms may or may not be activated in specific contingent circumstances. Markusen states that “it is not my intention to engage in a debate on epistemology”. However, addressing some of the issues that she raises requires precisely such an engagement and recognition that different conceptions of theory make different epistemological assumptions. The constitution of “valid evidence” and the meaning of key concepts such as “representative” are contested and dependent upon the theoretical context in which they are grounded.

Conclusions and future research directions

In the last decade or so there has been an increasing ‘turn’ to cultural, institutional and evolutionary perspectives in the analysis of regions, regional problems and regional development. At least in part, these changes were in response to what were seen by some as the limitations of the political-economy approaches that had previously been in the ascendant. For some, exploring these other approaches offered an alternative, rather than a complement, to, political economy approaches, which were seen as overly structural and deterministic, allowing too little (if any) space for human action and political intervention. At the risk of stating the obvious, this clearly represents but one reading of much of political economy. Moreover, it is one that many of those who seek *both* to defend the merits of a political economy approach *and* explore the scope for fruitful engagement with other intellectual traditions in the social sciences, would reject. For others (myself included: for example, see Hudson, 2001), then, exploring alternative approaches represents a way of adding to the advances previously made in understanding

regional uneven development via explorations of a variety of political-economy perspectives.

Whatever the precise reading and interpretation of recent developments, however, what is beyond any reasonable doubt is that the exploration of diverse and heterogeneous approaches to the study of regions and regional development has led to a lively and more interesting debate, both within and beyond the academy. The growing interest in the social sciences in the spatiality of social life has ensured that this debate within the academy has become truly cross-disciplinary, and has benefited enormously as a result. The exploration of diverse theoretical perspectives, however, led to a parallel concern with equally diverse forms of evidence – or more precisely, a diversity of views as to what constituted valid evidence which challenged not only some of the tenets of political economy but also the positivistic approaches to regional analysis, to which political-economy perspectives were themselves a response.

Given the weight of theoretical and empirical evidence, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that regional uneven development is an unavoidable and necessary feature of the capitalist space economy, although its particular manifestations are contingent. This has profound practical and policy implications. It means that regional problems cannot be abolished by inter-regional competition, linked to endogenous development strategies that generate “win-win” scenarios. Nor can they be abolished by state involvement in economy and society. Indeed the economic crisis tendencies inherent to capitalist production and which are at the heart of “the regional problem” cannot be so abolished but instead are internalised within the operations of the state. In due course, they mature into crises of the state itself. On the other hand, politically (democratic) states cannot be seen to be insensitive to issues of regional inequality.

Consequently, in terms of policy, further research addressing “the regional problem” and regional policies must focus on two sets of issues:

1. First, on the ways in which “the problem” can be contained for particular periods of time, to produce a temporary spatialisation of the social relations of the economy within “acceptable limits”.
2. Secondly, on the relationships between this containment strategy and more general contradictions in the relations between economy, society and state.

In short, there is no point in seeking to deny the inevitability of the “regional problem” but the issue of which regions become problematic and of who gains and loses as a result, remains one of profound significance. For this reason if no other, it is vital that geographers and other social scientists continue to address “the regional problem”.

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