

# Geography and worker organisation: Do spatial approaches change our theories of union praxis?

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## On the making of the geography of capitalism

In this paper we explore several geographical issues that relate to understanding matters of work and worker organisation. The belief that the spatial relations of social life are important to theorise is deeply intertwined with the notion of the 'production of space', by which is meant how economic and social landscapes are actively struggled over. Central to this idea is the concept of the 'socio-spatial dialectic', which views spatial relations and social relations as mutually constitutive, such that spatiality is both a material product of social relations and a shaper of them. This approach to understanding the operation of capitalism has been most fleshed out by a number of Marxist geographers. Of particular importance in this regard is David Harvey, who has done much to develop the idea of what he calls the 'spatial fix'. For Harvey (1982), the key to understanding how capitalism operates is to recognise that, in order for accumulation to proceed, the economic landscape must be structured in particular ways – as a landscape of profitability rather than unprofitability, for instance. This necessitates capitalists ensuring – either individually or collectively – that they have workers on hand who can access a particular workplace, that raw materials can reach factories, that finished commodities can reach consumers and that information and capital can flow to where they are needed. All of these considerations require a certain spatial arrangement of investments in plant, infrastructure and the built environment more generally – what Harvey calls the 'spatial fix'. In pointing out that the geography of capitalism has taken on particular appearances at different historical moments, Harvey has argued (1982, p. 416-17), then, that 'the territorial and regional coherence that...is at least partially discernible within capitalism is actively produced rather than passively received as a concession to "nature" or "history".' At the same time, though, the way in which the landscape is structured materially shapes how social relations develop. A significant insight provided by Harvey is the proposition that even the most footloose capital can never be entirely free of spatial constraints or considerations because capitalists must always negotiate two contradictory spatial tendencies – the need for sufficient geographical mobility to be able to seek out investment opportunities in new locations, and the need for sufficient geographical fixity so that accumulation may occur. This tension results from that fact that, as Marx pointed out, capital can only ever be in one of two states during the circulation process – motion or fixity – and it can never remain permanently in either state if self-expansion is to occur. Harvey argues that because capital and commodities exist in space as well as in time, fixity in time also implies fixity in space, whilst motion through time usually implies motion through space. Put another way, even the most flighty of capital must come to ground at some point, since for all of their innovative capacities capitalists have not yet found, at least to our knowledge, an ethereal way of accumulating capital.

The result is that, as Harvey (1978, p. 124) puts it, capital must build ‘a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time’. The paradox, therefore, is two-fold: not only are the spatial configurations which are appropriate at one historical moment not necessarily appropriate at another, but in its effort to escape such spatial configurations capital must create other, different spatial arrangements. Not only, then, is there a dialectic between space and social relations, but there is also one between the past and the present – the landscapes of the past shape how those of the present are made, even as the creation of these new landscapes gradually erases those of the past. However, whereas Harvey (1978, p. 124) has focused primarily on how ‘capital represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image’, this approach has been critiqued for often forgetting that workers also seek to shape the landscape in ways they see as beneficial. The point, then, is that different groups of social actors may prefer to see quite different economic landscapes put in place, such that much of the political and economic conflict between them revolves around the matters of whose preferred spatial fix will be implemented and how this will, in turn, be challenged by those with competing visions.

Central to the creation of a spatial fix is how social relations are crystalised in particular places. This is important, for as Hudson (2002: 256) points out, although production occurs in and through the workplace of the factory, office or home, it is set within cities, regions and national territories. Thus, workplaces are, for workers, far more than simply a space in which to work for a wage but are arenas which are connected to a much broader economic landscape. Hence,

One can speak of a place specific culture, a continuously fashioned melange of meanings values and relationships that are affected by shared and ongoing social practices. These practices construct, sustain and transform the context in which economic social and political life is produced and reproduced on a daily basis and into which new members are socialized. Such a culture is born of a lived unity of experience that generated particular “structures of feeling” (Hudson 2002: 267)

Drawing on this, Castree et al (2004) suggest that places give meaning to people just as people give meaning to places. Moreover, because people, institutions and things come together in unique ways in different locations, social relationships, regulations and institutions have a high degree of local embeddedness. Social relations, like those of class, then, are experienced as a series of place-specific relationships. This configuration has echoes of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, where habitus represents the cognitive, affective and evaluative internalisation by actors of past experience on the basis of shared experience. Crucially, though, these common histories are shaped by the shared spatial contexts within which social actors live – people who live in the same place have their lives shaped by similar sets of processes, though they may experience these processes differently (given their different class positions, ethnicity, gender, etc).

### **Migration**

The notion of habitus has been criticised for being too all-encompassing, seemingly impossible to break out of or transcend, but it can be helpful in examining the atmosphere of places, as with Darlington’s (2005) account of labour militancy in Merseyside. More

pertinently, however, Darlington's study raises broader questions about the geography of worker praxis, particularly concerning how traditions of militancy or quiescence are generated in particular places, how individuals from those places become socialised within them and how such traditions may be transmitted spatially from place to place. One way for the latter to quite literally 'take place' is through the geographical mobility of workers, who can bring to new places traditions of militancy developed elsewhere, such that their arrival can serve as the catalyst of radical change in formerly quiescent and/ or non-unionised labour forces and lead to the 'invention' of new traditions. In other cases traditions may be transmitted through a 'demonstration effect' as workers in one place are inspired by learning about those in more distant places, a process which does not require the physical movement of workers themselves but does necessitate the spatial diffusion across the economic landscape of information about disputes elsewhere – a fact which itself raises interesting questions about how the economic landscape's spatial structure may help or hinder the transfer of knowledge from place to place. What this all highlights, then, is that the invention and sustenance of tradition is itself spatially embedded and structured. But it also underscores the fact that migrating militants need a supportive milieu of local institutions and ways of living within which to become embedded if they are to be successful, as do local militants who may either be inventing their own traditions *ex nihilo* or drawing inspiration from those they see being articulated elsewhere. Given how political traditions may be spread across the economic landscape, it is obvious that labour migration – a deeply geographic phenomenon – is also an important element of worker praxis to contemplate.

Shelley (2007) suggests that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there were around 3 million migrants entering the OECD countries legally every year, with many more entering illegally. He does, however, point to many states 'tolerating', if not actually encouraging, illegal migrants. For its part, the ILO has argued that the causes of rising transnational migration are: the disappearance of livelihoods through the loss of public sector jobs; decline of traditional industries; loss of agricultural competitiveness and the elimination of job protection because of World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes. May et al (2006), however, provide a more spatially sensitive analysis. Developing Sasken's notion of global cities, in investigating migrant labour in London they present evidence for a growing occupational polarisation and the emergence of a new migrant division of labour, and further highlight the role of the British state in shaping this divide. Policies of labour market de-regulation, welfare 'reform' and of 'managed migration' have helped create a new reserve army of labour in London consisting mainly of low-paid migrant workers. May et al also point to the effect of recruitment through personal contact leading to a tendency towards ethnic segregation at the bottom end of the labour market. More theoretically, Kelly (2009) argues that there are four spatialities involved in the process of migration and labour market integration. The first relates to the territorial regulatory spaces in which labour import and export are established – including immigration controls etc. The second concerns the spaces of home or social reproduction that are intimately linked to immigrants' experiences of the workplace and the labour market. The third spatiality is within the workplace and concerns the hierarchies which are established and enforced, often based on access to certain workplaces or space within them. Finally, global capitalism in both its contemporary and historical forms underpins all these spatialities. Past forms have left a legacy of racialised and gendered hierarchies whilst the

processes of uneven development have defined the unequal relationship between places, such that labour flows move in one direction rather than another.

### **Resistance**

The issue of worker resistance is obviously important, but particularly because of its spatiality. However, whereas matters of spatiality have often been reduced to a single explanatory factor with regard to worker resistance (the ability to control a particular place or the ability to ‘jump scale’ from a local to a national level of action are seen as key to success), as Leitner et al (2008: 169) have argued, there is no single component of spatiality that trumps all others. Rather,

a variety of spatialities (place, scale, networks, positionality and mobility) matter for the imaginaries, material practices and trajectories of contentious politics. Scale is one of these, particularly given the scaled nature of political and economic structures, but the spatialities of contentious politics cannot be reduced to scale or any other spatial ‘master concept’. No single spatiality should be privileged since they are co-implicated in complex ways, often with unexpected consequences for contentious politics.

The issue of the scale at which workers organise is important because contemporary restructuring, based on a neoliberal agenda, has often led (perhaps paradoxically) to both a decentralisation and a supra-nationalisation of social life and institutions of state control. Hence, as Turnbull (2006: 309) argues, European integration means that unions are increasingly having to establish themselves as pan-European entities. However, this may mean they are increasingly faced with the possibility of losing touch with their rank and file. Upscaling their activities, then, might then lead to a suppression of political alternatives and mobilisation capacity. At the same time, though, if they focus too much on local scales of praxis they may develop strategies that are too parochial to deal with transnationally organised capital. In this context how unions go about constructing new geographical scales of organisation so as to face the challenges confronting them is a central element of their political praxis. However, it is important to recognise that workers and unions are not free to construct new scales of organisation just as they wish, for both capital and the state may have quite different sets of ideas as to what is the most appropriate geographical level – the local, the national, the supranational – at which to conduct collective bargaining. Hence, for instance, in countries like the US and Australia the state has been active in seeking to localise collective bargaining as a way to facilitate capital’s ability to whipsaw plants and communities against each other. The growing role of the state in such activities certainly destroys the myth that states are neutral and passive victims of the forces of globalisation and, more importantly, means that the state – which is itself, of course, spatially configured into local governments and a space-economy contained within national boundaries – will be a prime target for worker actions.

Such transformations in the spatial scales at which collective bargaining is regulated, though, may open up new possibilities as well as present new challenges. This is especially so because rather than a general crisis of trade unionism, what has occurred is a crisis of a specific, narrowly based *type* of trade unionism – typically, one narrowly focused upon workplace matters and ‘bread and butter’ issues. Simultaneously, the internationalisation of work and employment, in the state sector as well as elsewhere,

reinforces the relevance and salience of international awareness and the necessity of trans-border links and concerted action. Hence, one response has been to look to supranational agencies, specifically Global Union Federations. However, in reviewing the state of global labour organising, a number of activists from the International Union of Foodworkers have concluded that its actual practice remains sparse and unsystematic (Garver et al 2007). However, in reviewing the experience of the Nestlé/Coca-Cola Global organising project, they have suggested that spatial matters are paramount – they have been particularly sensitive to how various spatial scales are interconnected and have argued for a new approach to connect the global with the local, calling for fewer international meetings and an increase in resources to put ‘boots on the ground’ in the form of full time regional co-ordinators. Another tactic to connect the global and the local, though, has been what is known as ‘community unionism’.

### **Community Unionism**

Building solidarity with community groups and social movements is central to a new form of unionism which has been variously labelled ‘social movement unionism’ or ‘community unionism’ (although we would argue that there are significant differences between the two forms). Significantly, this form is about transforming the spatial relationship between the workplace and what goes on beyond it – whereas more traditional models of unionism tended to treat the workplace as if it were somehow hermetically sealed off from what goes on around it, with the focus being upon workplace-defined bargaining units and wages and conditions of work, community unionism/ social movement unionism seeks deliberately to break down such spatial barriers to make deliberative links between the workplace and the broader economic landscape within which it sits. An emerging literature, then, recognises the growing importance of unions moving beyond the workplace and engaging with communities and there are numerous studies, mostly from the US, which explore the linkages between unions and community groups. Wills (2001: 466) argues that there are four gains that unions make by forging common cause with community groups and political campaigns;

- Community initiatives are able to tackle issues of justice that stretch beyond any particular workplace.
- Unions are able to reach non-union workers who have been traditionally marginalised from trade unions.
- Unions are able to reach low paid, contingent manufacturing, and service workers who are often employed in small workplaces, which have been difficult to reach with traditional organising methods.
- The community can be invaluable in defending traditional workplace trade union organisation.

However, such efforts have been criticised for allegedly having some serious weaknesses, including that successful examples are few and far between and that models developed in one socio-spatial context (the US) may not be geographically transferable to other contexts (say, the UK) (Taylor & Mathers 2008). Hence, Clawson (2003: 23) cautions against neglecting traditional union tactics in favour of social movement tactics:

If unions substitute law suits and press conferences for their greatest source of power – the participation and solidarity of millions of members able to disrupt the economic functioning of the system – it will further undercut the unique promise of the labour movement. But if unions are able to combine the new style and tactics with the mass mobilization characteristic of unions at their best this would create an awesome political force whose potential is only now being explored.

In thinking about ways to connect the global with the local, Martin Smith, Head of Organising at the GMB in the UK, argues that if unions cannot support transnational migrant workers and help them build solidarity with UK workers, then they must ask themselves what their role is in the globalising economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Certainly, such efforts do not mean that workplace-based organising can be ignored. But, although organising may be based on workplaces, to be successful in such contexts it may require new branches to be set up specifically for particular communities as a starting point, a strategy the GMB has pursued by founding community branches where workers are contacted through bars, churches and internet cafes (see No Sweat [nd] and see also Shelley 2007).

Although old occupational communities may be breaking down, it is perhaps too simplistic to argue that the ‘new workplace’ may be the community, as workers increasingly live lives that are fragmented and isolated from each other. Equally the growing geographical isolation of the wealthy from the poor in discrete locations suggests that rather than the death of community per se, a complex geographical restructuring of urban space in particular is taking place, one which will require sophisticated analysis if connection is to be made between that and restructured workplace union organisation. Lopez (2004: 12) goes further and points out that in distinguishing community unionism from the organising model it is important to realise that this involves not simply a shopping list of tactics, but is rather a process of change within the labour movement itself, leading to a vision of participatory powerful unions that is very different from the old (US) varieties and in which the spatiality of organising is quite different – for instance, in the case of the SEIU in the US, organising has often been across whole labour markets rather than individual workplaces (Savage 1998). For Clawson (2003:92), though, social movement or community unionism may actually simply be a new old form of organising, recreating forms of struggle that would be familiar to activists 50, 100 or even 150 years ago. However, it does represent a paradigmatic break with the recent past as it seeks to connect the democratic basis of the organising model to an alternative vision of society based on equality strategies, the reaffirmation of class-based identities and a celebration of the primacy of rank-and-file trade unionism (Schenk 2003). The task, then, is to articulate union issues in a framework of community needs and thereby overcome sectional self-interests. This vision extends beyond the workplace to the labour movement and society as a whole. In practice, Lopez (2004: 19) argues, such a commitment to social justice and making campaigns more than simply a union matter can help overcome internal union organisational blocks and help overcome members’ servicing expectations. Crawford & Ladd (2003: 55) suggest that bringing the community development philosophy into debates on union renewal, combined with an examination of a spatial restructuring of strategy by seeking to work

across worksites, elevates an understanding of community unionism as working-class resistance that is simultaneously anti-racist, socialist and feminist.

### **Representing Scale**

Finally, we turn to the matter of geographical scale, for much of the talk about unions in recent years has revolved around the ‘necessity’ for them to rescale their geographical resolutions of operation, either decentralising to the local level to be more responsive to local conditions or scaling up to the global level to be able to confront transnational corporations. Issues of how spatial scales are represented discursively, then, have played an important part in efforts to understand how the world is scaled and how social actors’ praxis is structured. For instance, scales are often seen as areal spatial units, with scales such as ‘the local’ or ‘the national’ frequently represented as, for instance, a rung on a ladder (whereby one moves ‘up’ the scalar hierarchy from ‘the local’ to ‘the global’) or, perhaps, one of a series of concentric circles (in which one moves ‘out’ from ‘smaller’ scales, as when moving from ‘the local’ to ‘larger’ scales like ‘the global’, with the latter ‘encircling’ the former). What is important here is that although these two representations are in some way quite different – the ladder metaphor is a vertical representation of scale whilst the circle metaphor is a horizontal representation – they do have some similarities as both conceive of different scales as spatially discrete things, such that ‘the local’ and ‘the global’ are separate rungs/ circles. Hence, in the ladder metaphor ‘the global’ appears ‘above’ the other scales, whereas in the circle metaphor it ‘encompasses’ them. This has implications for conceptualising workers’ efforts to, for instance, rescale their actions from the local to the national scale. Taking this further, instead of viewing scale in terms of areal boundaries which circumscribe particular territorial units, some writers have proposed that a more useful metaphor views scales in terms of networks, in which geographical scales are seen not as spatially discrete and separate levels or spheres of social life but, rather, as ways of describing ‘networks that are by nature neither local or global, but are [instead] more or less long and more or less connected’ (Latour, 1993: 122). In such a view, then, it is still possible to recognise that different scales exist but it is much more difficult to determine exactly where one scale ends and another begins. Such matters of how we think about scale ontologically and discursively, then, transform dramatically how we think about the relationships between different scales and what it might mean to talk about such practices as ‘scale jumping’, ‘rescaling’, ‘scaling-up’/ ‘scaling-down’, ‘centralising’/ ‘decentralising’, ‘going global’/ ‘going local’, ‘thinking globally’ but ‘acting locally’, and the like. In turn, this impacts how we theorise work and employment practices – for instance, trying to organise against transnational corporations which are perceived to be ‘global’ is quite a different prospect psychologically than trying to organise against those which are perceived to be ‘merely’ ‘multi-locational’ and may lead workers to adopt utterly different tactics and strategies.

As Castree et al argue (2004: 8) the increasingly stretched nature of social relationships between place-based workers across national and supranational space can take a variety of forms. This generates for workers a complex landscape of geographical difference and interdependence, which in turn creates dilemmas of scale – at what level(s) are accommodation or resistance to be organised or imagined? The conclusion to be drawn from this, then, is that the geographical scale at which action should be taken to defend working conditions is always relative and contingent. In most cases worker or

union activity will be place-based – usually focused on the workplace – but the increasing scale(s) of economic activity demand(s) that new spatial structures be developed by labour to counter the power of capital's (often) superior command of space. From the local to the global has to mean more than simply upscaling forms of action, for the process is more dialectical than the phrase perhaps suggests. It is not a linear process neither is it an either/or choice. It is dependent on the spatial situation in which workers find themselves and may involve a mix of organising approaches.

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