

# Uneven Development Redux

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I am very grateful to all of the contributors to this symposium – Emily Eaton; Julie Guthman; Nik Heynen, Peter Hossler and Andrew Herod; and Mazen Labban – for their generosity, not just in taking time to pass comment on *Uneven Development* (UD) but to do so with such critical magnanimity. I will resist the temptation to respond to most of the points but let me begin with a couple of engagements addressed directly to the comments, before taking a wider view. This article briefly picks up on several comments made in this exchange concerning the book *Uneven Development*, then raises several issues that emerge from the original arguments and extend the theory in light of empirical shifts over the last quarter of a century.

**Keywords:** uneven development

While in *Uneven Development* (UD) I did spend some time theorising social reproduction into the equation of uneven development, it was, as Nik Heynen et al. suggest, insufficient and, as Julie Guthman picks up on, this discussion had little material grounding in the human body. In fact, I was significantly influenced by the feminist movement from the 1970s but that movement was not as advanced as it became in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, I would venture that the heavy theoretical emphasis on the body in these later decades, while opening up many important questions, also ironically helped diffuse a valuable radicalism and organisational intent. Too often it cast a disproportionate focus on the individual, often at the expense of collective action.

Related and more generally, and this might count as auto-critique, I would suggest that the theory of scale proposed in the first edition today seems a bit wooden, especially in light of the discussions and debates over scale in the last 25 years, but for me it was a first halting stab at something I sensed was vital yet still lacked even basic theorisation. I fully agree with Julie Guthman concerning the need to theorise the body in this context, along with the household, and I have ventured in this direction in some subsequent work. Indeed, I have learned a lot on precisely this point from the work of Donna Haraway, especially concerning her path-breaking insistence on ‘the body as an accumulation strategy’. But by the

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same token, I think we need to be careful about how this is accomplished. It is not so much the body per se that is the issue for me – that may have been the fetish that a certain thread of 1990s postmodern cultural theory encouraged – but the more or less fungible social relations within which social bodies and their meanings (a point pressed home by Emily Eaton) are variously made, and conversely how these bodies themselves (not to leave behind the mind) can collectively transform social relations. I think this is Haraway's point too – an understanding of how the body is implicated in capital accumulation and at the same time a means of revolt. This obviously connects to the observation that a greater space needs to be made for challenges to capitalism. Some of this can be accessed through questions of social reproduction and labour; production in all its multifold forms, as well as consumption, (re)produces the body and, as Julie says, a wide swath of everyday life is involved in this dialectic.

I am not sure I have been able to disentangle entirely what Mazen Labban is trying to argue, but let me have a stab at it. First, I think Mazen is arguing that UD advances a 'dualism between nature and space' but that was never the intent in UD. Thus chapter 3 begins: 'Unless space is conceptualized as a quite separate reality from nature, the production of space is a logical corollary of the production of nature.' Further, the whole point of the later discussion of scale is to accomplish the imbrication of space and nature in practice. That is, scale can be seen as the metric which organises spatial differentiation such that it is possible to recognise the substantive differences (the different and differently produced social natures) of one place vis-à-vis another, and therefore the coincident production and reproduction of such spatio-environmental differences. Second, there is a claim that in UD 'the space of production' is somehow separated from 'the physical space of nature', the location of nature separate from the location of capital. But that argument surely cannot be sustained. The entire point of placing labour at the heart of the production of nature (a crucial argument which I think Mazen avoids) was, among other things, to fix the mutuality of capital, space and nature. Whether in direct extraction or in some derivative process, social labour simultaneously alters the form of natural material and human nature alike. In fact, one of the things I say to graduate students almost on an annual basis is that someone has to go back and work out the intellectual and political history of how 'we' (the Enlightenment-educated West) came to separate space from nature in the first place. This was a central if not always obvious intent of UD; it involves a tight dialect between historical geography and the history of geographical thought. There is a lot more that could be said here on the reading of 'centralisation' and 'concentration' or on the politics that obviously inhere in economics – capitalist economics is as much the result of socio-political class divisions, for example, as the source of their reproduction – but it may be more worthwhile to focus on more positive arguments.

In admittedly abstract terms, the theory of uneven development suggested a see-saw movement of capital, already evident in a gentrification process which has today ballooned into a global and systemic rather than local and incidental event, but the meteoric economic expansion of China, India, Brazil, Korea and various other economies in South America and Asia (no longer marginalised with the postwar moniker 'Third World') would seem to bear out this argument

at other scales too. As regards China, it should be clear now that it is only a matter of time before the Communist Party inverts Lenin and declares capitalism in fact to be the highest stage of communism. But that wasn't so clear in the early 1980s. Today the evidence seems overwhelming that disinvestment and underdevelopment create the opportunity for their opposite and the flood of capitalist investment and (re)development – creative destruction indeed in a tersely geographical register. In all of this, there is no way to get around class as some have recently attempted. With a few notable and not necessarily supportable exceptions, the leaders of almost all countries – rich and poor alike, New York to Lagos, London to Brasilia, Beijing to Pretoria – subscribed to the soporific addiction of neoliberal ideologies. Here we need to ask the hard questions about how even national liberation movements transmuted into a socially divisive and at times violent neoliberalism, and this inevitably takes us back to Frantz Fanon and the limits of such national liberation movements.

So what's going on here as regards uneven development? If the see-saw theory looks more not less applicable empirically, what are we to make of sub-Saharan Africa? This region largely remains an outsider, still widely redlined in the world of global finance. It might even seem to be the enigma of global uneven development. And yet Chinese investment is dramatically expanding throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa – resource mines and port facilities, land grabs and factories – even as US capital largely ignores this region. The exception of course is North Africa which in English-language geography gets grouped into the 'Middle East'. This racist and imperial geographical description is hilariously evident when we recall that Morocco, for example, has territory further west than mainland Spain or even Ireland. In fact Chinese government-organised capital investment begins to look a lot more progressive, geographically more revolutionary (in capitalism's own terms) than US or even European capital. Not to mention that China simultaneously holds more than a trillion dollars of debt for a highly vulnerable US financial economy, has become the world's second largest economy, and now represents, for better or worse, a stark counterpoint to US political *cum* economic power at a global scale. By the same token, the growing radicalism and organisation of Chinese workers makes it a significant pole of class struggle.

The other shift that has taken place in patterns of uneven development at the global scale is obviously the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, mostly between 1989 and 1991. There too, capitalism has hit like a tsunami, and in most places little is left of the old state regimes. Whereas the state structure of the Balkans and of South-West Asia has fragmented, Germany has reunited, and the absorption of various East European states, new and old, into the European Union, not to mention migration from Africa and Asia, together with internal European migration, have re-sculpted the socio-economic and political geographies of this region.

This is of course a familiar story; less in focus is the local scale involved in this new round of uneven development. The remaking of Beijing, Shanghai and Mumbai, and of other cities in Asia and elsewhere, suggests a global scale gentrification of cities that could not really have been imagined in New York, London, Sydney or Philadelphia as late as the 1990s. Gentrification is a central part of this localisation of uneven development and of global struggles, yet this process has

itself transformed (and not just through an increase in scale). Gentrification today has blossomed into a full-blooded global city-building strategy. This has happened unevenly to be sure. Yet from the United States where privatisation and the gutting of public housing provision opened up gentrification as the *de facto* housing policy as early as the 1980s, to Europe where ‘regeneration’ became the naturalising euphemism of choice in the 1990s, to Asia where massive state-organised urban construction and reconstruction remakes the landscapes of twenty-first century cities in the image of dramatically expanding class differences, gentrification is now a ventricle of capital accumulation. The resulting patterns of uneven geographies at the local scale are very different from those observable three decades ago.

There’s also the question of the nation-state. The 1990s saw a barrage of arguments that globalisation was dismantling or eroding the power of the national state. Today we understand better that the national state has in many places been the central vehicle of neoliberal policy and that if anything the post-2007 global economic meltdown fortified the power of some national states if not others. This will be a crucial nexus of uneven development research in the future, especially as research focuses on the security state. It will involve the intensified militarisation of the national state. But there is also the global state. The financial and broader economic meltdown has seriously damaged globalisation, but not by any means fatally so, and as of this writing it is dramatically unclear whether an imminent second recession will actually materialise in a haunting repeat of the 1930s. What *is* clear is that the raft of institutions created as a global state architecture amidst and in the wake of World War II – the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), GATT – all initially languished in the shadow of the US/Soviet cold war and aggressive decolonisation movements, yet by the 1990s these global institutions experienced a dramatic revival. GATT for example morphed into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, and the power of the World Bank, IMF and WTO became sufficiently trenchant that, especially after the so-called Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, they became for some years the objects of anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist demonstrations. That global economic architecture will not be eroded easily. Nor will the extraordinarily repressive capacity of the state, opportunistically clamping down political dissent especially after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005. In coming years, these shifts will reshape uneven development in ways not yet clear.

Some of the patterns of uneven development, global to local, were predictable in the early 1980s but many others were not. When we made the decision to issue a third edition, I was on the edge of thinking that a new book was really what was required. Yet it seemed like a massive task. I do think this would be a highly useful project today. Yet so much work has been done in the last 25 years that it would be an immense challenge. The central argument I would still like to make is that we need to understand the varied patterns and processes of uneven development across geographical scales. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the ways that a mortgage crisis in the United States became almost immediately a global economic and financial meltdown. Even more to the point, this has become a social crisis for that part of the world not already in social crisis; for those already in social crisis it only became more so. In many ways, and perhaps

linking together some of these commentaries above, this economic crisis mutated into a social crisis, conveyed via the local/global economy, but affecting every nook and cranny of daily life. The answer will necessarily be social and certainly political, but along the way it will have to evict the economic conveyor belt of capitalist common sense which lurches the social body from crisis to crisis.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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