Classics in human geography revisited


Commentary 1

Neil Smith’s *Uneven development* was published exactly 16 years ago. While I was rereading his text early in 1999, a number of stunning events were taking place, each of which could have served perfectly as examples to illustrate the points Neil explores in the book. Britain’s main media were debating the politics, economics, ethics and health issues of growing and consuming genetically modified crops. The Steven Lawrence murder inquiry report showed the pervasive and structural faces of institutionalized racism (as if a report was needed to figure that out). The Kurdish leader, Apo Ochalan, was abducted by a terrorist Mossad–CIA alliance and surrendered to a state with a human rights record equal to that of Sadam Hoessein. The mildly upbeat news was that a British court ruled that workers should not be forced to work more than 48 hours (!?) per week.

The theses developed in *Uneven development* not only help in framing these events, but also convincingly show and argue how and why they hang together. Grasping the connections between genetically modified species, racism, class struggle and international geopolitics is exactly what this book is all about. Indeed, it seems to me that the full impact and implications of what Neil was addressing in *Uneven development* are just now becoming so general and pervasive that a reassessment of his work is quite rightly on the agenda.

There are a number of things that make this book a classic text. First, its impact has been great far beyond the narrow confines of geography as a discipline. Few other geography texts have been used and cited so widely in a variety of fields, from the social sciences to cultural studies and the humanities. While geographers have, for a long time, argued for the difference that space makes theoretically and practically, Neil’s contribution has made this message heard loud and clear in many other disciplines. Its impact has of course a lot to do with the exquisite exposé and the sophisticated mode of argumentation. What makes this book stand out among the plethora of Marxist texts of that time is exactly the accessible, yet sophisticated, manner in which historical-geographical materialist modes of inquiry and theorizations are explored and presented. While many geographers and other social scientists have paid lip service to Marxist analyses, Neil Smith has thoroughly understood the foundations of historical-geographical materialism. The argument unfolding in *Uneven development* is a prime
example of dialectical argumentation and a textbook example of how to practise this. Very few are capable of showing with such ease and pervasiveness the power of dialectics in the construction of representations of the world. Uneven development argued convincingly that historical-geographical theorizations may indeed attempt the construction of a total theory (in the sense that everything hangs together with everything else), but also showed that a total theory is not necessarily a totalizing one. In fact, Neil demonstrates how capitalism and the dynamics of capitalist society are, of necessity, inherently heterogeneous, conflicting, diverse and differentiated, while – at the same time – insisting on the forces of equalization and systematic domination.

In addition, long before deconstructionist and postmodern modes of argumentation became the fad of the day, Neil suggested how the powers of ideology, representation and metaphor (discourse in today’s jargon) are a real material force in shaping sociospatial practices. It is indeed not a coincidence that the first chapter of the book addresses the ‘Ideology of nature’. The excavation of the contradictions of dominant bourgeois representations of nature in capitalist societies forms the foundation for tackling what I believe to be the first of three major contributions this book makes, i.e. theorizing ‘the production of nature’. While at the time of its writing the notion of ‘producing nature’ may have sounded rather opaque and confusing, the recent polemics about the reconstructions of nature and the making of new ‘natures’ bring out forcefully what Neil argued in the second chapter of the book. The dabbling with recombinant genes, the controversies over the production of new ‘natural’ environments, the rise of the environmental movement as well as the recent theoretical work of, for example, Donna Harraway (1997), David Harvey (1996) or the edited collection by Braun and Castree (1998), suggest how important this debate is, both politically and theoretically. Not only does the notion of ‘the production of nature’ belong squarely to the heart of geography, but it also addresses what is arguably the single most important process in the contemporary process of capitalist restructuring in which reconfigurations of the environment, and the politics associated with the construction of new ‘natures’, take centre-stage.

It is only a small step, then, from considering ‘the production of nature’ to ‘the production of space’, a theme first explored by Henry Lefebvre (1974/1989), but expanded and reformulated in Neil’s theorizations of uneven development. What Neil, of course, adds to our understanding is how ‘the production of space’ is not only a historical-geographical process shaped by the dynamics of sociospatial relations, but also how nature and the environment – as historically scripted and materially articulated geographical etchings – are an integral part of the capitalist production of space.

The second main contribution the book makes revolves around uneven geographical development and the necessary character of spatial unevenness under capitalism. Once again, it is the internally conflicting, heterogeneous and differentiated sociospatial dynamic of capitalism that drives processes of both equalization and differentiation, resulting in a restless, but deeply uneven, process of perpetual socioenvironmental transformations. In these chapters, Neil shows how capitalism is an inherently geographical project, implicitly arguing that any politics of transcending capitalism through an emancipatory political programme has to be a geographical project as well.

The third, and arguably most important, contribution is Neil’s attempt at constructing a theory of spatial scale. It is here that the threads woven in the earlier chapters come together in their most effective manner. Spatial ‘scale’ has, together with the
environment, been central to geography as an academic project. Not only does Neil open up a theoretical avenue to explore and understand these key processes (i.e., the making of the environment and the making of geographical scale), but he also simultaneously demonstrates the fundamentally political nature of both scale and the environment. Geography becomes for him ‘an active political process’ (p. ix) in which the body, the urban, the regional, the national and the global become produced and intertwined as perpetually shifting landscapes where multiple choreographies of class, racial and/or gender power relations, of domination and subordination, are played out and struggles for empowerment and control unfold. In contrast to the fashionable discursive deconstructions of the body, the city or indeed the globe that litter today’s geographical literature, Neil’s theorization of spatial scales and their articulation suggests how sociospatially, discursively and materially, constructed bodies, places, cities, regions and worlds interrelate to produce often deeply disturbing and highly uneven geographical configurations.

But at the end of the day, what makes this book truly different from many others – and even more powerful today than at the time of its writing – is the commitment to a political project. It is a project that revolves around ‘big issues’ of the kind exemplified above. If anything, the intellectual engagement to grapple with ‘big issues’ desperately needs reviving if geographers aim to be more than the lackeys of the Prince. We may disagree over the enduring relevance of a Marxist interpretation of the world, but a genuine and committed intellectual agenda, combined with a ‘principled’ political position of the kind that Neil’s academic and political project stood and stands for, is what makes any academic project worth while pursuing. In fact, the current conditions in many parts of the world do not demand less from a self-respecting discipline. Uneven development provides a small pointer on the way of producing, both conceptually and practically, a ‘genuinely humanizing geography’ (Harvey, 1973). And of course, to use Neil’s words, ‘capitalism has always been a fundamentally geographic project. It may not be too soon to suggest, and I hope not too late, that the revolt against capitalism should itself be “planning something geographical”’ (2nd edn, p. 178).

Oxford University

Erik Swyngedouw


Commentary 2

That a book a mere 16 years old should already be accorded ‘classic’ status is symptomatic of the accelerating turnover time of ideas in academia. For me at least, the mid-1980s do not seem very far away at all. I vividly recall buying Uneven development on a dark December day in Oxford. The purchase was a big deal. For financial reasons...
I didn’t buy many academic books as an undergraduate and the only copies Blackwells had were in hardback. On top of this, I’d only read one thing by Neil Smith at the time: an essay on Marx and nature co-authored with Phil O’Keefe. It was enough to persuade me, though, and *Uneven development* duly made it on to my book-shelf. During the Christmas vacation I read and reread the dense and often counterintuitive arguments packed into its 150 something pages. The hardback subsequently became so tatty and scribbled on from use that I later bought the second edition when a graduate student at the University of British Columbia.

I recount all this with a sense of immediacy, rather than nostalgia. *Uneven development* remains as much a landmark contribution today as it was in 1984. Indeed, with the passing of time (and the reconstitution of space, place and nature) the power and relevance of its author’s arguments seem to have grown rather than diminished. This fact says much about the fundamental nature of Smith’s insights – for *Uneven development* was, of course, an analysis of the basic structure and geography of capitalism rather than any of its conjunctural forms. Where more concrete analyses might have dated quite rapidly, the abstractions of *Uneven development* retain a freshness and contemporaneity to the extent that capitalism and its ‘satanic geographies’ (Smith, 1997) are driven by a set of relatively invariant processes and logics that will doubtless endure long into the twenty-first century.

Of course, Smith’s decision to theorize these processes and logics from a Marxian perspective would meet with far less approval today than it did in 1984. Sixteen years ago, *Uneven development* was a major contribution to the development and consolidation of Marxist geography as a leading postpositivist paradigm. Complementing Harvey’s *The limits to capital* (1982) (for me among the two or three most brilliant and original pieces of theoretical analysis in modern human geography), Smith sought to show why Marxism was relevant to geography and geography to Marxism. And it worked: for *Uneven development* offers a compelling account of why space is central to capital’s survival and why capitalist development is necessarily, rather than just contingently, uneven. But, alas, at the time it only really worked in geography. For, like *The limits*, *Uneven development* had little immediate impact on Marxists outside the discipline. The sociology of academic influence was such that Anglophone historical materialists seemed to need a ‘heavy-weight’ like Lefebvre to persuade them of what Harvey and Smith had been saying for years – namely, that we need to think in terms of historical geographical materialism. Hence the seemingly sudden and generalized interest in space (albeit often metaphorical) following the translation of *The production of space* in 1991, the same year as *Uneven development* was quietly reissued as a second edition for the benefit of geographers who already knew well the aporias of aspatial social theory.

The irony of the reissue, of course, is that it occurred at the moment when Marxism in geography became the subject of a concerted attack by critics on the left as much as the right. In retrospect, the seven years between the first and second editions of *Uneven development* mark the period between Marxist geography’s arrival as a mature, fully-fledged perspective and the beginning of its demise. This is an incredibly short period and should serve as a corrective to those non-Marxist geographers who argue that Marxism was somehow an entrenched and self-satisfied orthodoxy within the discipline by the early 1990s. As I intimated above, the turnover time of ideas in academia is now so fast that their sell-by dates are, it seems, measured
in weeks and months rather than years and decades.

But this said, what is interesting about *Uneven development* – indeed about Smith’s work more generally – is that it did not attract the kind of post or anti-Marxist censure that, say, Harvey’s work did from the early 1990s onwards. At first sight, this is odd. After all, *Uneven development* was replete with the kind of ‘modern’ tropes that postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial critics of Marxism have delighted in dissecting. But there was something else going on in *Uneven development* too. Somehow, the dialectic of equalization and differentiation at the centre of the theory of uneven development seemed less rigorous and closed than in those orthodox Marxisms that have attracted the animus of geographical critics since the early 1990s. Though capital and class remained central to Smith’s exposition, the duality of labour that conjoined the here and there, the local and the global, the concrete and the particular gestured towards an open intellectual-political terrain wherein capitalism’s putative ‘interiors’ were always already interfused with its ‘exteriors’. Perhaps the critics of Marxism in geography sensed this and saw, as I do in Smith’s subsequent work, that one can adumbrate a strong version of historical-geographical materialism while still being acutely sensitive to issues of gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, sexuality and so on.

Whatever the reason, *Uneven development* has largely survived the rigours of the after-Marxist turn in geography. Today it still enjoys healthy rates of citation. It also remains widely cited too, by which I mean that it crops up in all manner of debates within human geography. And this speaks to one other enduring strength of the book: it’s multiple and interlinked story lines. Though the topic of uneven development was cleary the theoretical centrepiece of Smith’s treatise, it was woven into a wider set of arguments which could (and, with one exception, subsequently did) stand alone as significant conceptual contributions. I am thinking here of the notion of the ‘production of nature’, which now seems immensely prescient in the light of the new biotechnological developments reported in Rifkin’s (1998) recent polemic. I am thinking too of the related notion of ‘the ideology of nature’, which, alas, has been given little credence now that the concept of ‘discourse’ has eclipsed the seemingly outdated concept of ideology. I am thinking, thirdly, of the philosophical treatment of relative and absolute space which, when linked to Marx’s processual notion of internal relations, demonstrated so well why the spatial is social and the social spatial. And I am thinking, to offer a final example, of the notion of the ‘social production of scale’ which, over the last decade, has proved to be an important and fertile subject for geographical research. The range of these conceptual contributions is remarkable, especially for a book consisting of five relatively short chapters.

Let me end on a forward-looking and didactic note. In a typically memorable turn of phrase, Smith (1998: 271) has described the millennium as ‘an arbitrary moment of time . . . fixed with epochal significance’. But, arbitrary though it undoubtedy is, it does offer us human geographers a convenient opportunity to take stock and reflect on the state of our discipline (The Annals, for example, has had a ‘millennial number’). In this respect, I think *Uneven development* can help us look back to the future in at least two ways. First, as economic geography has become dominated by meso-level and empirical studies, and as human geography has experienced a wider ‘cultural turn’, the kind of abstract political economy Smith dealt with in 1984 has been put on the backburner. It is almost as if ‘capitalism’ has become so familiar an object of analysis for the left of human geography that there has been a loss of interest in explicitly theorizing its
basic structures and forms. The danger here – as Sayer (1995) and Gibson-Graham (1996) have shown in very different ways – is that we assume capitalism as an already-understood context or background when, in fact, we need to continue debating and conceptualizing its nature and forms in a way Smith encouraged us to do 16 years ago (cf. Castree, 1999). Secondly, it is easy to overlook the fact – and the importance of the fact – that Uneven development, like pretty much of all Smith’s work, was very well written. The prose was clear, periodic and, at times, passionate, rather than jargony, mandarin and abstruse. Though Uneven development was hardly an easy read, it was thus at least readable. This is far from trivial, because the left of human geography will always remain detached from constituencies beyond the university precints if it cannot speak to them intelligibly and persuasively. This is not to argue for a wholly colloquial style of geographical writing, but it is to say the kind of direct and unfussy prose Smith deployed to such good effect 16 years ago is far better model for left geography today than some of the precious animadversions that have accompanied the cultural turn.

University of Liverpool

Noel Castree


Author’s response

I am very grateful to Erik Swyngedouw and Noel Castree for their characteristic generosity in these comments on Uneven development. Theirs was the most difficult assignment: to be trained as a critic, ready to pounce at the first discrepancy, and yet to write an appreciation that delicately avoids the many faults of the book. Inevitably, perhaps, given all that has happened since 1984, I have thought of writing an updated version of the arguments in the book and I think I would write it a bit differently today. Erik and Noel are kind to suggest that the abstraction of the argument, deriving a theory of uneven development from Marx’s critique of capitalism, is part of its merit, and I concur entirely with the warning about the current marginalization of economic analysis and the need to reconnect to political economy. But I also share with them a sense that the vividness and violence of uneven development today, and the vistas opened up by cultural politics, make a more evocative analysis both possible and necessary.

My favorite indicator of just how much things have changed since the early 1980s
concerns the role of the estate in the global economy. In those days, socialists, feminists, anti-imperialist and anti-nuclear activists and many others were unabashedly critical of the capitalist state even if there was little agreement on what a theory of the state might look like. We understood it as an instrument of social reproduction, forging and reforging the contours of class, race and gender difference via strategies of social investment and repression, while it at the same time fueled the pump of capital accumulation. Fresh from reading Lenin, many of us even dared to take seriously the ‘withering away of the state’ amidst the tumult of an imagined socialist revolution. Today, however, the picture is utterly reversed. Socialists, feminists and, to a lesser extent, anti-racist activists are more likely to find themselves defending the remnants of specific national states whose apparatuses of social reproduction are being systematically dismantled. As for the ‘withering away of the state’, this trope has passed with apparent ease from Leninist dictum to Wall Street fantasy. The ‘end of the nation-state’ (Ohmae, 1995) is today a staple of business school courses in global finance, no longer a Marxist but a capitalist Utopia. The City and Wall Street now house the true Leninists.

But of course we are all aware that so-called globalization is anything but the end of geography and that only some parts of the state will wither while others are bolstered, if Wall Street gets its way. Still, the remaking of global capitalism since the 1970s has thrown up a world economy that looks more rather than less like the economy Marx critiqued. His simplifying assumptions of a single global economy and the expanding proletarianization of social relations of production (cf. east and southeast Asia) remain simplifying assumptions but they are far more realistic now than they were a century and a half ago. This in no way implies that the rhetorical Wall Street Utopia of an equalizing globalization is round the corner. Rather, equalization is always countered by differentiation, and uneven development results from precisely this dialectic of social and economic equalization and differentiation. If Uneven development points to some of the sources of this dialectic, the forms it now takes have changed dramatically, sometimes in predictable, sometimes in unpredictable ways. In short, it is vital to analyse the new dynamics of equalization and differentiation that lead to different landscapes of unevenness at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Intensified reinvestment in old urban centers, the decline of regions as the production platforms for national economies, the hollowing out of national economies (if not necessarily nation-states) and the integration of previously third-world economies into the global core were all adumbrated in the see-saw theory of uneven development. But more important are the changes that were missed: the intensity of economic and cultural globalization built around global production; the rapidity and intensity of the east and southeast Asian industrial revolution since the 1960s; the intense gendering of these new workforces, and the financial as well as productive integration of these as well as the Brazilian, Argentinian and Mexican economies toward the core of global capital: the repositing of urban political and economic power (and a revamping of the urban scale per se) in the global economy; the financial red-lining of sub-Saharan Africa; and the reassertion of defensive, violent nationalisms and fundamentalisms, from Rwanda to Serbia. These all represent specific expressions of uneven development that are not well accounted for in the original theory. They may represent significant historical breaks, and yet are quite consistent with the theory of uneven development. Anchored in the structural makeup of capitalist society, uneven development is far from an unproblematic, linear, continuous expression of these social relations.
The 1999 war by and against Serbia, for example, presents a wholly new expression of uneven development. The reawakening of ultra-nationalist aspirations for a Greater Serbia owes not only to the erosion of a centralized communist state after 1991 and the re-expression of identitarian differences and repressions – predominantly religious and ethnic – strongly rooted in specific territorial claims. It also results from the economic and social disruption accompanying sudden immersion in a viciously competitive global economy and the visceral threats to economic and cultural identity that follow. By the same token, the NATO war had less to do with preventing genocide and ethnic cleansing against Kosovar Muslims – it clearly exacerbated this – than with military enforcement of a certain global ‘equalization’ of political and economic conditions in the most volatile quadrant of an economically pivotal yet struggling Europe. The most agreeable short-term result would presumably be bilateral defeat – military globalism and incipient Serb fascism mutually disabled may yet transpire.

As Erik and Noel both suggest, the dramatic transformation of global and local geographies in the last 16 years also highlights the urgency of a more theoretical conceptualization of geographical scale. For it is the rescaling of cultural, political and economic activities that orders the geographical expression of equalization and differentiation. As Erik Swyngedouw himself (1997) has pointed out, this simultaneous restructuring of global and local scale, and the partial hollowing out of the national scale in particular, invites more authoritarian power geometries. The Serbian war stands for the moment as the paradigmatic case.

But there are other theoretical reasons for wanting to revise and restate a theory of uneven development for the twenty-first century. For all that a spatial imagination has captured cultural politics – sometimes seriously, often superficially – and that the project of politicizing geographical space (and spatializing political analysis) now has unprecedented respect, the grander surveys of the twentieth century generally continue to write history as at best trivially geographical (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1994; White, 1996; for an exception, see Arrighi, 1994). Even those more intellectually and politically attuned to the dynamics of uneven development simply do not see the inherent and powerful spatial dynamics of geographical unevenness. It remains a political gestalt to their vision. Most perplexing, perhaps, is Bob Brenner (1998), whose painstaking analysis of uneven economic development in the latter half of the twentieth century is fatally flawed by the assumption that uneven development is little more than a question of different growth rates between separate national economies. I say ‘fatally flawed’ because Brenner’s lack of spatial theoretical imagination leads him to treat the global economy much as it was in 1970: the boxes of economic activity are all the same, only the specifics of certain national economies have changed. Of the restructuring of different scales, the partial erosion of national economic boundaries, transformed relations between local, regional and global, all of which fundamentally redefine the national scale, he is only dimly if at all aware. As a result, the significance of the most intense industrial revolution in history – east and southeast Asia after the 1960s – is lost to Brenner’s analysis of global capital as the focus remains doggedly on the USA, Japan and Germany. Spatial blindness abets eurocentrism.

If political economic analyses have fallen out of vogue in some quarters it is otherwise with analyses of nature, and so a second theoretical rationale for reworking a theory of uneven development today comes from the need to rebuild a socially revolutionary environmental politics. When the notion of ‘the production of nature’ was
coined it sounded like an absurdity, and its connection to the production of space was
deemed curious by not a few critics, spurious by others. But 16 years later social con-
structionism has left nothing unsocialized and the constructionist impulse has been
domesticated by a co-opted establishment environmentalism. Most scholars and
pundits ‘get it’; environmental managerialism is its own kind of social construction of
nature. But as the Sokal affair suggested, social constructionism has become a
shibboleth on the left too (although Social Text, as anyone familiar with it will know, was
an undeserving target). The materialism of the ‘production of nature’, with its focus on
social labor, builds in an antidote to the most idealist impulses of social construction-
ism, but at the same time focuses so centrally on social agency that the insights of
cultural constructionism can, if the will is there, be spliced together with the political
economic analyses of 1984.

Twenty-first century uneven development of global capital will bring its own
thrilling and violent surprises. The most important thing, presumably is never to lose
sight of the fact that the uneven geographies of capitalist development are all premised
on relative stability of very specific social relations of production and reproduction.
Quite apart from its own internal weaknesses – cf. the economic crisis after 1997 which
western pundits called ‘Asian contagion’ – the economic logics of uneven development
turn to jelly when the social and political assumptions, and associated structures, begin
to quake. The economy is not some fixed ‘base’ of society, as anti-Marxist critics like to
posit, but a ‘superstructure’ entirely susceptible to change. It would be a great pleasure
to see quakes of social revolt thoroughly negate the theory of uneven development and
to have to start again from a wholly different set of social assumptions to construct a

City University of New York

Neil Smith


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