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Locality Debates

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Introduction

The locality debates of the 1980s and 1990s were the most heated yet illuminating wrangles in human geography since those over ‘environmental determinism’ in the 1950s and the ‘quantitative revolution’ in the 1960s. The soul of the discipline seemed to be at stake, and the victory of the localities perspective over a desiccated and nihilistic structural marxism that had threatened to remove spatiality from other than an epiphenomenal ‘fix’ for capitalist accumulation proved final (Harvey, 1981). This observation may seem odd to those interested in and knowledgeable of the *dramatis personae* of the main vehicle fuelling the locality debates. This was the UK Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) research programme *The Changing Urban & Regional System in the UK* (CURS) which the present author coordinated. The very titles in the preceding sentence express the politics of the day. Formerly the Social Science Research Council, the name had been deliberately changed by Sir Keith Joseph, the Thatcherite Minister of Education & Science on the spurious grounds that social research was non-scientific. The echoes of notions like ‘scientific socialism’ probably also clanged in the nightmares of the Mad Monk, whose recanting of his interventionist past had so buttressed Thatcherism. As well as establishing the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies think-tank, Joseph was the man who insisted his chief civil servants read *The Wealth of Nations* before offering him policy advice in his first Thatcher government stint as Secretary of State for Industry 1979-1981.

The use of ‘Urban & Regional System’ as the object of inquiry of the ESRC research programme was also not entirely value-free. While city systems had been identified as early as Pred (1964) and such concepts influenced the quantitative revolution in geography (Haggett, 1965) and planning (McLoughlin, 1967) the associated mathematisation and behaviourism had produced little real *theoretical* or *policy* progress and were roundly criticised for this in a pathbreaking article by Doreen Massey (1979). Thus it was not enough to consider relations among cities in the absence of theory addressing their *regional* context and interactions. Moreover, the

insights of Manuel Castells (1977) into a differentiation between the *organisation* of industrial production being analytically *regional*, while that of consumption constituted the *urban* question had helpfully cleared much conceptual undergrowth. The coincidence of Massey's (1979) publication and the coming to power of the Thatcher and shortly after Reagan neoconservative governments was not circumstantial. Massey correctly foresaw how an absence of *theory* in the work of spatial scientists up to then had left industrial regions in particular, vulnerable to the application of neoconservative political ideology in which, fundamentally, money is treated as more important than people – excepting only those who make it. Behaviourist models and their designers melted away in observing the disastrous changes caused by Thatcherism in the UK, including inner-city riots across the country, the destruction of industrial relations law and the decimation of regional employment in industry.

In discussions at the ESRC Geography committee about the launching of a first research programme into the effects of the damage wrought, the Chair, Michael Wise of LSE is reported to have observed that as the geographical right had failed, now was the time to hand the intellectual torch to the left. This was to be under the intellectual stewardship of Wise's academic colleague, Doreen Massey, previously funded by an SSRC research fellowship to investigate the changing industrial geography of the UK. The original CURS programme committee, chaired by Brian Robson and including Massey, Noel Boaden, Derek Lyddon, Duncan Gallie and myself as well as such future academic administration luminaries as Howard Newby, was sufficiently left-leaning in 1984 to appoint the present author, then an avowed Gramscian (Cooke, 1983) as programme co-ordinator. Immediately charged with writing four theoretical and methodological programme-framing briefings, I re-discovered the postgraduate joys of burning the midnight oil. These were broadly set within a Massey-flavoured 'restructuring thesis' theoretical framework that arose from her fellowship findings (Massey, 1984).

Not surprisingly, many of the seven proposals finally selected for funding involved principal investigators familiar with a regional political economy approach, even though by no means all were economic geographers actively studying restructuring. Sociological teams such as that from Lancaster led by John Urry and Aston by Dennis

Smith joined sociologically inflected ones from Durham, Kent and Essex involving the likes of Huw Beynon in the Durham team (researching Middlesbrough) and urban sociologists Chris Pickvance, Nick Buck and Michael Harloe in the teams studying Thanet (including welfare sociologist Peter Taylor-Gooby) and Swindon respectively. Indeed, of the twenty-eight team-members contributing to the core text (Cooke, 1989) only seven (25%) were practising geographers. The other professional groupings were twelve sociologists (43%), seven planners (25%) and two economists (7%). The rather threadbare nature of theoretical economic geography at the time is thus revealed quite tellingly in these statistics. In what follows, the following lineaments and resonances of the locality debates will be elaborated upon. First, a fuller account of the origins of the localities analysis from the early 1980s will be attempted. Then the rise of locality studies and critical responses to the approach will be reviewed. Finally attention will be devoted to the long legacy of locality studies, which includes new regionalist research, urban cultural & consumption research and at a lesser level the 'scalar envelope' critique of spatiality in general.

Origins of Localities Analysis

In this section we will be concerned with three main issues. These are the following: first, the critique of regional industrial geography that heralded the turn towards theorised spatial analysis of the locality kind. Second a review of the importance of restructuring theory and recognition of ways in which 'local uniqueness' could be theorised in a general way by the development of local narratives within an encompassing theoretical discourse. Finally, reference will be made to this conspectus in relation to then ongoing debates in regional political economy.

For a considerable time there had been a rising sense of dissatisfaction with the products of – broadly neoclassical – theorems in economic geography and its sub-field of industrial geography. It echoed a more widespread sense of the failure of geography to offer a more theoretically engaging canvas for the study of spatiality. Among the earliest such critics were the likes of Gunnar Olsson (1975) who produced a first explicit critique of geography's new obsession with formalistic modelling, quantitative techniques and so-called 'spatial science'. A little later, Andrew Sayer (1976) produced a monograph entitled 'a critique of urban and regional modelling' which critiqued industrial geography for its reductionism, spatial determinism and,

accordingly, 'chaotic concepts'. About this time, radical urban and regional political economy associations had formed in the US and UK and these became the forum in both countries for the most advanced critique and re-theorisation of spatial issues, notably inequality and its causal mechanisms. The Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) group and its journal *Review of Radical Political Economics* was founded in 1968 in the US and attracted involvement by the likes of the late Bennett Harrison, a leading critical thinker of his day (see, for example, Harrison, 1974), Ann Markusen (1978), and Dick Walker (1978). In the UK, the Conference of Socialist Economists was founded in 1970, and from 1971 published *Bulletin of the CSE* which was in 1977 transformed into a refereed journal *Capital & Class* that, like its US counterpart, continues to thrive. Articles by economic geographers published in *Capital & Class* include those of Doreen Massey (1978) and Andrew Sayer (1986).

A key section of CSE was its 'Regionalism' group, which met regularly, usually at the Architectural Association in London as well as in UK regional locations. Among the membership of the CSE Regionalism group were the present author, Doreen Massey, Richard Meegan, Ash Amin, Andrew Sayer, Kevin Morgan, Ray Hudson, Jim Lewis, Robin Murray and John Urry, the last-named also running the Lancaster Regionalism research group. At these meetings papers were presented and discussed in a seminar format, among these being early critiques of orthodox economic geography and reformulations later influential in the rise of so-called 'new regionalism' of which locality debates were a progenitor. Interestingly, many such CSE Regionalism debates and critiques were on 'scale' in industry and on the nature of the state. The latter was criticised for its overweening and often misguided interventions in regions, industry and public affairs more generally. Ironically, Thatcherism agreed, but with markedly different motivations for change. Trying to forge theory and practice that would facilitate action tailored to distinctive regional and local identities were thus CSE Regionalism group priorities. It will be remembered that this was the era of the failed UK devolution policy affecting Scotland and Wales, and of the rise of various left-wing administrations in London and other large UK cities pursuing local policies in defence of their citizens against the depredations of Thatcherism. Many CSE Regionalism group members were actively advising such administrations, notably Doreen Massey and the Greater London Council (GLC). Group member Robin

Murray was the architect of the GLC's alternative economic strategy at the time, aspects of which are covered in Best (1990).

At the heart of these debates was a project of regionalism and localism informed by the industrial restructuring perspective. Economic geography at any given point in time was seen as a temporary resultant of processes by which firms and industries found ways to cheapen labour costs and hence raise profitability. This produced 'sedimented' 'spatial divisions of labour' with each 'round of investment' (Massey, 1984). Hence, spatially differentiated labour markets existed and they were further differentiated by socio-political characteristics deriving from local work and cultural specificities. These were the base for different kinds of localised response to crises of many kinds deriving from variable intensities and activation of local social capital. This in a nutshell was the theory of regional and local development which informed the subsequent locality debates. Of great importance to this theory, as discussed at CSE, was the accumulating evidence of successful, radical, regional and local economic development activity in the Italian industrial districts as described by Brusco (1982). A powerful analysis and presentation emphasising the shift from Fordism to network forms of collective entrepreneurship in Italy was given to the Regionalism group by CSE member Fergus Murray, in touch with Charles Sabel, subsequently published in *Capital & Class* (Murray, 1983). Later on Piore & Sabel (1984) underlined the new 'flexible specialisation' associated with the same phenomenon. Based on research in Italy, Portugal and UK and with Portuguese research associate Artur da Rosa Pires, an early comparative 'clusters' study was published (Cooke & da Rosa Pires, 1985) inspired by Murray's and Brusco's results. Thus the first locality debates were about the imputed demise of Fordist corporate control of the economy in the face of an apparently rising radical and solidaristic entrepreneurship rooted in localities thriving under left-wing regional polities – indeed in Italy, varieties of Communist regional administration.

These ideas were being implemented in the GLC under the policy influence of Robin Murray and discussion in the Regionalism group was of the superiority, in terms of working conditions and profitability of the industrial district model over the corporate model practised - in London, for example, in the furniture industry (Best. 1990). However, the left intellectual imperative to support trade unions - until Thatcher at the

height of their power in large corporations and the state - meant there was frequently a blind spot regarding the progressive potential of collective entrepreneurship Italian-style. This dilemma is well-captured in Dick Walker's comradely obituary for Bennett Harrison:

'Even Bennett was drawn away from the labour question to a diversionary fight over large and small firms.....however, he was derailed by a futile attempt to show that small firm clusters were not the wave of the future....the mistake of everyone, Right and Left, was to think that small firms are bound for the dustbin of history – which is like saying that small creatures are less important than big ones in an ecosystem, just because the latter hog so much visible space' (Walker, 2001).

Research informed by the restructuring and localities perspective began to be published in the geographic literature by others than the main progenitor, for example, Cooke (1981) with a paper on the way 'tertiarisation' or the rise of services industry was expressing new spatial divisions of labour to 'produce new combinations of spatial and social differentiation at the sub-regional level', and Morgan (1983) with his study of the fracturing of labour and locality contingent upon the privatisation of the UK steel industry. Subsequently, there was a great burgeoning of such literature from all corners of the de-industrialising world as the imposing 'restructuring thesis' was successfully tested out. This is explored in the section which follows.

The Rise of Locality Studies

In this section the following three aspects of locality studies and debates will be examined. The first of these concerns actual changes in regional policy under the neoconservative reforms set in train by the Thatcher governments. This is done not with forensic attention but more as a broad narrative of the pressures and shifts in trajectory typical of the time. Second attention is paid to the more salient locality studies performed from a broadly restructuring and spatial divisions of labour perspective. Finally, the key findings of the 'Localities' research programme and the controversies it provoked will be reviewed. In the space available, the two key debates – adding to the one concerning clusters and corporations already dealt with – will be reprised: the so-called empiricist and postmodernist consumption geography turns.

So widespread was the concern among academics and policy-makers at the wholesale changes visited upon government programmes in support of less favoured areas of the UK that even CSE Regionalism group sceptics bemoaned the rapidity of policy and funding change. Indeed, so draconian were the threats to anything other than the market mechanism as a means of fuelling economic development that the main professional body with a watch over this field – the Regional Studies Association – launched an inquiry, among the panel for which was the present author. Leading ‘social democratic’ and other panellists, for recall the Social Democrat Party had split from an increasingly left-leaning Labour Party only two years earlier, included Derek Diamond, David Eversley, Peter Hall, John Goddard, John Rhodes, Michael Keating and, as chair, Gerald Manners. The published report sought to re-examine the nature of current regional development problems (RSA, 1983). It was followed up by a book (Damesick & Wood, 1987) enlarging on the analysis. The report was one of the earliest to draw attention to the ‘North-South divide’ in UK prosperity. Much was made of the ‘success’ up to the 1973 oil-price hike in transferring manufacturing jobs to development regions but ‘failure’ of policy to narrow regional gaps significantly thereafter. Manufacturing employment decline had accelerated bewilderingly, competitiveness was weak and productivity faltering. The UK also joined the European Common Market in 1973 and manufacturing employment decline was set to continue for the next thirty years and more as the comparative advantage of the continent’s industrial regions worked itself through the economy. This was usually to the UK’s detriment given the more than fifteen-year advantage its competitor economies in the Common Market had already enjoyed regarding investment, modernisation and competition in an enlarged market.

The Thatcher reforms, which included swingeing cutbacks in regional grants (-40%, and covering 25% not 40% as previously of the working population), privatisation of the older industries that had earlier been nationalised, and the dismantling of industrial relations legislation that had functioned as something of a cushion against precipitate employment decline – especially in negotiations with Labour governments – ushered in an intensification of manufacturing job-loss. The report noted a retreat from regional policy, abolition of the Economic Planning Councils and refusal to countenance regional strategic plans. In their place were offered new, more market-friendly spatial policy initiatives such as the Urban Development Corporations

(UDC), Enterprise Zones (EZ) and localised enterprise agencies, subsequently rolled into Training & Enterprise Councils and other business support services (e.g. Business Links). The irony of these new 'local discourses' was not lost on the likes of CSE, but of course the 'Italianate' alternative economic strategies being practised by the GLC were of such anathema to the Thatcher administration that in 1986 she personally arranged for the abolition of the GLC *tout court*. Fundamentally, the market mechanism became the key guide to economic development trajectories with a light hand on the interventionist tiller (e.g. UDCs and EZs) to smooth away impediments to market operations.

Numerous studies of restructuring effects upon localities were published in the UK and US, subsequently joined by work from other countries suffering a North-South divide such as Germany, albeit of lesser intensity than those appearing in the liberal market economies (for the US, see, for example, Perry & Watkins, 1978; Tabb & Sawers, 1984) and much of the work of the 'California school' from Scott (1988), Storper & Walker (1989) and other Berkeley acolytes such as Meric Gertler (1986), Annalee Saxenian (1994), Amy Glasmeier (1988) and Erica Schoenberger (1988). Much of the aforementioned work reported postgraduate research that was being conducted contemporaneously with the UK work in the early 1980s and influenced somewhat by the presence as a visiting fellow of Doreen Massey hosted by Ann Markusen and others at the Berkeley Planning School (Walker, 2001). In the UK, collections such as Carney, Hudson & Lewis (1980), Gregory & Urry (1985) Thrift & Williams (1987) and Allen & Massey (1988) opened up for discussion and exploration the nature of contemporary socio-spatial differentiation and uneven development. The focus – often uniting geographers and sociologists – was upon theorised local distinctiveness under conditions of state-invoked restructuring. These proved invaluable ingredients to the evolving 'localities' paradigm. By the 1980s, economic geographers worldwide were marvelling at the innovation and creativity wrought upon the underwhelmingly descriptive modelling geography that had so successfully been critiqued and superseded. This was, of course, principally due to the development of interestingly sophisticated *theory* which both engaged with and explained different spatial realities coherently, attracting economic geography stars of the future as it did so.

So what of the key findings of the actual CURS research programme that stimulated so much debate, only a fraction of which can be touched upon here? The best place to look is the final chapter of Cooke (1989) which briefly summarises the findings of the studies conducted. The first key finding was that the theoretical perspective adopted, taking an 'industrial restructuring through local labour market transformation' approach worked remarkably well, with rich quantitative and qualitative data that delineated internal and external articulations linking local and global spatial processes. In particular, second, the results confirmed something which a tradition of top-down thinking in academe and government could never grasp, namely that localities were a little like laboratories in which unexpected compounds sometimes jelled with influential effect. It is noteworthy that at the end of the research local 'social capital' had been discovered, though we called it 'local proactivity'. This facilitated responses and initiatives by some, not all, localities to self-improve their conditions of living and working within the constraint and opportunity-sets locally available. Swindon and Liverpool were deemed managerially proactive policy-wise to an increasing extent and at the time, late 1980s, many that had not been proactive much in the past, such as Cheltenham, Lancaster and Thanet were becoming noticeably more politically so in the face of collective problems encountered. Industrial cities like Middlesbrough and Birmingham seemed the hardest hit in this respect, registering lower 'social capital' type effects than when they had been more prosperous. Third, there was much evidence of a rise in the 'networking' propensity of the localities, even the less proactive ones. Municipal enterprise, partnerships and localised development agencies were among these more 'associative' forms then emerging. But there was little sign then of 'clusters' though these seem to have burgeoned in many places in the subsequent decade with the decline of older corporate models, outsourcing of production, and the rise of collective entrepreneurship among innovative and creative small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Finally, these shifts seemed to presage something of a 'postmodern' localised developmental discourse as localities came to terms with the demise of the grand narratives of socialism, the welfare state and the corporate 'job for life' assumption, not to mention the fragmentation typical of some of the worst deindustrialisation instances.

Of the two critical positions in relation to this virtual hegemony in explaining change processes in economic geography that may be mentioned here, the first referred, bizarrely, to this collective, international, theoretically-informed effort as a *retreat* from theory and a new *empirical* turn (Smith, 1987). The main burden of this critique was based on a fear that the ‘research would be unable to emerge from the morass of information’ (Smith, 1987). But as indicated, this fear was unfounded, not least because of the careful theoretical and methodological design of the research. Indeed what the critique signified was a fear on the part of the authors that data might ‘disprove’ theory, which given the ultra-leftist positions of Neil Smith and his mentor David Harvey would have been disastrous for them (Harvey, 1987). The ‘scale’ question reared up as it continues to do amongst this fraction, implying small is local and thus uninteresting while only big is important. We have noted above how one of the brethren, Dick Walker (2001) did not fall into this ‘spatial trap’ and neither did the locality researchers. Of greater veracity was the bemoaning of a ‘retreat from Marxist theory’ (Smith, 1987) which, if true was prescient on our part, and if not true meant we were not allied with the somewhat over-theorised version practised by the critics in question. Of lesser direct import was the wideranging critique, more focused on Cooke (1990) at that book’s alignment of post-Fordism with cultural postmodernism, the rise of consumption culture and the rejection of grand narratives and modernist ‘foundationalism’. Yet all these things have come to pass, whether always for the better is debatable. But we live nowadays in a media-saturated world of ‘floating signifiers’ such as the celebrity obsession, reality TV and rootless cultural production (‘Pop Idol’). Bruce Springsteen’s 2006 return to folk music may have marked the beginning of a movement to repair part of that ‘postmodern’ syndrome.

Conclusions: The Long Legacy of Locality Studies

Probably the longest-lasting legacy of locality studies has been the rise of so-called ‘new regionalism’. Already spotted around the time of his return from Australia by Nigel Thrift (1983) this theorised regional political economy analysis was gaining ground rapidly as we have seen, in the new times of ‘global localisation’. The locality studies themselves and the comparative methodology that allowed spatial variety to be explained within a coherent and satisfying theoretical framework furthered this impulse. The next research project engaged in by the present author saw a return to the ‘regional innovation systems’ work first embarked upon with an SSRC fellowship

in the early 1980s (Cooke, 1985) on this occasion comparing regional innovation in the UK and France. It concluded that indeed a process of global localisation could be observed in both countries, despite their profoundly different 'varieties of capitalism' (Cooke et al, 1992; Hall & Soskice, 2001). This was followed by a further, definitively regional innovation systems comparison of four countries, which also identified and explicated the intra-regional variety of industrial *clusters* within regional innovation systems (Cooke, 1992; Cooke & Morgan, 1998). Simultaneously, the first global comparison of regional innovation from a systems perspective derived from the 'localities' methodology was published, with a second edition arriving later to meet demand (Braczyk et al, 1998; Cooke et al, 2004). Nowadays, of all the fields of innovation system studies, that focused upon regional innovation systems has the largest number of refereed publications (Carlsson, 2006). Of course, the range of studies of industrial clusters, following the first by regional scientist Stan Czumanski (1974) is now virtually innumerable, and by no means confined to economic geography (Porter, 1998).

Another field where there were resonances from the locality debates, and a further example of debate arising from the 'localities' methodology, concerned urban cultural and consumption research; what later became the so-called 'cultural turn' in human geography. This arose largely from the opening perceived more strongly by the present author than most colleagues, with the possible exception of John Urry, into 'postmodern geographies'. How did this evolutionary element of 'related variety' emerge? First, recall the local discourses discoveries in the localities research findings and the 'anti-foundationalism' associated with the demise of grand narratives associated with the modernity project in its various guises. That social model was undermined by verbal attacks from a more Gramscian left perspective represented to some extent in CSE positions, and it imploded under the neoconservative onslaughts of the Thatcher-Reagan era. The likes of David Harvey railed against all this, preferring, to his credit, not a Stalinist hierarchy as a preferred social model, but a nevertheless 'totalising' discourse effacing social identity and variety, designed like Haussmann's Paris for maximum social control. I debated this in person and in the special issue of *Society & Space* devoted to these and related issues then being uncovered by the locality debates and on the occasion of Harvey's somewhat underwhelming return to Britain to take a geography chair at Oxford. Both Nigel

Thrift and I noted his predilection to ‘overtotalise’ society, which he saw as utterly suffused by abstract Capital and with no room for individuals. Even Marx did not go so far, it was pointed out (Thrift, 1987; Cooke, 1987). Later on, Simon Duncan asked me to write a piece for *Geoforum* predicting the likely megatrends in geography for the 1990s (Cooke, 1989). I said it would be postmodernism and it would take the form of consumption studies, not least because the *production* and labour market focus of the ‘local restructuring’ thesis had left especially urban geographers dissatisfied, not least given Castells’ (1977) privileging of that sphere for urban analysis. And it had to be admitted that the CURS localities were urban in the main, but although CURS contained in Chris Pickvance and Michael Harloe the first British academics to pick up on ‘the French School’, even they found Castells’ structuralist Marxism hard to operationalise methodologically and the rest of us found it almost worse than Harvey. By now work on ‘creativity’ has transmuted into studies of the ‘creative class’ that is as provocative a notion as ‘localities’ were a generation earlier (Florida, 2002). Lastly, debate still continues on the ‘scale’ question with a new generation of ‘scalar envelopers’ (Brenner, 2001; Bathelt, 2003) continuing to wish to efface spatial variety from a lofty and depressingly linear ‘top-down’ perspective that has, naturally from an evolutionary economic geography perspective into which much of the ‘localities’ legacy has now comfortably folded, to be resisted.

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