

DANGERS OF THE EMPIRICAL TURN: SOME COMMENTS ON THE CURS INITIATIVE*

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Economic restructuring, the emergence of a service dominated economy, the shift of employment away from metropolitan centres, and the transformation of reproduction relations have contributed to a major restructuring of urban and regional systems in most advanced capitalist nations since the early 1970s. The task of understanding these dramatic changes became increasingly urgent at the same time as a new generation of social scientists, politicized in the 1960s, was rediscovering marxist theory, and by the late 1970s the analysis of urban and regional restructuring was broadly if not exclusively a marxist preserve. Here in one relatively well defined set of processes, it seemed, we could identify most of the central elements in marxist theory – the economic system of accumulation and crisis, the social world differentiated by class (and, as we had to learn, race and gender), and the political sphere which was rediscovered through attempts at theories of the state. Associated with these were processes of cultural and geographical restructuring. But more, the restructuring of these different dimensions of capitalism was simultaneous, and if not at all parallel or in unison, at least their inter-relatedness was dramatically evident. The historical eruptions of capitalism itself seemed to be offering considerable proof of Marx's historical approach which emphasized the essential oneness of the world and the central (but *not* determining) role of political economics.

The major problem was how to use this theory in practice. If it gave us the general outlines of historical change that we seemed to be witnessing, it did not at all extend to the specifics, and much time was spent linking the newly learned marxist theory to particular aspects of urban and regional change. For more than a decade and into the 1980s, marxist theory led the research frontier

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in geography and in other sub-fields of the social sciences precisely because of its ability to link, with some success, an abstract theoretical framework of wide compass with clear patterns of change on the ground. Until recently the starting point for research was usually the theory as we strove to develop a framework for understanding the events as they unfolded; empirical patterns of change in the urban and regional systems were certainly important but were often selectively analysed to support or illustrate the theory. It is not that the theory was too crusty to be valuable; rather the emphasis was upon rediscovering a forgotten marxist tradition at precisely the time when dramatic restructuring made the renovation (not simply the rediscovery) of the theory a vital priority. A critique of marxism began to emerge emphasizing its perceived conceptual rigidity in general and more specifically its overly structuralist perspective on social change. Today marxism no longer cuts such a sharp edge at the research frontier but shares it with a broader and more eclectic set of -isms. As part of this methodological shift, research on restructuring has moved from a primary focus on the theoretical to an overwhelming concern for empirical research in hopes of gaining a much more detailed and sophisticated view of social, economic and geographical change; the stick is to be bent back. The focus is now on the study of specific *localities*, and more of the innovative empirical research is probably being done in Britain than anywhere else. Among the initiatives underway, the programme on Changing Urban and Regional Systems in the UK (CURS-UK), sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council, is perhaps paramount.

The CURS Initiative

There is considerable agreement today on the broad outlines of an appropriate research agenda for examining questions of restructuring. In general terms we could define it as a search for the middle ground, an attempt to walk a knife edge path between polarised excesses of the past: between the abyss of abstract theory on one side and the equally daunting abyss of empiricism on the other; between structure and agency, social and spatial; between economic explanation and political, social and cultural analysis; between production and reproduction, between anecdotes and aggregates (see Scranton, 1986). This is the broad programme which the CURS initiative adopts. Its more specific brief is to examine the effects of economic and social restructuring

on seven 'localities' in Britain (actually England). Beginning from a broadly shared theoretical perspective on the international, national and regional dimensions of restructuring, the CURS researchers aim to provide detailed profiles for each locality of the impact of restructuring. Each profile of local transformation can be pictured as a matrix combining several dimensions of change: the labour market, industrial mix, work culture, social divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, etc.; housing market and household characteristics; political change; and the planning process. For each locality a research team of from three to six people has been assembled; their main task is to gather available data on these different vectors of change, and to prepare a profile of the social, political and economic transformation of the locality that can be compared with homologous profiles from the other localities. The point is not to emerge with a one-dimensional mathematical resultant from these vectors of change – eigenvalues of transformation, as it were – nor to emerge with a definitive sentence or two on the direction of urban and regional change, but to construct a multidimensional portrait of the spectrum of change in the entire social fabric.

The localities under scrutiny fall in the middle range as regards population (50,000 to 200,000) and were chosen for their potentially very different experiences of restructuring: East Liverpool, a classic 'branch-plant' economy stricken by long term de-industrialization, chronic unemployment and social unrest; Middlesbrough, a thriving steel, chemicals and health service centre into the 1970s which has experienced precipitous decline in less than a decade and a half; South West Birmingham, also with a growing economy into the 1970s but now experiencing severe decline in auto and related skilled employment, major automation and deskilling in remaining jobs, and little evidence of a compensatory increase in service sector work; Lancaster's "diversity in decline" (Bagguley and Shapiro, 1986) – a stagnation of industrial employment, a series of external takeovers and consequent job reductions, but an increase in some low-level service occupations including tourism; Cheltenham, with a sustained growth of clerical, managerial and service employment especially in government and financial sectors; Swindon, on the M4 corridor, dominated by modern high-tech industrial expansion, a paternalist work culture, and expanding financial employment; and finally the Isle of Thanet, a conservative region dominated by resort and retirement services and with a class structure polarized between the petit bourgeoisie and low-order service workers.

The CURS research is now underway and initial progress reports offer a view of potential results (Cooke, 1985; Beynon, et al., 1985; Cowen and Harrison, 1985; Urry, 1985; Bagguley and Shapiro, 1986). Research teams are indeed beginning to provide an impressive statistical portrait of their localities, demonstrating their serious commitment to the 'empirical turn'. Much effort has already been devoted to documenting the minutiae of local change, and the resulting picture is one of daunting complexity. As intended the mass of empirical detail is the strength of the project, but it is also the source of potential weakness. Since the research is still ongoing, it is necessary to be careful about overly definitive criticisms, but insofar as some of the potential problems are symptomatic of broader shifts in research priorities in the late 1980s, it is worth the risk to offer a preliminary critique.

A New Empiricism?

The most evident danger already apparent in this research is that it will be unable to emerge from the morass of statistical information. The emphasis at present is squarely on complexity, difference and the uniqueness of each locality. Although there is a shared theoretical background, the researchers are reluctant to generalize at all about the experience of restructuring, resulting in the impression that the project is primarily about the localities in and of themselves rather than an attempt to understand the dimensions of contemporary restructuring as revealed by the experience of these localities. It could be argued that the complexity of change defies generalization and the identification of any patterns of change, but this is not an unproblematic claim. Taken to its extreme, this argument tends to empiricism since the question whether generalization is possible cannot be answered wholly on the basis of empirical data. It is what we make of the empirical data that counts, and this implies that the shared theoretical perspective must be an ever active ingredient; theory cannot function simply as a backdrop to an unfolding empirical play but must be a co-star on the front of the stage. If the comparability of results between the different localities is not stressed, the danger is that the CURS project will do little more than repeat the empiricist locality studies of an earlier generation which deliberately examined individual places for their own sake, and not attempt to draw out theoretical or historical conclusions.

The CURS project is clearly more ambitious than to settle for mere documentation of empirical changes but staying on the knife

edge will take considerable effort. Doreen Massey has been occupied with a parallel project focusing more on specific industries but attempting to show the changing local experiences involved in industrial transformation. She too accepted "the challenge . . . to hold on to both the general movement and the particularity of circumstance" (Massey, 1984:8), but was only partly successful. She had to concede in the end that the case studies of local transformation could not be generalized to provide an overall picture of change in the British space-economy but rather had to be viewed as demonstrating only the diversity of potential experiences. So it is a substantial challenge, but the CURS researchers may avoid some of the pitfalls of empiricism if the empirical results of their diverse locality studies are interpreted in light of the three-stage development of the UK space-economy identified in the theoretical background to the project. Cooke (1985) argues that a first group of regions (Clydeside, North–East England, Lancashire, Yorkshire, the Midlands and South Wales) had industrialized before World War One and experienced the beginnings of a long drawn out decline shortly thereafter. A second regional grouping of the West Midlands and outer London led industrial expansion for thirty years after World War Two, and a third wave of industrialization in aerospace, computers, consumer electronics, pharmaceuticals and telecommunications focused on the M4 corridor.

A Gestalt of Scale

A second and overlapping concern involves the question of scale. The localities under investigation vary from self-contained urban units – Lancaster, Cheltenham, Swindon and Middlesbrough – to slices of much larger conurbations – East Liverpool and South West Birmingham. The criterion of selection, that the population of the locality lies between 50,000 and 200,000, appears rather arbitrary. In the first place, with localities of that size, it is difficult to see how any meaningful comments can be made about the regional scale. Second, even at the urban scale, two very different experiences are being confused. There is an inherent incomparability between an entire urban area, more or less coherent in functional terms, and a sector of a larger urban mass, plucked from its surroundings; like the blind man with a python in one hand and an elephant's trunk in the other, the researchers are treating all seven localities as the same animal. Thus the scale criteria for choosing the localities adds unnecessary complexity to the study

results, reinforces the impression that it is the nature of the localities themselves that informed the selection process rather than a theoretical perspective on urban and regional change, and exacerbates the tendency to empiricism. In fact, as the researchers themselves suggest, the very constitution of the urban and regional scales is being utterly transformed by the restructuring process. In Middlesbrough, for example, "a coherent local economy . . . is, today, being stretched to the limits" geographically as well as socially and politically and culturally. Middlesbrough may well have been "in the North but not of the North" (Beynon et al., 1985:4 and 8) until the 1970s, but despite continuing selective investment, the rapidity of decline in the last decade may be making it more and more of the North as well as in it. But because of the scale of the CURS locality study, this is exactly the kind of vital regional question which cannot be answered satisfactorily but must remain an issue of speculation.

The question of scale and empiricism is of broader importance. As the scale of economic activity is transformed so too is the geographical scale at which regions are constituted, but we do not yet have either a generally agreed upon language or a theory of the development of geographical scale with which to comprehend this transformation. Consider the obvious example of suburbanization. The growth of the suburbs is generally treated as a spatial decentralization of the city, and indeed from the office towers or from city hall located at the centre, suburban growth is a decentralization outward. But if we change our perspective, take to a balloon and float skyward several miles so that we can see 100 km in each direction, the rapid growth of the suburbs now seems like an impressive *centralization* of the region's economic activity – its labour force, work places, transport arteries and residences. So is suburbanization a process of centralization or decentralization? Is it both? Or is it neither? We can think of this as the 'kaleidoscope effect': the empirical pieces are the same but with a slight shift of perspective they make a very different pattern. In so far as the shift of perspective is achieved through a change of scale, we can think of this puzzle as a *gestalt of scale*. If you view the pieces from one scale you see one pattern (or lack of pattern), and if you view it from another scale you see a different one.

Clearly the empirical data do not tell us the appropriate scale or scales of analysis, yet at the same time we cannot make a judgement about the scale of analysis in complete abstraction from real world processes. There needs to be some kind of correspondence between the scale of real processes and events and the scale of analysis. There can be no definitive resolution to this question

especially since the scales of real processes are themselves plastic, structured and restructured within the processes of economic, social and political restructuring. But at the very least we need an historical theory of geographical scale that will help us to order what at first glance may seem like irreconcilable empirical complexity. Such a theory of scale may allow us to alter our perspective ever so slightly and to see the pieces fall into place. This could make the difference between whether we interpret the empirical results of locality studies as evidence of uniqueness and complexity or whether the profiles of change in East Liverpool and Swindon, for example, should be interpreted explicitly in terms of the changing regionalization of Britain or, and I suspect more accurately, the changing regionalization of Europe. For it is not clear in the current restructuring that, in economic terms at least, coherent regions continue to exist as subdivisions of the national rather than international economy.

Dangers in the Broader Methodological Shift

As Massey (1985:9–10) remarks, “the radical critique of the 1970s—for very understandable reasons both intellectual and political—went far too far overboard in its rejection of the importance of the spatial organisation of things, of distance, and perhaps above all, of geographical differentiation.” Geography was thereby “left . . . without an object.” She goes so far as to conclude that “the unique is back on the agenda” (p. 19). Parallel to the rediscovery of place, and the uniqueness of specific places, is a distancing of contemporary research from marxist theory, also for both intellectual and political reasons. The intellectually serious critique of marxism as overly structuralist degenerated into an opportunistic game of hunt-the-structuralist-functionalist, often carried on by players blissfully unaware not only of the differences between structuralism and functionalism, but of the fact that far from being a ‘form of structuralism,’ marxism predated structuralism by over half a century. Others distanced themselves from marxism for political reasons, continuing to use a sanitized marxist framework and odd convenient concepts for their explanatory potential, but were squeamish about the implications of being labeled marxist. The emergence of realism taught us to distinguish between necessary and contingent relations, leading ultimately to the proposition that abstract theory pertains to necessary relations while concrete geographical patterns are the product of contingent relations and are hardly accessible to abstract theory (Sayer, 1984; 1985); theory and

empirical investigation are wedged apart and what began as a search for the middle ground ends by making the knife edge so sharp it is unwalkable.

The "retreat from Marxist theory" (O'Keefe, 1985:7) is buttressed by structurationist theory, yet it is increasingly clear that there are severe difficulties in making this methodology operational. A dynamicized structuralism (Giddens, 1981:26–29), structuration theory has failed to distinguish itself in practice from some of the traditions out of which it was built. Where it has sought to distinguish itself theoretically, as with the proposed marriage with time geography, the result has combined the obscure with the self-evident (Gregory, 1985) and has not furthered efforts at theoretically informed empirical research. On the question of space, Giddens has been explicit about its role at the heart of social theory, but his attempts to incorporate space have been disappointing, falling well behind the level of insight now generally available (Giddens, 1985; Soja, 1983). In practice, structurationism has functioned as an elaborate theoretical edifice legitimating the focus on individual and institutional agents and local cases, albeit situated in their social context.

All of this is quite removed from the CURS project and yet the latter does contribute to the general current away from or at least ghettoizing substantive theory. This is not an appeal for a return to abstract theory; at least for now that period is rightly gone and empirical research has most to offer. Even less is it an appeal for a return to some of the cruder marxist analyses we struggled to produce in the 1970s. It is an appeal that we do not again go overboard, this time in the opposite direction, and foreclose the possibility of a middle ground. The signs are already ominous. If indeed the unique is back on the agenda, then it is difficult to see how we can avoid again fighting the crude Hartshornian battle between the ideographic and the nomothetic, the unique and the general (Hartshorne, 1959). Surely 30 years of extraordinary theoretical ferment have taught us enough that we can avoid repeating what is now a thoroughly sterile debate. Should this debate emerge again, as indeed it threatens to do, it will be tantamount to admitting that we have learned nothing since the 1950s.

As recently as five years ago, research on geographical questions was characterised more by fragmentation than cooperation. Tight knots of social scientists argued intensely with each other but there was little cross-fertilization of ideas. Today some of the intensity is gone but the dialogue is much broader, as demonstrated by the range of interests of the CURS researchers. Hypothetically

that should make it easier for us to broaden the knife edge we want to walk between empirical and theoretical excesses. But to do so we need a realistic appraisal of the abysses on either side. It is therefore important to recognise that there is nothing inherently or intellectually superior about the unique and the complex. As we have seen, the difference between complex and simple realities may involve little more than a theoretical gestalt. As regards the unique, everything is unique, but that really does not tell us very much. The essence of the intellectual enterprise we are engaged in is to construct sustainable generalizations and to judge when these generalizations are no longer sustainable; the decision concerning what can and cannot be sustained is obviously contentious and involves a judgement heavily but not exclusively rooted in theory. It is also important, then, that the 'understandable reasons' for the seeming roughness of emerging theory in the 1970s, as well as the undervaluing of space, are well comprehended. Paramount was the attempt to replace an explicitly fragmented positivist methodology with a coherent and unified perspective on the relationship between society and space. Inevitably this was a mainly theoretical effort, and if the theoretical links were at times mechanical and some troublesome realities were glossed over, the partial success of the theoretical project is demonstrated by the current clamour for empirical research to catch up with many of the theoretical claims; it is further suggested by the sense that a broad common ground is possible. The potential promise of the CURS research, therefore, is not only that it will give us empirical documentation of this or that change on the ground but that it will utilise the theoretical acumen of its researchers and venture challenging generalizations which may or may not be sustained in the long run.

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