FROM A GEOGRAPHY OF LABOR TO A LABOR GEOGRAPHY: LABOR’S SPATIAL FIX AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF CAPITALISM

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Someone once wrote “All the world’s a stage.”
But the truth comes written somewhat different on my page.
I know this script’s fixed from the start,
because ordinary men and women only get supporting parts.
— Chris Dean: “The Power is Yours”

The notion of “spatial praxis” is firmly on the intellectual agenda in human geography. The making of the economic and social landscape in particular ways is now recognized as being fundamental to the articulation of political power (cf. Harvey, 1982; Soja, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991). In this paper I argue, however, that whilst they recognize landscapes are socially constructed, many economic geographers and theorizers of the geography of the capitalist space-economy — both mainstream and Marxist — have tended either to ignore the role of workers in making the economic geography of capitalism or have frequently conceived of them in a passive manner. Although during the past two decades economic geographers have generated a considerable literature which seeks to understand how capital attempts to make the geography of capitalism in particular ways to facilitate accumulation and the reproduction of capitalist social relations, there has been much less work which examines and attempts to theorize explicitly how workers actively shape economic landscapes and uneven development. Labor’s role in making the economic geography of capitalism has been rendered largely invisible by the analyses both of traditional main-

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stream neoclassical economic geographers and also, ironically, by many Marxists, for both approaches primarily present economic geographies devoid of workers as active geographical agents. In their explanations of the dynamics of the capitalist space-economy both neoclassical and Marxist approaches in geography have conceived of workers primarily from the viewpoint of how capital (in the form of transnational corporations, the firm etc.) and, to a lesser degree, the state make investment decisions based on differences between workers located in particular places. Whereas for mainstream scholars it is the relative importance of various factors of production and consumption which determines the location of economic activity or perhaps the structure of the firm which is significant, for Marxists it is capital which acts, capital which produces landscapes in its continual search for profit. In both such views capitalists are theorized as capable of actively making economic geographies through their investment decisions whereas workers are seen rather passively either as inert “factors” in the calculus of location or, following Harvey (1982:380–81, original emphasis), as little more than “variable capital, an aspect of capital itself.”

It is not hard to understand why locational theory in economic geography has developed this way. Neoclassical economics has been concerned with providing insights about the nature of the firm or enterprise, whilst Marxist work has sought to examine the expansion of capital during the accumulation process. However, this understanding does not mitigate the fact that both approaches as generally articulated are unsatisfactory theoretically because neither leaves much room to conceive of workers as active makers of the geography of capitalism. What I seek to do here, then, is to argue for a much more active conceptualization of workers as engaged in the uneven development of capitalism. In so doing, I am trying to do two things theoretically. First, I wish to question the primacy accorded the activities of the firm and capital in general in defining the field of economic geography (and particularly locational analysis) as it is usually practiced. In this sense, I would align this paper in the broader emergent literature which is beginning to question the very nature of what “economic geography” is (cf. Thrift and Olds, 1996). Traditionally, explanations of the genesis of economic geographies have primarily relied on understanding the decision-making processes of managers and capitalists. Although workers’ activities are sometimes seen as a “modifying” force that needs to be factored (and I use this terminology quite deliberately) into the locational equation, such an approach essentially places capital center stage both empirically and theoretically as the focus of research, whilst banishing workers to the fringes of the discipline. In essence, it tells the story of the making of the geography of capitalism through the eyes of capital(ists). In this paper, in contrast, I suggest that much insight on how the economic geography of capitalism is produced can be gained by greater analysis of the social and spatial practices of workers. Thus, whilst not rejecting the insights into the production of the
geography of capitalism that can be gained by understanding the actions of capital, I would argue that at the same time it is important to recognize that workers, too, are active geographical agents whose activities can shape economic landscapes in ways that differ significantly from those of capital. Hence, understanding how workers actively shape economic space is important if we are to conceptualize how the geography of capitalism is made.

Second, and following from above, I wish to return agency to workers in the literature on the development of economic geographies. This means conceptualizing labor not merely in terms of “factors” of location or the exchange value of “abstract labor” but to treat working class people as sentient social beings who both intentionally and unintentionally produce economic geographies through their actions — all the while recognizing that they are constrained (as is capital) in these actions. Certainly, in suggesting that “capital is not all” I do not wish to argue that “labor is all.” That is not my purpose, for such an argument would be equally problematic. Rather, I wish to assert that workers have a vested interest in attempting to make space in certain ways. Workers’ abilities to produce and manipulate geographic space in particular ways is a potent form of social power. Recognizing this fact raises important questions about the theoretical status of spatial relations in workers’ own self-reproduction and the issue of workers’ “spatial praxis.” Whilst capital’s efforts to create landscapes in particular ways have been theorized as an integral part of its self-reproduction and survival, in this paper I argue that workers, too, seek to make space in particular ways to ensure their own self-reproduction and, ultimately, survival — even if this is self-reproduction and survival as workers in a capitalist society. The economic geography of capitalism does not simply evolve around workers who themselves are disconnected from the process. They are active participants in its very creation.

The paper is in two main parts. The first of these is a critique of how labor has been conceptualized in both neoclassical and Marxist inspired economic geography. I argue that the way labor has usually been thought of in these approaches is very much as a Geography of Labor, by which I mean that analyses have examined the spatial distribution of workers across the landscape to show how this affects the decision-making process of capitalists and, hence, the economic geography of capitalism. The second part attempts to outline a way in which a more active sense of workers as being involved in the creation, manipulation, and use of space can be incorporated into economic geography. As a means of distinction I have termed this approach a Labor Geography, by which I mean it is an effort to see the making of the economic geography of capitalism through the eyes of labor by understanding how workers seek to make space in particular ways, that is to say, how they seek to make the landscape in their own image.
Geographies of Labor

“The history of capitalism” remarks Stanley Aronowitz (1990:171) “has, typically, been written as a series of narratives unified by the themes of accumulation.” These narratives, he suggests, have been marked by a focus on mercantile and imperialist interests seeking fresh sources of investment; the scientific and technological revolutions that have driven growth; international rivalries over territory and labor supplies; and the multitude of conflicts among fractions of capital that take political forms, such as the struggles for power among capital’s personifications or wars. . . In these accounts, workers enter the theater of history as abstract labor, factors of production, dependent variables in the grand narratives of crisis and renewal.

Much the same could be said of the writing of the geography of capitalism. Such treatment of labor by geographers has its roots in the very establishment of the modern discipline. Nineteenth century commercial geography, notoriously linked as it was to imperial adventurism, was one of the first branches of geography to give any sort of systematic accounting of labor. The predominantly but by no means exclusively, British practitioners of this subject essentially sought to record the spoils of empire: raw materials for industry, climatic conditions affecting production, times of the year when riverways were navigable, the location of mountain pathways — in short, anything which would be of commercial use to an imperial power seeking to augment its economic and political might. In this type of geography labor was inert, a factor of production to be catalogued no differently from the various soil types or climatic conditions found in different regions of the globe. Effectively, workers were marginalized as sentient human beings. This is not to say, however, that commercial geographers considered labor unimportant. Far from it. Indeed, one of their greatest concerns was the relative productivity rates, skills, and “upkeep costs” of different colonized peoples. For an imperial power like Britain, knowing which of its subjects could pick tea most efficiently was clearly of vital concern. Imperial apologist and commercial geographer L. Dudley Stamp (1937:65–66), for instance, compared the productivity of textile workers in the damp northwest of England rather favorably with those of sunny northern India, noting that in the early part of the twentieth century in Cawnpore [now Kanpur] “nine men were still required to work a [spinning] mule of 800 spindles where, it was said, only three would be necessary in a Lancashire mill.” Certainly, the demise of the British Empire and the rejection of early twentieth century geography’s fascination with environmental determinism (Peet, 1985) mean that commercial geography no longer occupies the central place within the discipline that it once did. However, the legacy of its descriptive treatment of labor lingers on.
Arguably, the dominant theoretical impulse in economic geography, at least until the 1970s, has come from neoclassical location theory and its behavioral step-child. In an early critique Massey (1973) identified four major strands within neoclassical industrial location theory. First, there is a large body of work in economic geography based on Weber’s (1929) treatise which examined how transportation costs, labor costs and what Weber called “agglomeration forces” affect the locational decisions of independent, single plant firms. Second, geographers have developed location theory stemming from Hotelling’s (1929) examination of the spatial behavior of businesses whose location is dependent on the location of their competitors. Third, during the 1960s and early 1970s there was great interest in the “behavioral” approach derived from the attempt made by Cyert and March (1963), among others, to understand how the internal operation of the firm influences its decision-making processes and thus its economic geography. And fourth, economic geographers have followed the approach developed by Losch (1954) which, whilst beginning with an examination of individual firm behavior, sought to broaden the scope of analysis to the development of entire economic landscapes. Although contemporary mainstream location theory has been refined since these initial propositions were first presented, many of its underlying assumptions about the nature of location can be boiled down to the basic theoretical principles articulated in these four approaches. Certainly, this brief summary does not exhaust the literature. Nevertheless, the four approaches are, I would argue, broadly emblematic of the major traditions in mainstream location theory and of how labor is conceived within these traditions (see Isard, 1956; McNee, 1960; Smith, 1966, 1970; Krumme, 1969; Dicken, 1971; Rees, 1974; Walker, 1975; Latham, 1978; Greenhut and Hwang, 1979).

These approaches have been fairly thoroughly critiqued on a number of grounds: for too often being subservient to the economic and political ambitions of capital and the state; for operating under largely a-spatial assumptions; for their positivist methodology and philosophical underpinnings (particularly attempts at “value-freedom”); and for assuming that economic exchange takes place between social actors who come to the market as equals. These criticisms have been well articulated elsewhere and I do not wish to rehearse them here (see Harvey, 1972; Massey, 1973, 1995; Gregory, 1978; Smith, 1979). However, I do want to reiterate one particular point concerning mainstream economic geography’s marginalization of labor, namely that neoclassical economic geography is fundamentally about how firms make locational decisions — *it is firms’ behavior and investment decisions which are both the activities to be explained but also the activities which define economic geographies*. For sure, workers are not always totally ignored. Sometimes they are incorporated in explanations of the genesis of economic geographies as consumers of commodities and services (e.g., in terms of how consumer choice affects land-use patterns, as per bid-rent
models). However, the point is that location theory (which for so long has been taken to represent the entire field of economic geography) conceives of workers as capable of making decisions which might affect the development of particular economic landscapes only in this very circumscribed way. Certainly, it does not conceive of them as sentient geographical actors for whom the making of the economic landscape in ways which further their own economic and social agendas is integral to their ability to reproduce themselves as workers on a daily and generational basis.

The neoclassical approach has at least two important consequences, then, when considering the conceptual marginalization of the geographic power of working class people in the literature. First, clearly, the point of view presented is that of capital. Thus, as Massey (1973:34) has argued, for traditional location theory “profit is the criterion, wages are simply labour costs.” Second, it presents an economic geography devoid of workers, both as individuals and as members of social groups. Because it is the firm which acts, neoclassical location theory does not need to theorize workers as active makers of economic geographies. Thus, there are no workers in neoclassical explanations of the production of economic landscapes, merely crude abstractions in which labor is reduced to the categories of wages, skill levels, location, gender, union membership and the like, the relative importance of which is weighed by firms in their locational decision-making. Working class people are stripped of many of their most analytically telling qualities and presented in the stark terms of how the cost and quality of their labor power to any particular purchaser affects that purchaser’s investment decision-making process. In perhaps the clearest expression of such workerless landscapes, Weber (1929:95) even goes so far as to suggest that “labor costs can only become factors in location by varying from place to place.” Taking this argument to its logical conclusion it quickly becomes evident that in Weber’s mind, at least, it is theoretically possible (in cases where costs do not vary spatially) for labor to play absolutely no role in explanations of the economic geography of a particular industry!

Much of the problematic approach to workers outlined above has been reproduced in the behavioralist approach which emerged in economic geography during the 1960s in response to critiques of earlier theory which assumed that locational decisions were made by economically “rational” firms. Two antagonistic traditions can be identified within behavioralist location theory, one which argues that certain of Weber’s propositions (with modification) may still provide a valid theoretical starting point for research on industrial geography, the other which maintains that the Weberian focus on smaller, single location firms must be utterly spurned in favor of one which is primarily concerned with explaining the behavior of large-scale oligopolistic enterprises (Carr, 1983; Hayter and Watts, 1983). At first glance such a focus on “behavior” appears to hold out the possibility for a more active incorporation of workers’ political and cultural practices into location theory in economic geography. However, this is not the case. While many Weberian assumptions have been abandoned with this new
interest in the large-scale enterprise, the behavioralist approach to economic geography shares many of the same faults as its predecessors when it comes to dealing with labor. Given behavioralism’s origins in the management and administrative sciences, this is, perhaps, hardly surprising.

As with neo-Weberian location theory, there are two fundamental characteristics of the behavioralist approach which mark it as a Geography of Labor. First, its primary focus is upon how enterprises make investment and location decisions. As Hayter and Watts (1983:164) argue, the “main emphasis in [behavioralist] studies of locational choice has been in providing practical guidelines for managers concerned with finding new locations.” Again, the assumptions underlying this approach are defined by the needs of capital. Indeed, concern with management decision-making processes and the behavioral characteristics of the enterprise have sometimes reached such proportions that Carr (1983:396, emphasis in original) has commented that in some versions “The choices of management have . . . become the causes of industrial change.” Second, workers are excluded from consideration as active agents in these decisions. When labor is considered, as with neo-Weberian studies of the firm, it is again merely in the passive terms of how the spatial distribution of labor power, differentiated by skill, cost and so forth, is one influence on a corporation’s investment and location strategies. Hence, for instance, the product cycle model is largely predicated on the argument that as production becomes more standardized, corporations will seek out locations with low labor costs and/or high labor productivities. Equally, the literature on branch plant location in peripheral regions frequently emphasizes the importance of lower labor costs relative to those found in core regions (e.g. see Greenhut, 1956; Keeble, 1968; Krumme and Hayter, 1975; Lever, 1975; Townroe, 1975; Stafford, 1991). Whereas both these sets of literature consider labor an important influence on enterprises’ spatial structures, the point is that they do so from the explicit perspective of how capital can best exploit different labor markets.

To reiterate, neoclassical location theory represents a type of investigation that I have termed a Geography of Labor for two reasons: it is fundamentally descriptive of labor, and it examines the geography of economic activity from the explicit perspective of capital. It fails to incorporate workers in any active (let alone proactive) manner within its analyses, conceiving of labor instead as a largely inert variable in the calculus of the corporate/firm locational decision making process.

Marxist Economic Geography and Labor

The influx of Marxist thought in the 1970s transformed the way economic geography had traditionally been done. In particular, it sparked a welter of theorizing about the connections between the uneven development of space and the broad forces of capitalist accumulation. Although there was much early debate about whether or not focusing on patterns of geographically uneven development was simply fetishizing space and diverting
attention away from the social relations of capitalism (see Massey, 1978; Walker, 1978; Anderson, 1980; Peet, 1981; Smith 1979, 1981), by the 1980s the notion of the “social production of space” had become common parlance in the Marxist literature in economic geography. Whereas neoclassical approaches tended to see space as an ontologically-prior stage upon which economic transactions took place — so that space was theorized as a “container” of social life — Marxist approaches increasingly sought to portray the actual production of space in particular ways as integral rather than contingent to the continuation of the accumulation process. In this view space was not simply a reflection of society but was more fundamentally imbricated in the constitution and functioning of society. Thus Harvey (1982:417), for instance, suggested that “the geographical organization of capitalism internalizes the contradictions within the value form.” Clearly, for Harvey and others, the making of space in particular ways had come to be seen as a key part of the circulation of capital. Likewise, following from this, crises of capitalist accumulation were argued to take on specific spatial forms.

The idea that capital must actively produce space in particular ways owes much to the work of Henri Lefèbvre whose ideas have provoked a great deal of recent theorizing in critical human geography (Soja, 1989; Smith, 1990; Merrifield, 1993). Essentially, Lefebvre’s thesis argued that the production of space was central to the reproduction of capital and capitalist social relations (Lefebvre, 1970, 1976, 1991). His argument touched on a historical debate which has raged within the Marxist literature since Marx’s own time concerning the geographical nature of European imperialism and its relationship with capitalist development (see Smith, 1990:93-96 for more on this debate). Briefly stated, Marx had implied, and Rosa Luxemburg (1951) had explicitly argued, that the closing of the imperial frontiers to capitalism’s further absolute geographical expansion would eventually herald its downfall because there were now no longer non-capitalist societies to which the economic crises of the core European countries could be exported as part of a geographical solution to capital’s internal contradictions. In opposition to this argument, Lefebvre maintained that the end of European imperialism patently had not witnessed the end of capitalism. Rather, he suggested (1976:21, emphasis in original) in a now somewhat overused turn of phrase that capitalism has found itself able to attenuate (if not resolve) its internal contradictions for a century, and consequently, in the hundred years since the writing of Capital, it has succeeded in achieving ‘growth.’ We cannot calculate at what price, but we do know the means: by occupying space, by producing a space.

For Lefebvre (1991), the secret to capital’s success lies in the ability to construct the appropriate material geographies which it can use to facilitate the extraction and realization of surplus value during the accumulation
process. However, whereas geographies produced by capital in the pursuit of profit must have use value for capital, they may have no use value for labor. Herein lies a source of contradiction and (potential) struggle, for workers may have very different geographical visions with regard to how the economic landscape should look and function than do capitalists. Such a conclusion would appear to suggest that in Lefebvre’s schema there is potentially great theoretical room for incorporating workers as (pro)active shapers of the geography of capitalism in the first instance. However, paradoxically, this is not the case.

Lefebvre’s conception of the production of space under capitalism is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is its curious mix of mental and material worlds — at times the term “abstract space” seems to include everything from the urban redevelopment of Haussmann and Le Corbusier to space as exchange value, to fashion, sport, and even sexuality as ideology (p. 309). Of greater concern with regard to labor’s role in making geographies, however, is the fact that despite his admonitions that struggle is important for shaping the production of space, ironically, Lefebvre has trouble incorporating labor theoretically as an active geographical agent whose activities can directly shape the geography of capitalism. This problem stems from his initial failure to locate struggle at the center of his analysis. Let me explain this contention in more detail.

The dynamic nature of capitalist accumulation means that space is always in a state of flux, constantly being made and remade. This renewal is contested for, in the reproduction of capitalist social relations, “there is no purely repetitive process” (Lefebvre, 1976:11). With this statement we clearly see that Lefebvre means to argue that struggle shapes the production of space. He further states (1991:55, emphasis added):

> As for the class struggle, its role in the production of space is a cardinal one in that this production is performed solely by classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes. Today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space. Indeed, it is that struggle alone which prevents abstract space from taking over the whole planet and papering over all differences. Only the class struggle has the capacity to differentiate, to generate differences which are not intrinsic to economic growth qua strategy, ‘logic’ or ‘system’ — that is to say, differences which are neither induced by nor acceptable to that growth.

This is an illuminating statement for several reasons. In particular, although he appears to emphasize the production of space as emanating from the dynamics of class struggle, Lefebvre in fact conceives of workers’ struggles as being somewhat secondary to the actual process of producing space under capitalism. Instead, for him, it is capital as maker of abstract space (what he conceives as the “space of the bourgeoisie” [p. 57]) that is assigned primacy. Class struggle on the part of labor merely serves to modify these
spaces, to prevent abstract space from taking over the whole planet.⁴ In effect, class struggle is seen to play its part only after abstract space has already come into existence.

Such a theoretical privileging of capital as primary maker of the geography of capitalism in the first instance leads Lefebvre to argue that the downfall of abstract space results, ultimately, from its own internal contradictions. In producing abstract space “contradictions . . . come into being which are liable eventually to precipitate the downfall of abstract space” (1991:52). Not only are these contradictions (what Lefebvre calls “differential space”) internal to abstract space, but they simply “come into being.” There is only the most abstract sense that they are actively created through struggle. Despite his earlier assertion that struggle prevents abstract space from taking over the whole planet, Lefebvre indicates that abstract space’s “falsification is self-generated” (p. 393). In the final analysis, then, such a view provides very little theoretical room to conceive of workers as active participants in the production of the geography of capitalism or as capable of challenging capital’s spatial practices and the landscapes which they produce.

Within Anglophonic geography during the past three decades Marxist geographers have developed a substantial body of theory concerning the production of space under capitalism. In his The Limits to Capital, David Harvey (1982) has theoretically integrated the production of space with the accumulation process to show how capital must create particular “spatial fixes” in the landscape at particular times to allow accumulation to proceed. These spatial fixes are not only integral to the circulation of capital but, Harvey argues, they constitute the very basis for the uneven development of the geography of capitalism. Thus, for Harvey (1982:417, emphasis added), uneven development is “expressed partially in terms of an opposition between countervailing forces, making for geographical concentration or dispersal in the circulation of capital.” Principally, such uneven development is the “coherent product of diverse intersecting forces operating within the overall unity of the circulation process” (p. 419). This geography of uneven development is never fixed, though, but is constantly remade during “The continuous re-structuring of spatial configurations through revolutions in value . . .” (p. 426).

Likewise, Neil Smith (1990) has laid out a powerful analysis of the dynamic of the geography of capitalism and the production of uneven development. For Smith, uneven development is not simply a historical “accident” but is integral to the accumulation process and is the very “hallmark of the geography of capitalism” (p. xiii). Smith’s work makes clear the links between the uneven geographical development of capitalism and the accumulation process. Thus, he argues, the geography of uneven development “derives specifically from the opposed tendencies, inherent in capital, towards the differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production” (p. xv, emphasis added). Integral to the accumulation process is the fact that capital produces space “in its own image . . . [Furthermore,] not only does capital produce space in general,
[but] it produces the real spatial scales that give uneven development its coherence” (p. xv, emphasis added).

Doreen Massey’s (1995) work on spatial divisions of labor also seeks to place the locational dynamics of firms within the broader social forces of capitalist political economy. In this work Massey makes theoretical connections between production, social structures and the geography of accumulation as a means to understand the uneven development of the British space-economy. Her goal in her provocative *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (first published in 1984) is to “set the changing geography of industry and employment within the wider context of the development of capitalist society . . . [and] to explore the geography of industry and of jobs through an interpretation of the spatial organisation of the social relations of capitalist production” (p. 5). For Massey, the underlying cause of uneven development is “the organisation of production on capitalist lines.”

These works are truly pathbreaking in the way in which they have encouraged Anglophonic (and other) Marxist geographers to think about the dynamics of uneven development under capitalism and the relationship between space and accumulation. Yet, they are also somewhat problematic in the way in which they conceive of and/or marginalize the roles of workers in shaping the economic geography of capitalism. Certainly, all three argue for the importance of class struggle in capitalist society. However, in terms of their actual analyses of the making of economic geographies and their practice of economic geography, these approaches pay rather scant attention to how workers’ activities can directly and significantly shape the geography of capitalism and focus, instead, primarily on the geographical structure of capital and how capital structures landscapes through its own activities (such as the pursuit of profit).

For example, in *The Limits to Capital* Harvey (1982:380) has tended to conceive of workers’ roles as shapers of the economic landscape only in rather limited terms of how the migration of labor affects the accumulation process. Elsewhere, in viewing class struggle in terms of “the resistance which the working class offers to the violence which the capitalist form of accumulation inevitably inflicts upon it” Harvey’s (1978:124, emphasis added) epistemological priority allows labor to resist capital but apparently not to take the initiative in class struggle. Likewise, his comments that “capital represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image” and that “capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time” (p. 124, emphasis added) highlight the extent to which he sees the geography of capitalism as largely the product of capital itself. Such statements leave little theoretical room to acknowledge that workers struggle (often successfully) to shape the economic geography of capitalism in ways which they themselves view as advantageous as part of their own practices of self-reproduction.

Smith’s theoretical work on uneven development, too, tends to view the making of the economic geography of capitalism as the product of capital
and presents a study focused almost exclusively on the activities and structure of capital. Although he is sensitive to issues of class struggle, ultimately his explanation for the process of uneven development rests on an analysis of the internal dynamic of capital. Thus, for Smith (1990:xiii, emphasis added) “uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital.” There is little theoretical examination of how workers may also be actively involved in the uneven production of space as part of their own social and spatial praxis designed to facilitate their own self-reproduction (e.g., by engaging in boosterism or protectionist policies to ensure that particular places and groups of workers enjoy privileged positions in the local, regional, national, or global economies). Rather, for Smith, uneven development and the making of the geography of capitalism result primarily from the actions of capital.

Equally, while Massey is certainly correct to argue (1995:7) that “The world is not simply the product of capital’s requirements” and that spatial structures are the “object of political struggle” (p. 82), her thesis about the spatial division of labor predominantly focuses on understanding the structure of capital in the British space-economy and how layers of capital investment have shaped contemporary patterns of economic development. The foremost concern of her book is to illuminate the connections between the activities of capital and the spatial structures of production. Her theoretical examination of uneven development (as laid out in Chapter Three of Spatial Divisions of Labour) relies principally on an analysis of the social and spatial organization of firms for its explanation, particularly concerning how they restructure their production through intensification and rationalization of the production process and investment in technology, and the implications this has for the economic geography of capitalist development. Whilst arguing that landscapes are contested objects, Massey’s early work, perhaps understandably given her interests at the time, tended to pay rather less attention to the geographical practice of labor than it did to that of capital. (More recently she has written about the changing geography of trade unionism in Britain and how capital has used spatial shifts in production against labor (e.g. Massey and Painter, 1989), although without perhaps making extensive theoretical connections between this geography, labor’s use and production of space as part of the construction of a “spatial fix” in its own image, and the uneven development of capitalism as brought about, at least in part, by labor.)

That Marxist-inspired scholars have tended to prioritize capital as actor is perhaps not surprising given the heritage of Marx’s own work. As Stanley Aronowitz (1990) points out, Marx himself was concerned to examine the processes of capitalist accumulation and to develop a critique of bourgeois political economy as constructed from the viewpoint of capital. Hence, “the three volumes of Capital,” notes Aronowitz (p. 171), “are written from the point of view of capitalist accumulation.” Nevertheless, this explanation does little to mitigate the fact that such a marginalization of workers as
(pro)active, sentient geographical actors is limiting theoretically for it presents a world in which workers’ social and spatial practices remain largely unconnected to the process of the uneven development of capitalism. In short, in such a view workers are not theorized as being present at the making of the economic geography of capitalism but, instead, are seen to struggle and live within the contours of an economic and social geography created by and for capital. While capital can fashion the geography of capitalism to suit its own needs, there is little sense that workers may also do the same.

Certainly, this is not to say that labor has been ignored completely in Marxist economic geography. Richard Walker and Michael Storper (Walker and Storper, 1981; Storper and Walker, 1983, 1984, 1989), for instance, have argued for a greater recognition of the role of labor in locational analysis. In a series of publications they criticize both neoclassical economic geography and some of its Marxist variants for a number of flaws, not least of which is that labor is invariably conceptualized in the same terms used to describe inanimate commodities such as cars, shirts, grapes, and the like. Conceptualizing labor in this way, they argue, has the effect of denying the human element to the production process. Although, they maintain, labor power does indeed take a commodity form, it is different from a true commodity because workers are not the same as objects of work or machines used in production — and worker behavior can drastically affect the labor process. In contrast to neoclassical economics which they say has considered labor as a factor of location only in labor intensive industries, Walker and Storper aver that labor is an important locational factor even in highly capital intensive industries and “that a strong argument can still be made for the primacy of labor over all other market factors influencing industrial location” (Walker and Storper, 1981:497). However, despite arguing that a greater emphasis should be placed on labor as a factor of location in locational analysis, Walker and Storper’s approach nevertheless does not link explicitly workers’ own economic and social practices to their production of their own spatial fixes and of economic landscapes. While they may have refocused attention on labor, the point is that they have done so from a perspective which still examines the evolution of the economic landscape in terms of how capital makes locational decisions. Although they touch briefly on the issue of worker migration and how such patterns affect the geography of industrial development (e.g. see Storper and Walker, 1989:157), they still are primarily concerned with how the supply and demand of particular types of labor are important to capitalists in making their investment decisions and how, through these decisions, capitalists shape the economic landscape. There is little consideration of how workers themselves actively seek to shape the economic geography of capitalism and to make space in ways not dictated by capital.

Gordon Clark has also examined some of the connections between the geography of labor relations and the making of economic geographies. His work has focused particularly on the role of labor law and state institutions
(such as the National Labor Relations Board) in shaping processes of industrial restructuring (Clark, 1985, 1988, 1989). This represents a vital contribution to the literature on the location of economic activity, for previously both traditional and more critical brands of economic geography had virtually ignored the spatial implications of the law and how legal interpretations concerning legislation can have crucial implications for the geography of labor relations and patterns of economic development. However, while providing tantalizing insights into the geography of labor law, Clark stops short of examining how working class people themselves construct landscapes and shape uneven development as part of their spatial praxis designed to ensure their daily and generational reproduction. Instead, he focuses primarily on how the activities and organization of the state—through, for example, the NLRB and the judicial system—structure the economic landscape.

Richard Peet’s (1983) analysis of the “geography of class struggle in the US” also sought to highlight the role of labor in the location of economic activities. By analyzing state level data concerning numbers of strikes, percentage of the workforce represented by labor unions, wage levels, and an inverse measure of a state’s business climate, Peet attempted to make connections between the geography of class struggle and the location of manufacturing industry. By classifying those states with high numbers of strikes, high wages, a large percentage of workers represented by unions, and a poor business climate (as seen through the eyes of employers) as areas of “high” class struggle, Peet sought to show how manufacturing capital has relocated in the post-World War II period to states with “low” levels of class struggle (defined as states with the opposite characteristics). “Overall,” he concludes, “the data reveal a definite relation between the level of class struggle and the changing geography of employment” (Peet, 1983:130). Again, this represents a significant contribution to understanding the thoroughly political and class nature of economic restructuring and the location of economic activity. However, ultimately Peet’s approach remains largely descriptive of labor. The story presented is one of how capital has used the uneven spatial distribution of these four factors to restructure the post-World War Two economic geography of the U.S. There is little examination of how workers attempt actively to shape the economic geography of capitalism themselves as part of a spatial fix for labor. Rather, it is capital which is seen as the maker of the economic landscape through the location choices it makes.

More recently there has been an active exchange concerning the geographical aspects of trade union decline in Britain (see Martin, et al., 1993, 1994; Massey, 1994; Painter, 1994). Primarily the debate has concerned the problems of doing research on working class organizations and how to explain the geographical patterns of change in union membership in certain industries. This debate represents an important development within economic geography and provides crucial insights into the nature of the (in this case British) capitalist space-economy and the geography of labor.
Whilst such work is certainly a solid start to countering the capital-focused nature of much contemporary economic geography, to date it has not sufficiently theorized how workers and their institutions actively seek to mold the economic landscape in their attempt to facilitate their own self-reproduction. The active creation of economic landscapes by workers as a fundamental part of their social praxis and ability to reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis is generally ignored. The production of space is not incorporated as an integral part of workers’ social existence but is, rather, integrated into the analysis largely in terms of how trade union membership is exhibited across the landscape.

Of course, such a brief examination of the Marxist literature within geography on the production of space can never hope to do justice to the depth and breadth of insight which such analyses have provided concerning the historical geography of capitalism. However, by focusing on a number of very influential works which I see as having been key in defining and setting the theoretical agenda for Marxist economic geography — works which I think are fairly emblematic of Marxist approaches as a whole — I believe such an examination does provide an indication of the major thrust of Marxist work within economic geography during the past three decades. In contrast to mainstream approaches which conceive of space as a stage upon which economic actors simply interact, Marxist work has focused on the processes whereby geographies are actively produced as social constructions integral to the reproduction of capitalist social relations and the continuance of the accumulation process. And yet, despite its claims that workers enjoy a privileged position within analysis because value is derived from labor, ironically much Marxist work within geography has tended rather to overlook labor’s role in actively making the geography of capitalism in favor of the analysis of the dynamics of capital. It is capital (together, sometimes, with the state) which is conceptualized as the active agent structuring economic landscapes and which has received by far the greatest theoretical and empirical attention. Workers’ roles as active makers of the geography of capitalism through their efforts to create spatial fixes which facilitate their social reproduction and hence survival have been decidedly undertheorized. In what follows, then, I present an argument in which I attempt to build on these highly influential works so as to expand our understanding of the production of capitalism’s geography. In addition to theorizing how capital produces space as part of its spatial fix, it is important to more fully theorize labor as attempting to make its own spatial fixes and to show how these, too, shape the geography of capitalism.

Towards a Labor Geography

The production of space in particular ways is not only important for capital’s ability to survive by enabling accumulation and the reproduction of capital itself (pace Lefebvre and Harvey), but it is also crucial for workers’
abilities to survive and reproduce themselves. Just as capital does not exist in an aspatial world, neither does labor. The process of labor’s self-reproduction must take place in particular geographical locations. Given this fact, it becomes clear that workers are likely to want to shape the economic landscape in ways that facilitate this self-reproduction. Struggles over the location of work, new or continued investment (public or private), access to housing and transport, all can play significant roles in allowing working class people to reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis. Recognizing that workers may see their own self-reproduction as integrally tied to ensuring the economic landscape is made in certain ways and not in others (as a landscape of employment rather than of unemployment, for instance), allows them to be incorporated into analyses of the location of economic activities in a theoretically much more active manner than traditionally has been the case.

For example, whereas workers’ involvement in local boosterist campaigns is often portrayed simply as a bad dose of false consciousness in which they help to sustain local capitals, in fact most workers would probably see retaining and/or attracting investment to their particular localities as integral to their ability to sustain their own livelihoods. Consequently, they may participate vigorously in such campaigns, not as cultural or class dupes but as active economic and geographical agents. Likewise, just as capital may find itself constrained by the structure of landscapes created at previous periods of accumulation (cf. Harvey, 1982), so may workers find that the landscapes which facilitated their social and biological reproduction in earlier times are no longer appropriate for doing so. Thus, as the structure of the family changes or as workers may have to commute greater distances to work, they may struggle for new urban designs which include centers for communally-run childcare, differently configured homes to accommodate new living arrangements (single-parenthood, for instance), new highways, and so forth — a point recognized by a number of feminist writers who have examined how women directly shape economic restructuring and the form of the built environment through their activities (cf. Stamp, 1980; Wekerle, Peterson, and Morley, 1980; Holcomb, 1981; MacKenzie, 1986; England, 1991). All of these activities are significant for shaping the uneven development of capitalism in ways not controlled by capital itself.

Suggesting that workers have a vested interest in making the geography of capitalism in some ways and not in others allows us to say four interrelated things theoretically. First, it suggests that even if workers’ struggles are less than revolutionary and even if they are still bound within the confines of a capitalist economic system, the production of the geography of capitalism is not always the prerogative of capital. Understanding only how capital is structured and operates is not sufficient to understand the making of the geography of capitalism. For sure, this does not mean that labor is free to construct landscapes as it pleases, for its agency is restricted just as is capital’s — by history, by geography, by
structures which it cannot control, and by the actions of its opponents. But, it does mean that a more active conception of labor and workers’ geographical agency must be incorporated into explanations of the making of economic landscapes. Capital is not the only actor actively shaping the geography of capitalism or even, in some places and times, the most significant one, and labor is not simply a “factor” of location in the sense in which it is so often conceived.

Second, such a conceptualization allows us to begin thinking about how the social actions of workers relate to their desire to implement in the physical landscape their own spatial visions of a geography of capitalism which is enabling of their own self-reproduction and social survival. Following Harvey’s (1982) argument about how capital seeks to make a “spatial fix” appropriate to its condition and needs at particular times in particular locations, it is also necessary to see workers’ activities in terms of their desire to create particular spatial fixes appropriate to their own condition and needs at particular times in particular locations. In addition to theorizing how capital attempts to create its spatial fix in its own image, we should also think of how workers attempt to create in their own image what we might call “labor’s spatial fix.” Likewise, any examination of how workers seek to impose their spatial visions on the landscape must recognize that “labor” is not an undifferentiated category and that different and competing groups of workers may in fact have vested interests in generating quite different spatial fixes — whereas group A may seek to keep employment in community/country A, group B may try to encourage capital flight to community/country B.

Third, conceiving of how labor might seek particular spatial fixes at particular historical junctures — fixes which are sometimes coincident with, but frequently different from, those favored by capital — allows a much less mechanistic and more deeply political theorization of the contested nature of the production of space under capitalism for, ultimately, it is the conflicts over whose spatial fix (capitalists’ or workers’) is actually set in the landscape that are at the heart of the dynamism of the geography of capitalism. This means that understanding processes of class formation and inter- and intra-class relations is fundamentally a geographical project. Workers often succeed in constructing landscapes in certain ways which augment their own social power and undercut that of capital. Although neoclassical and many Marxist accounts often portray capital as the maker of economic landscapes into which workers — who are themselves conceived of as somehow being disconnected from the process of producing capitalism’s geography — are merely posited as if dropped from the air, workers are in fact intimately connected to the production of space through their efforts to impose their own spatial fix on the landscape and so to develop geographical solutions to the problems of ensuring their own self-reproduction. Even when they are defeated in this goal, the very fact of their social and geographical existence and struggle means they shape the process of producing space in ways not fully controlled by capital.
Fourth, in addition to recognizing the active roles played by working class people in making the geography of capitalism, there is also the need to recognize their roles in producing the very real geographic scales which, as Smith (1990:xv) has argued, “give uneven development its coherence.” Whereas in Uneven Development Smith (1990, emphasis added) sees the production of geographic scale as arising out of the “tendencies, inherent in capital, toward the differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production,” I would argue that working class people, too, play their part in the generation of such scales and, hence, in making the unevenly developed geography of capitalism. Workers’ struggles are frequently about constructing the very geographical scales at which capitalism itself operates. For example, whereas the extent of the urban scale is often defined in terms of Travel to Work Areas, workers’ choices regarding where to live and their ability to win wage increases and shortened work hours (thereby allowing them to travel greater distances to work) clearly play an active role in determining the size and functional integrity of such TTWA’s and, hence, of the urban scale. Similarly, unionized workers’ abilities to create regional or even national contracts as a means to equalize conditions across space not only represent the creation of real geographical scales of bargaining but can also dramatically impact patterns of economic development and the location of work by preventing employers from whipsawing plants in different localities against each other. In turn, this directly affects the geographic development of these industries as it may prevent capital from leaving one region and migrating to another with lower wages or less restrictive work rules. In this sense, workers can be seen to be playing active roles in the creation of the economic geographies of entire industries.

So far in this essay I have sought to make a conceptual argument for why workers’ efforts to develop their own spatial fixes as part of their social reproduction must be given greater theoretical attention if the geography of capitalism is to be more fully understood. It is perhaps appropriate at this point, however, to offer up some empirical examples to back up my claims and to illustrate how workers’ geographical praxis can indeed shape the evolution of the economic landscape at scales from the local to the global in quite significant ways.

Workers and the Production of the Spaces and Scales of Capitalism

Here I want to give a (very) brief outline of instances of workers playing significant roles in making the geography of capitalism, both in cooperation with, and in opposition to, certain segments of capital. (The examples presented below draw upon larger empirical works reported elsewhere: for more details see Herod (1997a), and (1994) and (1997b) respectively.) In so doing, I want not only to provide empirical examples to support the theoretical assertions made above but also to argue that even when workers pursue spatial fixes which are beneficial to certain segments of capital, they
do so as active geographical agents making space as part of their own very real political and economic goals. Hence, even in such cases of capital-labor cooperation, a fuller understanding of the production of space under capitalism requires examining how workers have attempted to create economic geographies which they perceive as being advantageous to themselves.

The first of these two sets of examples examines US workers’ roles in facilitating the globalization of US capital and the underdevelopment of Latin America. I suggest that in its role as handmaiden to US capital, the US labor movement played a crucial role in bringing about the underdevelopment of Latin America and so of shaping at the international scale the geography of capitalism. The second example I wish to outline examines how dockers in the US actively shaped the evolution of their industry’s economic geography in response to a series of technological innovations. Workers’ struggles to impose their own geographic vision and spatial fix on the cargo handling industry in the face of ardent opposition from the employers were central to the evolution of the industry’s economic geography, an economic geography which cannot be understood simply by recourse to the examination of capital’s efforts to produce space.

a) Workers and Globalization: Typically, the globalization of economic and political relations has been presented in the geographic literature as the project of capital. Theoretically, the global economy’s creation is generally seen as the outcome of capital’s need to incorporate ever greater amounts of living labor, raw materials, and consumers/markets within the circulation process. For capital “going global” is as much a geographical project as it is a social one. It affords individual firms greater flexibility than if they remain “local,” whilst it may also allow capital collectively to displace spatially to other parts of the world crises of accumulation (cf. Harvey, 1985). However, the history (and geography) of international labor migrations and labor internationalism suggest that this is only part of the story of globalization and that, in fact, working class people have also played very active roles in this process (see, e.g., van Holthoon and van der Linden, 1988). The intervention of the US labor movement in Latin America during the past century or so is especially illustrative of the active role played by workers in the process of globalization.

The US labor movement has a long history of operating internationally. It has been particularly active in attempting to implement its own “workers’ Monroe Doctrine” in Latin America, both as part of a deeply-held conviction about the US’s “civilizing” mission in this part of the world (itself derived from a belief in the superiority of US civic and political institutions and traditions) but also as a means to bring the region under the economic influence of the United States (see Herod, 1997a). With US manufacturers until recently largely located within the confines of the United States, many US workers have historically seen their own ability to enjoy relatively high living standards as integrally tied to US manufacturers’ success in carving out new markets in the region. Such success would, workers believed,
stimulate production and employment in the United States. Indeed, many workers have shared the view of John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America, who, at a 1939 Labor Day address, argued that “Central and South America are capable of absorbing all of our excess and surplus commodities” (quoted in Scott, 1978:201). For Lewis, expansion into Latin America was one way of creating a spatial fix which would maintain US workers’ livelihoods by exporting crises of underconsumption abroad.

Working to maintain access to Latin American markets has been a key element in the US labor movement’s efforts to create an international spatial fix for much of this century. Consequently, many US unions have actively participated in destroying militant anti-US and anti-capitalist trade unions and political organizations in Latin America and encouraging the growth of more US-friendly bodies as a way to open up the region’s markets to US capital. Such activities have seen the AFL-CIO frequently working hand in glove with the State Department, the CIA, and various US transnational corporations (see Morris, 1967; Scott, 1978; Simms, 1992). Indeed, the AFL-CIO set up its own body in the 1960s — the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) — to support US capital in Latin America and, in the words of one official, to “make the investment climate more attractive and more inviting to [US corporations]” (quoted in Spalding, 1988:264; see also Barry and Preusch, 1990 for more on the AIFLD). Developing an international spatial fix to problems of underconsumption in the US has been an important part of US labor’s ability to ensure its continued self-reproduction, even if it has been at the expense of limiting the ability of workers elsewhere to do likewise. In seeking to create such a spatial fix not only has the US labor movement served as an agent of the globalization of economic and political relations, but it has also played an important part in the continued underdevelopment of the region (by helping to destroy/undermine indigenous manufacturing which threatened US competitiveness and market shares, for example) and, hence, in making the unevenly developed geography of capitalism in the Western hemisphere. Likewise, although current efforts to build international solidarity links with Latin American workers can be seen as an attempt by some US workers to develop genuine contacts with Latin American workers as a means of confronting transnational capital, of helping workers to organize for better wages and working conditions, and so of stimulating development in the region, it can also be read as an attempt simply to maintain their historic spatial fixes and levels of economic development which are currently being undermined by the very movement of factories from the United States to Mexico and other countries to take advantage of low wages.

In this sense, the practice of international labor solidarity can be regarded as an effort by particular groups of workers to develop spatial fixes and to organize social relations between workers in different countries in such a way as to shape the manner in which the global space-economy is made. Building networks of solidarity is precisely about overcoming geographical and social
barriers to cooperation between workers which, in the process, affects how the economic geography of capitalism evolves. At least since the nineteenth century international labor organizations have worked to develop transnational links between workers. Without question, this has not always been either a smooth or a successful project, and labor internationalism has frequently been held hostage to various nationalistic and/or ideological rivalries (see Radosh, 1969 and Windmuller, 1980 for examples of how Cold War rivalries were played out in the international labor arena). Nevertheless, these activities have had very real impacts on the geography of the global economy through, for example, restricting the ability of corporations to play workers in different places against each other and shaping the investment opportunities available to corporations (cf. Herod, 1995 which examines how a global campaign waged on behalf of a group of US steelworkers successfully restricted the planned geographic expansion of a multi-billion dollar corporation in Eastern Europe and Latin America).

b) Workers and the Making of One Industry’s Economic Geography: Prior to the 1950s, dockers and employers in the U.S. East Coast longshore industry bargained for their labor contracts on a port-by-port basis. The introduction of containerization in the industry, however, unleashed powerful geographical forces which served as a catalyst to transform the political and economic geography of the industry. For dockers the growing disintegration of regional hinterlands brought about by faster waterfront handling and overland transportation of cargo raised the possibility that in some ports wages might be undercut and strikes broken as shippers were increasingly able to use other, more distant ports to serve traditional markets. This was particularly worrisome to New York dockers who had the highest wages in the industry and who were the first to face the threat of job loss, the New York-Puerto Rico trade having been the first sea-route to be containerized. To address this problem the dockers’ union (the International Longshoremen’s Association) adopted a specifically geographical strategy aimed at producing a new spatial fix in the industry, one which has dramatically changed its economic geography. Two elements formed the basis of this fix.

The first element of the spatial fix pursued by the union and its members involved implementing a series of work preservation rules designed to retain certain types of cargo handling work at the piers. Whereas traditionally all cargo had been handled loose at the waterfront, with the introduction of the new technology now only the containers themselves had to be handled at the piers and the much more labor intensive work of packing and unpacking their contents (i.e., the actual freight) could be done at cheaper locations inland. By the 1960s dockers and their leaders had become particularly concerned that much of their traditional cargo handling work was increasingly being done away from East Coast waterfronts at inland container consolidating warehouses. In response, and after several lengthy strikes, dockers forced steamship operators throughout the East
Coast industry to agree to prohibit the conduct of certain types of container work at inland warehouses, to close various off-pier warehouses where this work was now being done, and to transfer such work to the waterfront (see Herod, 1994 for more details). Although they faced substantial opposition from steamship operators, trucking companies, and even the Teamsters union which represented workers employed in such off-pier warehouses, by consciously manipulating the geography of work in the industry in this manner dockers were able to sustain pier jobs and thus their own livelihoods. In effect, by imposing their own spatial fix on the industry dockers were able to retain at the waterfront some of the work that otherwise would have migrated inland. Consciously reshaping the geography of employment in the industry was a key element in dockers’ post-containerization strategy to ensure their own livelihoods were maintained. Their ability to make space in a way that benefited them, rather than in ways which the employers or even other groups of workers (such as the off-pier Teamsters) preferred, was significant in shaping the evolution of the industry’s economic geography during this period.

The second part of the spatial fix adopted concerned the union’s ability to construct a new geographic scale of bargaining in the industry. When containerization had first been introduced into the industry dockers in New York had struggled to impose various work preservation agreements to limit the job losses augured by the new technology. However, rank and file dockers and their leaders quickly realized that any work preservation agreements implemented solely in New York were doomed to failure because steamship operators could easily avoid the agreements’ provisions by shipping instead through other ports such as Philadelphia, Boston, or even some of the southern ports, and transporting cargo overland by truck or rail to serve the New York market. Consequently, they determined that any viable strategy would have to be implemented in all ports from Maine to Texas where the union represented dockers. Likewise, many southern dockers increasingly favored a coastwide contract which adopted the provisions negotiated in New York, since this would bring them higher wages and better working conditions. Beginning in the mid-1950s the dockers’ union fought to replace the system of local bargaining with one which was coastwide in scope. In effect, they attempted to reconstruct the very geographic scale at which negotiations were carried out and agreements implemented. Employers, on the other hand, opposed such an expansion of the scale of bargaining for fear it would reduce their flexibility and force them to match the higher wages paid in New York. For twenty years the union fought to impose a new geography of bargaining on the industry by developing a master contract that would equalize wages and many work conditions throughout East Coast ports. Certainly, this was not an easy process and many times the dockers’ strikes were defeated. Nevertheless, through their struggles waterfront workers were eventually able to implement their own spatial and scalar fix on the industry. This they did in a number of distinct (geographical) stages.
The union’s first success came in 1957 when it forced North Atlantic employers to adopt a regional master contract covering the ports from Maine to Virginia. This represented a significant break with the past because for the first time dockers in these ports would be covered under a single legally enforceable contract that included provisions guaranteeing between-ports equality of wages and several other work-related issues. In addition, although they were not legally bound to adopt the North Atlantic master contract, operators in the South Atlantic and Gulf ports were also increasingly pressured by dockers to do so, since for the union this would result in a system of pattern bargaining which stretched throughout the East Coast. Indeed, the union’s success in imposing such a master contract and pattern bargaining system on the industry forced the employers themselves to restructure their own organization and in 1970 to form a multi-port bargaining association that covered the North Atlantic ports. This reorganization on the part of the employers represented the second stage in the evolution of the union’s new spatial fix for the industry. At least since the 1950s the union had taken the “position . . . that all companies that we have any control over should sit down around the table with us . . . and make a rate for the entire United States” (Gleason, 1955:878). Dockers’ success in forcing the North Atlantic employers to develop a new bargaining association that would negotiate for the entire region was a significant achievement in this regard. Likewise, the formation of similar multiport employer bargaining associations in the South Atlantic and Gulf regions at this time were further evidence of the union’s ability to force the employers to restructure their own organization so as to be able to deal with the union’s efforts to remake the geography of bargaining in the industry.

Although the union was successful in securing a regional master contract and system of pattern bargaining, dockers continued to push for a single legally enforceable coastwide agreement that would protect them from the consequences of containerization. This they finally gained in 1977 when they pressured employers into accepting in 34 ports from Maine to Texas a Job Security Program which was linked to a coastwide master contract. The JSP was essentially a coastwide fund into which the employers paid fees that would allow shortfalls in any individual port’s welfare and benefits programs to be made up by the industry as a whole. This would allow the union to respond in a coastwide manner to the problems of job loss brought about by containerization, since individual ports’ welfare schemes for idled dockers would now be supported by an industrywide guarantee of financing. For the first time in their history, dockers from Maine to Texas were covered by a single agreement that was legally enforceable and that would ensure all were protected equally. The JSP represented the crowning moment in the union’s campaign to remake the geography of bargaining in the industry from a system of locally negotiated and implemented contracts to one in which agreements were made at the scale of the entire coast.11

Certainly, the examples outlined above may be exceptional empirically (although I doubt it — there are many other instances of workers struggling
successfully to impose national contracts, to develop regional, national, or international links of solidarity, to help various national capitals to create new markets abroad and thereby to shape the unevenly developed geography of capitalism, and the like). Yet even if they were unusual empirically, the theoretical lessons that can be drawn from them are, I would argue, nevertheless important because they force us to consider seriously how workers and their organizations struggle to impose particular spatial fixes on the economic landscape and how these struggles in turn shape the geography of capitalism. For sure, U.S. capital has had a historical interest in expanding into Latin America, but the fact that the U.S. labor movement played such an active role in facilitating this expansion of political and economic relations in the region as part of its own internally generated agenda is important to remember and to theorize. Opportunities for investment abroad by U.S. corporations were created, in part, by the very actions of workers and trade union officials. Workers’ activities were important in structuring the choices open to capital and need to be accounted for in any understanding of the geography of underdevelopment in the region and the creation of a globalized economy.

Likewise, although the development of a coastwide agreement in the East Coast longshore industry may in fact have benefited some high cost operators (such as those in New York) who saw the competitive advantages previously enjoyed by lower wage ports eliminated as a result of a standardized wage rate, it is important to bear in mind that the impetus for creating an industrywide agreement came from dockers in the face of ardent employer opposition. Understanding the evolution of the economic geography of the industry requires understanding how dockers successfully imposed their own geographical vision on the employers. Seeking to explain the industry’s economic geography by focusing only on how capital seeks to develop spatial fixes as part of its strategy for survival and treating labor as somewhat secondary to the whole process of actively structuring the industrial landscape does not provide either a complete or a satisfactory explanation.

Conclusion

What I have sought to do in this paper is to question the theoretical and empirical primacy usually given capital when seeking to understand the making of the economic geography of capitalism. Principally, the paper argues for a move away from the writing of geographical studies which incorporate working class people in descriptive, capital-oriented taxonomic terms of their wage rates and the like (what I have termed a Geography of Labor) and towards a more serious consideration of how they actively produce economic spaces and scales in particular ways (both directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously) as part of their own spatial fixes and thus of how working class people’s spatial practices shape the location
of economic activity and the economic geography of capitalism (what I have termed a *Labor Geography*). Just as the production of particular spatial fixes is integral to capital’s ability to reproduce itself, working class people’s abilities to produce particular spatial fixes at particular geographical scales at particular historical junctures are an integral part of their self-reproduction on a daily and generational basis. This ability demands a greater theoretical and empirical consideration of how the implementation of “labor’s spatial fix” shapes the unevenly developed geography of capitalism.

Certainly, some excellent empirical work along these lines has been done in geography. Cooke (1985), for example, has shown how Welsh miners’ and steelworkers’ cultural and work practices have been key to defining the regional division of labor on the South Wales coalfields. Mitchell (1998) shows how migrant farm workers in California during the 1920s and 1930s played active roles in shaping the agricultural landscape by using roving organizers to link geographically labor struggles throughout the state and to undermine the ability of the growers to contain and thus control workers’ disputes in certain local communities. Holmes and Russonik (1991) show how the changing economic context of the auto industry led Canadian and U.S. workers to adopt quite different geographical strategies during the 1980s which ultimately led Canadian locals to break away from the United Auto Workers and which have had wider impacts on the industry’s geographical structure. Yet these are few and far between in economic geography. The bulk of work in the discipline continues to look first and foremost to the activities of capital when seeking to understand the evolution of the economic geography of particular industries or regions of the world. On the whole, workers as active geographical agents have tended to receive rather short shrift from geographers.

In arguing for an approach in economic geography which recognizes working class people’s capacity for proactive geographical praxis I do, however, have two caveats to make before concluding this essay. First, the discussion so far has tended to concentrate on the realm of production and, in particular, industrial production by waged labor. This is not because I necessarily consider production more important than issues of consumption. Rather, because my critique was initially aimed at the failure of traditional economic geography and Marxist work (both of which have tended to focus disproportionately on the world of industrial production) to incorporate labor in any proactive manner, it is a reflection of reviewing what has gone before. I do not mean, therefore, to imply that a *Labor Geography* need be confined to examining workers’ roles in shaping the geography merely of industrial production. It is also important to consider how workers’ activities shape the geography of consumption (cf. Frank, 1994). A *Labor Geography* should not so much be defined by its focus on particular sectors of the economy but by its concern to show how the actions of working class people and their institutions actively shape the geography of capitalism.
Second, although trade unions are significant expressions of working class organization, a Labor Geography should not be so narrowly defined that it is concerned simply with their activities. Unions are certainly important and often powerful workers’ institutions, but they do not hold a monopoly as instruments of the expression of working class people’s interests. A Labor Geography should therefore recognize that working class people — waged and unwaged — organize along many cross-cutting political, social, racial, gender and cultural lines. And yet, the fact that they do so as working class people rather than as capitalists distinctively shapes their spatial praxis and, hence, their production of geographical landscapes.

In part, then, my argument here about the neglect of working class people as sentient spatial actors in economic geography is a theoretical one. Examining how particular groups of workers create their own spatial fixes — either in collaboration with or in opposition to both capital and other groups of workers — can provide significant insights into how the unevenly developed geography of capitalism comes to be produced. But it is also a political argument (to the extent that the theoretical and the political can ever be separated) about whose interests economic geographers choose to try to understand and represent. The social production of knowledge is a political process. Conceiving of workers as simply factors of production or as “variable capital” is to tell the story of the making of economic geographies through the eyes of capital. By proposing the notion of a “spatial fix for labor” and arguing for a more active and central role for workers in theory-building and empirical investigations of the creation of economic landscapes, it is also possible to tell the story of the making of economic geographies through the eyes of workers. Whereas geographers, especially those in the “locational analysis” tradition, have often used their skills to help corporations locate and relocate new facilities, understanding how workers use and create space as part of their daily and generational self-reproduction can, perhaps, provide a way for geographers also to use their skills to aid the dispossessed and the oppressed.

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Notes

1. For more on the connections between academic geography and imperialism, see Hudson (1977); Harvey (1984); and the collection of essays in Smith and Godlewska (1994).
2. Harvey (1973), for instance, touched upon Lefebvre’s ideas (although critically) in Social Justice and the City.
3. Although he recognizes this contradiction, Lefebvre tends to equate the articulation of space’s use value with the political actions of the state which organizes space through its power to control urbanization and the like.

4. This point is also taken up in Herod (1994).

5. This paragraph draws on Herod (1994).

6. It should also be pointed out that low wages, low levels of union representation, and low strike rates are not necessarily indicative of low levels of class struggle but can also reflect the power of capital and the state to suppress some forms of worker praxis (such as organizing), whilst the suggestion that “work stoppages are a quite direct reflection of the level of underlying worker resistance to capital” (p. 124) ignores the fact that a strike is merely one expression of such opposition. As James Scott (1985) has shown us in a different context, resistance to capitalist social relations can also be manifested in other less dramatic ways: absenteeism, slowdowns, sewing the wrong color buttons on a shirt, and so forth. Equally, it is doubtful that membership in a union is per se necessarily indicative of high levels of class struggle. Whereas some unions are very militant, others are often bureaucratic and politically conservative.

7. Although this literature has argued that women should be seen as active participants in the restructuring of space, it has tended to focus at the neighborhood/urban scale rather than more broadly at other scales. Furthermore, as far as I am aware, there has been little attempt explicitly to link such activities integrally with theoretical statements about the necessity of uneven development under capitalism and the production of space as a fundamental part of workers’ social survival.

8. To be fair, Smith has recently moved away from such a capital-centered explanation of the production of scale. In the first edition of Uneven Development (1984) he conceived of scale in such capital-logic terms. In the Afterword to the second edition (1990) he outlines the struggle on the part of homeless people in New York City to geographically extend their control of space from Tompkins Square Park to the entire Lower East Side, a struggle which he sees as being precisely over making scales of resistance to gentrification.

9. The AFL-CIO has been active in other parts of the world through various of its other regional bodies, including the African-American Labor Center, the Asian-American Free Labor Institute, and the Free Trade Union Institute which operate in Africa, Asia, and Europe respectively.

10. In her analysis of US workers’ efforts to develop international solidarity with workers abroad, Johns (1994) makes an interesting distinction between what she calls “accommodating solidarity” which seeks simply to use the rhetoric of internationalism to assist workers abroad to organize and therefore to reduce the incentive for firms to leave the US, and what she calls “transformatory solidarity” in which workers are united across space to fundamentally transform social relations of production. In the first of these it is spatial interests which dominate; in the latter it is class interests which, she argues, dominate the agenda.

11. In the 1980s the national union leaders found it increasingly difficult to maintain this system and in 1986 a number of Local unions in the Gulf voted to abandon the coastwide agreement because they felt that the higher wages guaranteed under the master contract were causing them to lose work to cheaper non-union operations (see Herod, 1996b for more details). Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that for a decade the union was able to impose a coastwide agreement on the industry. Furthermore, the decision of Gulf dockers to abandon the master agreement represents a further twist in the story of workers’ attempts to develop spatial fixes that they perceive to be
advantageous to them at particular times and places. Whereas Gulf dockers had seen their own interests best served by seeking to impose a coastwide agreement during the period between 1953 and 1986, changing local conditions led them to decide that a new spatial and scalar fix which was sensitive to local conditions in the Gulf was more appropriate to their continued ability to find work in the industry. Equally, it shows that divisions between workers (Gulf and North Atlantic dockers) may lead them to adopt different spatial fixes. For North Atlantic dockers, the decision of Gulf dockers to offer wage givebacks represented a worrisome situation, for it provided the steamship operators with a renewed opportunity to ship through cheaper southern ports and to transport cargo up to New York by truck or train. Whilst North Atlantic dockers saw the coastwide wage agreement as a way of eliminating the potential for the transfer of work to cheaper ports in the South, for Gulf dockers offering locally negotiated contracts which included wage cuts was a way of reducing the loss of work to non-union operations and of generating a competitive advantage which might ensure the continuance of work on their own waterfronts.

References

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