

Uneven Development

Brett Christophers, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

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Glossary

Comparative Advantage An economic theory explaining why it can be beneficial for two parties to trade, even though one may be able to produce every item more cheaply than the other; the theory relies on the ratios between how easily the two parties can produce different goods, rather than absolute costs of production.

Perfect Competition A hypothetical market form in which no producer or consumer has the market power to influence prices.

Returns to Scale Refers to a technical property of production that predicts what happens to output if the quantity of all input factors is increased by a given amount—if output increases by that same amount, there are constant returns to scale, while if output increases by more than that amount, there are increasing returns to scale.

Uneven development is one of economic geography's central themes and can be interpreted very literally: it means, quite simply, that the development of the economy is uneven. This unevenness is seen to exist in various dimensions—different sectors of the economy, for instance, developing to varying degrees and at different rates—but, for geographers at least, “uneven development” ordinarily implies uneven *geographical* development. This unevenness can be and has been established on the basis of any number of different metrics (employment rates, income levels, rates of economic growth, and so on) and it has been described at all geographical scales—from intraurban disparities all the way through subnational regional differences to uneven international development.

Further to identifying and delineating such unevenness in its various forms, researchers' primary concern has been to seek to explain it. Within the academic discipline of human geography, uneven development has most commonly been understood as an inevitable—or at the very least, highly likely—manifestation of the capitalist mode of production. Drawing to one extent or another on Marxist political economy, writers in this tradition see uneven development not so much as an exception but as the norm, with development in one place directly and ineluctably linked to underdevelopment in another.

This article focuses primarily on such work. First, however, it is important to register another tradition of thinking on uneven development (a tradition against which those offering Marxian interpretations have often been writing), which, by contrast, sees uneven development more as a departure from, or exception to, “normal” economic development. This tradition has made much less of a mark within human geography, but it has been very influential in policy circles and elsewhere in the academy, and many of its practitioners within contemporary economics explicitly style themselves economic geographers. Its roots are in classical political economy, while today it resides at the heart of neoclassical trade and growth theory.

Uneven Development in Classical Political Economy and Neoclassical Economics

Adam Smith and David Ricardo, the two great British political economists of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, shared a deep concern about the obvious economic disparities between nations. Thus, their respective inquiries into national wealth—its nature and the causes of its growth—became at the same time investigations of uneven international development. Both writers saw contemporary trade flows as the immediate and identifiable cause of such disparities (Smith was optimistic that free(r) trade would ultimately lead to international convergence; Ricardo's prognosis, meanwhile, was more gloomy); however, for both writers, contemporary trade was essentially just exacerbating *existing* inequalities that neither one sought to ascribe to the underlying dynamics of modes of economic production. Instead, these inequalities were pegged to the differing internal characteristics of the territories in question: for Smith, inferior development reflected inferior physical geography, policy, or demography; for Ricardo, it was a function of being a producer and exporter of subsistence goods. In both cases, trade occurring in the context of these existing differences (on “absolute advantage” grounds for Smith and “comparative advantage” grounds for Ricardo) was serving merely to amplify those differences.

From the mid-19th Century until relatively recently, uneven development largely slipped off the radar of mainstream Western economics, as the latter came to be dominated by neoclassical (or marginalist) economic approaches. This lacuna was not surprising: the persistence of uneven development simply does not square with neoclassical growth theory, which predicts eventual income convergence. In the last 40 years, however, a number of economists, dissatisfied with the ability of neoclassical theory to account for uneven development, have sought to address this phenomenon directly. Two broad schools can be identified.

First, in the 1970s and 1980s, economists such as Ronald Findlay revisited the same questions about international trade that Smith and Ricardo had asked two centuries earlier: did it tend to reduce or increase international inequalities? As it had been for Ricardo, the answer proffered was largely pessimistic; the main difference was in the methodological approach, which was

now highly mathematical, with researchers explicitly building models of so-called “North–South” growth and trade. One key similarity remained: uneven development—a basic asymmetry in the stage of development between two regions—was assumed *already* to be in evidence. Few economists asked why such asymmetries had arisen in the first place, and where they did, their appeal to histories of empire and colonialism went largely unnoticed by most of their peers.

Second, since the mid-1980s, an alternative set of economic models has been advanced, in this case proceeding from the assumption of spatial symmetry. This is an important difference: these models aim to answer the question of why countries *starting from a comparable stage of development* might develop at different rates. Again, however, the approach is highly mathematical; and again, the focus is on trade. This modeling tradition has grown rapidly in the last three decades, and has thrown into question traditional neoclassical arguments regarding the long-term (convergence) benefits of international trade. The main theoretical departure has been the loosening of traditional assumptions of perfect competition and constant returns to scale. Instead, these models incorporate imperfect competition and, most importantly, increasing returns—the idea that economic processes may be self-reinforcing rather than self-limiting, which has been seen to be a powerful tool for understanding the emergence of international inequalities. Some of the main researchers in this area, such as Paul Krugman, claim they are practicing economic geography (or a “new geographical economics”), but their work has had relatively limited influence within human geography.

There is, however, one thread of research within human geography that does bear important parallels and discernible links to the work of Krugman et al. Krugman has explicitly sought to tie international trade not to theories of comparative advantage, but to the tendency for individual nations to pursue different economic specializations based on the presence of increasing returns. Krugman—and alongside him, most notably, Michael Porter—has also observed, however, that such specialization has geographical manifestations *within* territories, in the form of clustering of production in specific cities or regions. This, then, is another facet of uneven development for which economists have offered theories: the tendency not only for some countries to develop more rapidly than others, but for certain cities or regions to “get ahead” and stay there.

Economists have used terms such as “economies of agglomeration” or “economies of localization” to explain the geographical clustering of economic activity in specific places. In doing so, they have typically appealed to the late-19th-Century work of Alfred Marshall on “industrial districts,” which identified a critical trinity of labor market pooling, supply of intermediate goods, and knowledge spillovers. Economic geographers have carried out research along similar lines in the last three decades, albeit with a much greater emphasis on historical–geographical empirics, as opposed to abstract mathematical modeling. Among the main contributors have been Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift—who refer to “neo-Marshallian nodes”—and Michael Storper and Allen Scott. For these writers, debates on development and (therefore) uneven development are incomplete unless cities, regions, and “city-regions” are understood to be active, causal economic entities. Like Porter and Krugman, they claim that such agglomerations maintain competitive advantage due to positive internal (local) economies (though they further insist that economic readings are not in themselves sufficient, but must be allied to consideration of local institutional, cultural, and political contexts). In addition, they argue, crucially, that globalization has—perhaps paradoxically—only served to intensify such local economies, thus redoubling the significance of regions and aggravating patterns of uneven geographical development.

Uneven Development in Marxist and Other Critical Political Economy

Much of the writing on uneven development that has occurred either within human geography, or which has most strongly influenced human geographers, constitutes a direct critique specifically of the quantitative neoclassical models sketched out above—such models, the critique says, are inherently ahistorical; they assume overly simplistic conceptions of geographic space; they downplay structural interrelationships between different regional economies; and they fail to explain why capital in general creates such uneven geographical development, focusing instead on individual capitals and the rarefied market mathematics of exchange, supply, and demand.

In view of the fact that uneven development comes in an infinite variety of forms and exists at all geographical scales, it is not surprising that a wide range of more holistic and historical interpretative approaches have been advanced. These various approaches defy easy differentiation and categorization; they have been developed alongside one another, have frequently informed one another, and share many common themes (as well as differences); however, it is fair to say that most are inspired to one extent or another by Marxist political economy (as opposed to classical political economy or neoclassicism). Moreover, from the perspective specifically of human geography, they can be usefully split into two types. First, there are explanations in which uneven geographical development is effectively identified as a key *outcome* of the underlying social, political, and economic processes and structures that such theories elucidate. Second, there has been work—primarily by human geographers—that seeks to make the geography a far more central component of the theoretical framework: wherein uneven development is seen less as an outcome, and more as an integral, constitutive element of the capitalist mode of production. These two sets of approaches are now considered in turn.

Uneven Development as Geographic Outcome of Capitalism

Much of the most influential thinking on uneven development can be traced to the extensive international debates on development and (“Third World”) underdevelopment that ensued from the late 1960s. Inevitably, therefore, such thinking deals almost exclusively with uneven development on an international scale. The antagonist against which this thinking crystallized

was mainstream modernization theory deploying multistage economic “takeoff” models developed by the likes of Walt Rostow. Modernization theory looked at countries largely in isolation and sought to map out future development trajectories for “underdeveloped” territories based on the “successful” blueprint of paths previously followed by “developed” Western nations.

Two main critiques of modernization theory soon developed. The first, “dependency theory,” is perhaps most closely associated with Andre Frank. This argued that development and underdevelopment were in fact two sides of the same coin (uneven development): rich (“core”) countries *need* a group of poorer (“peripheral”) countries in order to remain rich; and those rich countries perpetuate this state of dependency through their economic, military, and cultural policies. A second key theory was that of “unequal exchange.” As formulated by Arghiri Emmanuel in particular, this argued—somewhat similarly to the more pessimistic of the classical and neoclassical trade models discussed above—that international trade would tend to exacerbate uneven development; however, it did so from a Marxian perspective, and through a direct critique of Ricardian “comparative advantage.” The central thesis was that when products are traded between high- and low-waged countries, there will always be a transfer of value from the latter to the former.

Out of both dependency and unequal exchange theories—but with critical perspectives on each—there emerged from the late 1970s what has come to be known as “world-systems” theory. Its main proponents, who include Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Giovanni Arrighi, have argued that dependency and unequal exchange theories assumed too much passivity on the part of less-developed countries. Furthermore, the singular driver of unequal exchange theory (wage differentials) was increasingly seen to be a *result* of uneven development, not its underlying cause; and dependency theory, meanwhile, has been taken to task for oversimplification of the world into a bimodal system with only “cores” and “peripheries.”

Thus, world-systems theory is perhaps best known—but also too easily caricatured—for its analysis of the world’s uneven development in terms not only of an economic core and periphery, but also a “semiperiphery.” This semiperiphery plays a key role in the world economy: it is a stabilizing entity between the “core” and “periphery,” but it is also where the most intense restructuring and conflict occur. World-systems theory places great emphasis on specific analysis of the relationships *between* societies (and places), as distinct from more generalized models of social change. To this extent it diverges from classical Marxism, and it also rejects the developmentalism assumed not just by Marxism but by modernization theory (the assumption of unidirectional movement through “stages” of development), although Wallerstein, for one, sees himself as writing largely in a Marxist vein. And indeed, one of the key features of the three-way economic stratification posited by this theory (core, periphery, semiperiphery) is that it is deemed to be fluid and dynamic: positioning in this hierarchy is not fixed, but rather is influenced by the effects of periodic crises in capital accumulation, and the resulting periods of stagnation and growth (described as “waves”). The geographies of such crisis effects, however, have not been explicitly theorized.

Human geographers have, nonetheless, been influenced by world-systems theory in exploring uneven development and have demonstrated that geographical positioning in the world system deeply shapes development possibilities and paths of differential economic progress. The work of Jim Blaut has been central in this regard—especially on the Europeanization of capitalism from the 16th Century—and has been well received by world-systems theorists. Other human geographers who have sought to draw on the insights of world-systems theory (such as its rejection of developmentalism) include Peter Taylor, who has written widely on “world hegemonies” and has worked with Wallerstein.

There is, too, another body of work that has strongly influenced geographers’ thinking on uneven development, and which has explicit connections to the world-systems literature. This is (in very broad terms) research into the international division of labor and global commodity chains. (World-systems theorists rely on both of these concepts to give concrete, descriptive definition to the capitalist world economy; they argue that variation in the operation of the different institutions implicated in such chains and labor markets, at different geographical “nodes,” serves to reproduce patterns of uneven development. And yet for world-systems theorists, global commodity chains and the international division of labor are essentially supporting concepts, not the primary objects of analysis.) This literature has been very influential within human geography in the last two decades, guiding much of the work on “global production networks” by economic geographers, particularly those of the “Manchester school” most closely associated with Peter Dicken. One key figure in this original literature is Stephen Hymer, whose work on multinational corporations has been pivotal. Again, it would be wrong to simply label this work “Marxist.” Nevertheless, Hymer himself did gravitate over time from a more mainstream economic perspective to an avowedly Marxist one, which increasingly saw him focus his work explicitly on the relationships between multinational corporations and uneven development.

Hymer’s argument about uneven development was relatively simple (and indeed, has been criticized as overly simplistic). He claimed, in short, that multinational corporations create a world “in their own image” (an echo of Marx and Engels), where the internal corporate spatial division of labor (paradigmatically, with headquarters in Western cities and production activities increasingly outsourced to “developing” countries) is reproduced in the international division of labor more widely. Economic geographers’ work on global production networks—and, specifically in relation to such networks, on uneven development—has been much less categorical. Arguing for a more accretive, bottom-up form of “theory,” this work suggests that we can only illuminate the mechanisms of uneven development at all scales by examining in detail the places comprising such networks, the flows (of capital, knowledge, and labor) between them, and the ways in which these flows and places coconstruct one another. Most research in this area has been conducted on an industry-sector-specific basis, and therefore understands uneven development in relatively narrow terms. This work also, for the most part, has taken geographers quite a way from Marx. In both of these respects, it differs substantially from the strand of economic–geographical thinking on uneven development that I discuss next and in most detail.

This work appeals directly to classical Marxism; it also seeks to put geography “back” into Marx; and a theory of uneven development has been a central component of this reassertion of space in Marxian political economy.

Uneven Development as the Geographical Motor of Capitalism

As Marxism became a driving force with human geography in general and economic geography in particular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of uneven development emerged as pivotal. The work of David Harvey and Neil Smith was, and remains, seminal (Dick Peet was another important early contributor). Both—and Smith most specifically—have sought to theorize uneven geographical development at a macro, abstract level and expressly in terms of the core conventions of Marxist economics. That said, and as Smith has indicated more than once, Marx himself did not say a great amount about uneven geographical development (although he did of course write about many other dimensions of unevenness in capitalist development). It is more in the writing of Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, and especially their writing on imperialism, that economic geographers have found direct inspiration for their theorization of this phenomenon.

The fullest such theorization has been offered, and subsequently refined, by Smith (though both he and, most recently, Harvey have insisted that the theory remains very much work in progress and will perform continue to evolve as capitalism evolves). Smith argues that at the heart of capitalism there are contradictory geographical tendencies toward “differentiation” and “equalization.” Geographical differentiation is seen to occur at the level both of individual capitals and of specific sectors of the economy; meanwhile, capital is also, paradoxically, a “leveler,” tending to equalize across space the conditions of production and the level of development of productive forces. For Smith, these two opposed tendencies, and the contradiction between them, are what cause uneven development.

Smith emphasizes that this process is inherently dynamic; in other words, it does not result in a static disparity in levels of geographical development. Instead, places that are development “laggards” at one moment may surge ahead at a later moment. This is because, in the development of one place, capital creates there many of the very conditions that militate against further development, manifested in a falling rate of profit—and vice versa for places of underdevelopment. Hence, in articulating a theory of uneven development, Smith asserts that capital is apt to oscillate (or “seesaw”) geographically from developed areas to undeveloped areas and then, later (once conditions have reversed), back again. But he admits that such a “seesawing” is limited in practice by a variety of factors, including the level of mobility of capital. Hence, oscillation is highly evident at the urban scale, less so at the national scale, and hardly at all at the international scale (although the experience of the so-called “newly industrializing countries” arguably stands as an example of such international seesawing occurring).

These latter references to scale foreground a critical component of the concept of uneven development, which Smith has fleshed out in a variety of ways since developing his initial theoretical architecture. This is that uneven development not only occurs at a variety of different scales, but is itself intimately bound up with the production and reproduction of geographical scale. Thus, human geography’s burgeoning “scale literature” of the last two decades can in part be traced to the conceptualization of uneven development in Marxist economic geography. Uneven development, in this tradition, entails a fundamental restructuring of the geographical scales that frame—and are framed by—the production and circulation of surplus value. Most specifically, it is argued, recent decades have seen erosion of the materiality of the nation-state as a scale of economic influence, with a complicated nexus of global and local scales increasingly coming to the fore. Others writing in the same political-theoretical tradition as Smith—such as Erik Swyngedouw—have sought to theorize and explore this rescaling, and its links to processes of uneven development, in more detail.

This high-level Marxist theorization of uneven geographical development has been very influential both within human geography and outside it; however, it has not been without its critics. John Browett, who has also strongly criticized Frank’s dependency theory, has suggested that Smith overstates the degree to which uneven development is inherent to capitalism and is systematically weaved into its fabric; contingent forces—and especially, he believes, “start-off” conditions in different territories—may constitute a sufficient explanation for the development of economic–geographical inequalities. Gordon Clark has been equally critical of the “necessity” model of capitalist regional inequality. And from a very different theoretical and political perspective, meanwhile, Gillian Rose has offered a feminist critique of the Marxist theory of uneven development.

These critiques notwithstanding, a large number of economic geographers have been influenced by the work of Smith and Harvey in seeking to account for patterns of uneven development at all manner of geographical scales. Some of this work has sought to provide more precise analytical flesh to what were broadly theoretical claims—Michael Webber and David Rigby have carried out research in this area, offering quantitative spatial analyses of, in particular, rates of profit and industrial development in order to buttress key elements of the uneven development thesis. Other work has been less mathematically oriented, but equally concerned to understand and explain uneven development in its historical–geographical particulars. On occasion this research has retained, and even deepened, the theoretical sophistication found in Harvey and Smith (most notably Patrick Bond’s work on uneven development in Zimbabwe). More commonly, it has taken the theory and sought to examine the extent to which it is evidenced—or otherwise—in specific empirical situations. There has, for instance, been a large amount of geographical work on regional economic development in Europe that is influenced, to varying degrees, by the Marxian theorization of uneven development. Mick Dunford, Costis Hadjimichalis, Ray Hudson, Andres Rodriguez-Pose, and Adrian Smith have all been active contributors in this area.

In addition to working with theories of uneven development in particular historical–geographical contexts, economic geographers have, lastly, tried to build what can best be called midlevel theoretical “bridges” between generalized theory and those tangible historical geographies. The rationale for such efforts has been that Marx’s (and in turn, Smith and Harvey’s) thinking, while

extremely suggestive, is at once too abstract and too rigid to provide an adequate framework within which to carry out detailed empirical research and to grasp the significance of specific empirical findings. (Smith, in turn, suggests that these other “theories” frequently lose theoretical purchase and power altogether by lurching too far, and too exclusively, toward particularities.)

Perhaps most influential in this regard has been Doreen Massey’s parallel work on uneven regional development, especially in the UK context (her first findings were published several years before Smith first wrote on uneven development). While also rooted in Marxist political economy, Massey’s work uses a different terminology—her preference is “spatial divisions of labor”—and she explicitly states that she does not see this as an explanatory concept. In discussing UK regional disparities (and in particular the congregation of economic control functions in the southeast, while direct production activities are found proportionately more elsewhere), she uses this phrase in reference to the spatial organization of relations of production, and to signal the importance of three interrelated sets of changes: changes in the national division of labor; the changing relation of the UK economy to international divisions of labor; and changes in modes of technical and industrial organization. Massey’s key arguments are that the reasons for uneven development vary over time and space, and that different sectors of the economy exploit geographical unevenness in different ways, thus (re)producing different kinds of uneven development. Storper and Dick Walker have made not-dissimilar claims (though with a greater emphasis on growth dynamics), their model of “geographical industrialization” being equally indebted to Marx, equally grounded in production relations, and equally insistent on “bridging” abstract theory and nuts-and-bolts empirics.

A final important direction taken by economic geographers in regard to the political economy of uneven development has been to seek to incorporate the insights of the regulation theory of, among others, Michel Aglietta. Adding nuance specifically to the type of theoretical structure erected by Harvey and Smith has, again, been a principal objective here. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell followed this route in analyzing the intensification of UK regional disparities under Thatcherism. For them, regulation theory—with its twin emphasis on the historical specificity of capitalism’s institutional forms, and on the role of processes of social regulation in averting crisis tendencies—helps us to understand the temporal evolution of capitalism. They admit, however, that in its original form, regulation theory does not begin to broach the spatial complexities of uneven geographical development. By integrating the analysis of regional uneven development within a regulationist framework, Peck and Tickell thus sought to bridge high-level Marxian theory and the regional particulars of UK historical geography.

Conclusion

One of the most interesting and revealing features of the concept of uneven geographical development has been its durability: in economic geography as in other disciplines and subdisciplines, tides inevitably change, bringing with them changing philosophies, methodologies, and substantive concerns; however, uneven development remains a core political, theoretical, and empirical thematic for economic geographers (and indeed for many human geographers more generally)—notwithstanding “post-” interventions of various stripes, the “cultural turn” of the 1990s, and indeed the tentative dialogs between economic geography and “new geographical economics.” Indeed, the concept has been given a new lease of life in the wake of the global financial crisis, as scholars have returned to it in trying to make sense, firstly, of the deepening contemporary regional inequalities of countries such as Britain and the United States, and, secondly, of the reactionary political movements (Brexit and Trumpism) for which these inequalities are held to be partly responsible. This is not to suggest that there is anything approaching a consensus on the nature of, or reasons for, uneven development; a central objective of this article has been precisely to demonstrate the range of approaches to this phenomenon. Doubtless such variation will continue to feature in both research and debate. What the history of economic geography does suggest, however, is that no matter how it is delineated and explained, uneven development will remain a central disciplinary topic for as long as it persists on the ground. The Marx-inspired approaches to uneven development that continue to exert a major influence within the discipline would suggest that such persistence will be into perpetuity, so long, that is, as the world economy remains largely a capitalist world economy.

See Also: Agglomeration; Capital and Space; Capitalism; City–Region; Core–Periphery Models; Economic Geography; Economics and Human Geography; External Debt; Global Commodity Chains; Global Production Networks; Industrial Districts; Labor Market; Local Development; Local Economic Development, Politics of; Modernization Theory; Regional Inequalities; Scale, Analytical; Spatial Division of Labor; Trade, International.

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