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## Surviving Uneven Development: Social Reproduction and the Persistence of Capitalism

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# Surviving Uneven Development: Social Reproduction and the Persistence of Capitalism

NIK HEYNEN, PETER HOSSLER & ANDREW HEROD

This article takes the 25th anniversary of Neil Smith's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* as an opportunity to consider the seminal contributions the book has made for pushing scholars to more deeply consider the connections between the persistence of capitalism and social reproduction. Furthermore, we move on from this connection to consider the emancipatory ideas within *Uneven Development* and their connection to prompting new forms of revolutionary imagination and political possibility.

**Keywords:** uneven development, social reproduction, survival

## Dialectics of survival

In 1970, before a US Congressional Subcommittee investigating the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other internal security laws, Stokely Carmichael, the former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Panther Party (BPP) organiser, gave testimony that illuminated the overarching view of the Black Power movement at the time. When asked 'What do you think of solidarity between all countries that fight for their liberation?', Carmichael (1970) replied:

It is the only answer. I think that what we do not recognize, or we have not recognized in the past, is that capitalism has become international, and that we are fighting international capitalism. In order to fight international capitalism, you must wage an international fight. What has happened in the past, for example, is that if one nation was struggling everybody wished that nation good luck, but nobody served as part of that same fight. Although they could see that the same countries were oppressing their countries

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they still didn't make the connection in their minds that that was their common enemy.

Within the rest of his testimony, Carmichael, through his response to a range of questions, brought capitalism, poverty, race, gender, corporeal survival and the politics of scale into articulate conversation with each other in a way in which few scholars have been able to do, largely because he saw these aspects of social life through the eyes of an organiser who had been working to create a counter-hegemonic mobilisation against the uneven capitalist development which has shaped them in such fundamental ways. Why, though, recount this story on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Neil Smith's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*? The principal answer to this question is because there have been few books written within the context of Marxian political economy that have offered so many theoretically astute insights onto the kinds of degradations under capitalism highlighted by Carmichael as has *Uneven Development*.

Undoubtedly, *Uneven Development*'s most significant contribution to political economic scholarship has been the breadth of its theoretical insight and the political potentials that such insight augurs. Certainly, a quick Google scholar search demonstrates the book's quantitative importance to a wide range of disciplines and topical areas. However, *Uneven Development*'s impressive citations record unquestionably under-represents its qualitative impact on political economy and, in particular, threads of spatial thinking therein. Thus, for a generation of more junior scholars, Smith's text has been not merely a heavily cited book but it has served as an important introduction to geographical thought and numerous concepts that are now common within political economic parlance – the production of nature, the politics of scale and, of course, uneven development, to name but three. Indeed, as we reviewed our own heavily marked up copies, we were struck once again by the intellectual journey on which Smith took us as we moved through a history of Nature, social reproduction, theories of space, the uneven production of space and, finally, the political possibilities of transforming capitalism through developing explicitly spatial strategies.

If we were to focus on one central theme that helps pull together the different threads in *Uneven Development*, then it would probably be Smith's consideration of how capital produces particular types of landscape as a central element in its own survival. Indeed, by his own admission, the question of capitalist survival is central to his project, as when he states (2008: 4) that

It is not just a question of what does capitalism do to geography but rather of what geography can do for capitalism. Thus in addition to the essentially geographical question, the theory of uneven development also addresses the *political* [original emphasis] question: how does the geographical configuration of the landscape contribute to the survival of capitalism?

Certainly, Smith did not originate the phrase 'the survival of capitalism' – he borrows it from Henri Lefebvre's (1976) discussion of the same. Nevertheless,

one of Smith's most important contributions in *Uneven Development* is to flesh out in much greater detail Lefebvre's rather bare bones theorisation of the importance of space to capital's survival.

While it is less explicitly theorised, especially in the book's original 1984 edition, it is important to recognise that Smith also lays a foundation to engage with the survival of society writ large and with the social reproduction of the people who together form different societies. Thus, echoing Marx and Engels (1998) and Althusser (2001), he argues (correctly) that '[i]n addition to human physiology, human consciousness and the material means of subsistence, the production and reproduction of material life entails the production of workers, that is, the reproduction of labor power' (Smith 1984: 57). Outlining how the creation of a permanent social surplus facilitates 'the most basic survival of society', Smith (2008: 58) repeatedly illuminates the dialectical relationship between capitalist accumulation and human life in a fully developed capitalist society, averring that '[t]he specific class structure of capitalism ... makes capital accumulation the necessary condition for the reproduction of material life' (Smith 2008: 70). Finally, he brings patriarchy to the fore when he suggests that '[w]here responsibility for social reproduction has been shared, women were increasingly forced to carry the full burden with the evolution of modes of production based on commodity exchange' (2008: 62). Through these and other similar statements, Smith constantly reminds us that the survival of human life is at the very heart of capitalism's survival, for, at a most basic level, without labour upon which capital can prey there can be no accumulation – only labour is capable of creating the surplus value so coveted by capitalists. At the same time, though, it is important to recognise that capitalism's continued existence has hastened the development of oppressive hierarchies felt by human flesh and bone.

Despite touching upon themes of human survival and social reproduction, however, it is fair to say, we think, that *Uneven Development*'s focus upon how capital produces landscapes in its quest for survival meant that the ways in which, say, workers seek to produce space in particular ways as part of a strategy to secure their own social and biological reproduction on a daily and/or generational basis were not really explored in too much theoretical detail in the book. This is certainly not unreasonable, for no book can be everything to everyone. Equally, *Uneven Development* is not alone in this, as theorising the links between the production of landscapes and the social reproduction of humans has been one of the more glaring historical gaps within the larger body of Marxist political economic work, which has tended to focus upon the machinations of capital itself (see Bakker 2007). Nevertheless, it is also fair to say that even if Smith's *Uneven Development* itself did not fully unpack the myriad social relations underpinning social reproduction as it relates to capitalism, it did serve as a critical starting point for a number of subsequent interrogations (see Katz 2001; Marston 2000). Hence, taking conceptual inspiration from *Uneven Development*, efforts to theorise workers' spatial praxis resulted in the emergence in the 1990s of the field of 'labour geography', which has now solidified itself as an approach to understanding workers' spatial practices, both within the discipline of Geography (see Peck 1996; Wills 1998; Herod 2001) and beyond (e.g., Ellem and Shields 1999). A key aspect of this work has been to explore how

workers seek to make landscapes which are supportive of their own needs for social reproduction, for their own survival, with the result that whereas sometimes they support capital's geographical goals, frequently they challenge them. Beyond such examination of how labour might thwart the processes inherent to capitalist accumulation and landscape making, and in the process potentially shape the economic and political landscape in more constructive ways, the advent of 'New Left' organising around issues of gender, race and sexual orientation also often drew in productive ways on *Uneven Development*, even if the politics of such issues were not mapped out in great detail in the original text. Thus, numerous scholars have identified counter-hegemonic political geographical possibilities through drawing upon ideas laid out in *Uneven Development* (e.g., Castree 2000; Kurtz 2003; Boyer 2006; Heynen 2009).

Given its importance for helping to theorise how the geography of capitalist accumulation unfolds, then, we now briefly turn to an exploration of how Smith's work might inform more broadly revolutionary political possibilities to challenge such geographies.

### ***Uneven Development's political possibilities***

Despite some critique that in Smith's schema uneven development was seen to emerge largely from within the logic of capital's own structure, a theoretical position that seemed to suggest that there was little room for agency in understanding geographies of uneven development, in fact Smith's robust theorising was, at the time, some of the most open to inclusively and holistically imagining alternative political realities to those of capitalism. Indeed, as Castree (2000: 270) notes, 'somehow the dialectic of equalization and differentiation at the centre of the theory of uneven development seemed less rigorous and closed than in those orthodox Marxisms that have attracted the animus of geographical critics since the early 1980s'. Castree went on to suggest that this openness allows the theory of uneven development to be sensitive to issues of 'gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on'. We echo his assessment but would add that Smith's sensitivity to both the abstract and concrete spaces of social resistance that might lead to upheaval of the status quo adds another thread through which to understand the ever present connection between theory and on-the-ground organising. Despite the fact that Marx spent so much of his time organising (see Riazanov 1974) based on his insights, too much theoretically sophisticated Marxist theory has not attempted to integrate insights about the structural problems implicit in capitalism with potentially transformative spatial tactics that could be mobilised to create a more humane political economic system. To this end, we argue that there is a great deal of agency and political possibility flowing throughout Smith's often abstract theorisation of the inner workings of the production of nature and space under capitalism. This is perhaps most evident in his theorisation of 'scale jumping', or what is now more widely discussed as the politics of the production of spatial scale, a set of theoretical arguments which have positively contributed to bolstering how we can think about people's ability to organise against the exploitative ramifications of capitalism in important ways not previously theorised within political economic theory.

In considering *Uneven Development* as a source of theoretical inspiration for understanding the geography of contemporary capitalism and the creation of new political possibilities, however, it is important to understand that the book has evolved as a text through its various iterations. Neither the landscapes of capitalism nor our efforts to understand their genesis stand still. Hence, if the third edition of the book is read today, with the two afterwords, the way many junior scholars will no doubt encounter it, it has clearly transcended many of the limitations imposed by the more abstract theorisation which dominated the first edition. With its arguments having been refined over the past 25 years, then, in its present form the book is much more open than it was in its first iteration to how people can organise against the interconnected processes that facilitate the survival of capitalism and thereby to how they might produce space in those ways that increase their own chances for surviving the destruction wrought by capitalism. Indeed, Smith's attention to survival and social reproduction in fact return us to Carmichael by hinting at what is perhaps the ultimate act of resistance to capitalist accumulation: survival itself. Thus, although Smith never explicitly states this, his focus on the dialectics of survival throughout *Uneven Development* suggests the transformative possibilities of social reproduction. Certainly, in the earlier versions of the book some of this was foggy, as Smith indicated in the 1990 afterword, when he declared that 'it is not immediately clear what the production of space implies for political strategy. This translation remains to be done, partly because Lefebvre never escapes the terrain of philosophical critique' (2008: 228). Interestingly, however, Lefebvre, in his *The Critique of Everyday Life in the Modern World Volume 2*, written in 1961 but not available in English until 2002, did in fact shed light on this dialectic of survival and its political possibilities by suggesting that

Tactics and strategies correspond to what in often vague and philosophical language are called projects, decisions, plans for action and for the future, or agendas. In its particular manner, the immobility of groups . . . provides a tactic and a strategy for survival. Survival in itself is a form of action. (Lefebvre 2002)

The fact that Smith quotes Lefebvre approvingly and mirrors his argument about survival as action is significant, for a thorough reading of all the text contained within the 2008 edition strikingly articulates the dialectics of survival and political possibility in ways that can continue to innovate revolutionary theory: this is the living nature of this text.

This tension between survival and political possibility is illustrative of several interventions Smith makes throughout the work, dissecting with precision capital's power to produce space, yet never allowing us to forget that this can be contested and new worlds produced. So, while in *Uneven Development's* earlier editions Smith himself may have felt that the political strategies embedded within the production of space remained unclear, his work, and more specifically his theorising and demonstrating of the practicalities specifically of producing geographical scale as a political act, offered one such strategy. Nowhere does this come through more forcefully than within his discussion of Tompkins

Square Park. Hence, in his examination of the homeless and anti-gentrification activists' slogan 'Whose park is it? It's our fucking park', Smith unfolds the logic of this struggle first over Tompkins Square Park, but then against the forces of gentrification in New York's entire Lower East Side. In so doing, he demonstrates how the politics of this space, beginning with the right to utilise space as a site of survival, are extended spatially until it encompasses the larger neighbourhood 'as part of the political expansion of the struggle to include different groups and kinds of organizing as well as different locations' (Smith 2008: 232).

### Encouraging a revolutionary imaginary

Throughout, *Uneven Development* is doubly revolutionary. It is certainly revolutionary in the sense that Thomas Kuhn (1962) intended, as is evidenced in all the intellectual contributions, too numerous to list here, for which Smith's ideas provide a foundation. But it is revolutionary in another sense, for it provides a way in which to imagine how more emancipatory landscapes can be conceived and, more importantly, emplaced. Such imagination is sorely needed in these neo-liberal times and, in this regard – despite being a quarter of a century old – *Uneven Development* is arguably more relevant than ever. As Smith (2008: 266) himself concludes: 'One of the stunning things about the present is the extent to which the prospect and affect of revolutionary social change have been blanketed from the imaginary of political possibility. It may not be too optimistic to begin again to encourage a revolutionary imaginary.' Just as diverse social groups, struggling for different visions of justice, ranging from the International Longshoreman's Association (see Herod 2001) to the Black Panther Party (see Heynen 2009), long ago figured out spatial strategies to harness the politics of scale and how to 'jump scale', it was Smith's work that has for 25 years helped us articulate and comprehend these spatial political tactics. We suspect that in the years to come it will continue to provide insights on how landscapes might be produced that will facilitate human survival within the tyranny of neo-liberal capitalism and, perhaps, we might dare to hope, even how landscapes might be produced in which the last vestiges of capitalism itself are finally laid to rest.

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