

**Ray Hudson.  
Producing Places.**

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Since Seattle, “anti-capitalism” has re-entered popular discourse and talk of Marx appears to be enjoying a new respectability in social science circles (it never went out of fashion in other academic circles such as cultural studies). An indicator of the shift appeared in my inbox recently in the form of a call for a reading group to explore the possibilities “...for fashioning a new political economy that is sensitive to questions of space, time and nature and can grasp the complex technological, social and cultural changes that have occurred in capitalism and modernity over the last three decades”. I had high hopes that Ray Hudson’s *Producing Places* would grapple with similar concerns. While the reading group proposal seemed motivated by a readiness to radically re-think and re-invent the theoretical tradition in response to the complexities of the contemporary situation, Hudson, I discovered, is largely unmoved by the theoretical and political challenges of the last three decades. Instead he makes a case for a return to the old certainties of the neo-marxist paradigm of the 1970s.

The book is worth reading for the author’s attempts to rein in the theoretical excesses of the “geographic turn” as applied to the time-space restructurings of “globalization.” Hudson’s credentials as a geographer and extensive research record in the geography of capitalist development give his voice a certain authority in this regard. Bounded places matter. Capitalist production is not as “spatially indifferent” as some would have it. New commodities, in particular “services,” are not so abstract and therefore amenable to disembedding from place. The boundaries of states are not so permeable and their sovereignty not so dispersed (“upwards” to trans-national governing entities and “downwards” to regions and “communities”). Forms of political governance (as broadly conceived within the regulationist school) have not particularly ceded to new structures of trans-national capital. States are still the primary actors in constituting market “environments” (including, importantly, labour markets) at the regional, national and international levels. They still seek to absorb the (deepening) crises and contradictions of capitalist development.

Hudson offers genuine insights into the changing structure of firms as they seek to innovate or adapt to innovations in technology and to operate increasingly at multiple spatial scales. He identifies a dialectic of inter-firm competition and co-operation, where the co-operative links are embedded in networks of relationships that cut across firm boundaries. On the assumption that these face-to-face networks based on specialized skills and knowledge tend to be concentrated in specific locales (financial networks in the City of London, IT development in Silicon Valley) he speculates that place-based networks may take primacy over firms as units of competition (p.187). (In a satisfying irony, places take on a bounded coherence while capitalist firms succumb to postmodern permeability.)

Hudson gives particular weight to processes that others have called “localization.” His position, that “...while the development of the forces of production has apparently led to capital becoming more emancipated from the constraints of distance (and nature), the social production of space and places has imposed growing constraints on the location of production” (p.261), is stronger than most. (Many would say “new” rather than “growing” constraints on location.) He

acknowledges that places are constructed not only through proximate relations embedded in locales, but also through multiple disembedded relationships whose extent and overlapping character call into question the integrity and coherence of boundaries, and where internal exclusions create “perforated spaces.” However, he cautions that some places really are bounded and homogeneous, or are certainly constructed as though they are. He provides a useful summary of the ways in which state and civil society actors act to produce places – typically by attracting investment such that they become, or are preserved as, (capitalist) *producing* places. While he describes its capitalist moments in sympathetic depth and detail, Hudson does caution that we must not reduce human activity to production for profit. We should pay more attention to place based exchanges that are uncommodified, for example in domestic labour and the “third sector.”

Hudson’s book is a sustained corrective to characterizations of the current period that emphasize the spatially abstract, disembedded and trans-local. He refers throughout to Lash and Urry’s “economy of signs,” where “flows” have more salience than fixed spaces and occasionally to Omaha’s lyrical and uncritical “invisible continent” to which physical geography is a deceptive play of shadows. He could equally have included Naomi Klein’s popular analysis of the economy of “branding” wherein “...a select group of corporations has been attempting to free itself from the corporeal world of commodities, manufacturing and products to exist on another plane” (*No Logo*, p.21). Hudson’s position is the result of the difficult and subtle task of deciding where and how to place emphasis in characterising a complex that is beyond quantification by any reliable measures. To assess the empirical adequacy of the result, I would ask three questions: is there a more-or-less complete sketch of the field; are the proportions roughly right; is appropriate attention devoted to theoretically contentious cases? In a number of instances he surveys broadly and appropriately reasserts proportion. So, for example, we see that the hyper-mobility of capital makes sense in only a limited range of production processes (the final assembly of garments focussed on by Klein and much of the popular anti-globalization movement for example).

In his reassertion of the materiality (and spatial particularity) of production, I found him too willing to ignore contentious cases. Yes, he pays attention to information technologies (IT), the production of which is strongly embedded in things and places and the employment of which is dependent on locationally specific artefacts like bundles of network cables. But he pays less attention to the production of ideas that IT is supposed to facilitate, or the meta-production of ideas as commodities (through copyright and patent and brand). Or rather he does not address the ways in which the material instantiation of these “products” might problematize their locatability. For example, new techniques for problem solving using distributed networks of PCs are examples where the production of knowledge has no conventional spatial co-ordinates, but is rather trans-local. Similarly for services such as those provided by call centres in Bangalore. When the Indian operator is talking to a client in Texas a genuine service is being produced (by Hudson’s preferred definition it is being produced as it is being consumed), but it is locatable neither in Texas nor in Bangalore. Similarly with the “representational” values of international financial market transactions where the acts of buyers and sellers and the digital records that make them “real” never meet in Cartesian space. The conceptual challenge that IT presents for theories of the spatial has to do with the ways the use of IT mediated systems, whether for scientific knowledge production or the organization of spatially distributed production systems

or the networking of anti-globalization protestors, has the potential to construct the trans-local. Such uses may displace existing person-to-person networks with impersonal trans-local systems (e.g. automated trading). Equally they may bring into play new networks. If these new networks are re-embedded in face-to-face contacts, such contacts must be made across distance and locale. Hudson directs our attention to cases where networks, products and knowledges are locally embedded. He argues that networks that become units of competition must be based on identity and trust that are place based. (Is trust based on place or the face-to-face?). But he leaves considerable doubt as to whether he has met the challenge either theoretically or empirically.

Another lacuna is Hudson's treatment of biotechnology, or more specifically his failure to address the tremendous spatial implications of its application to agriculture and industrial manufacture. Biotech is largely ideational production. Its practitioners see in the mapping of DNA a potential "programming language" for biological systems, and in gene-splicing techniques (GM) a means of concretely producing new designs. Some of the initial applications of GM to agriculture aim to increase its spatial indifference. Hudson, as a part of his discussion of "nature," notes the imperative of capitalist production in agriculture to overcome the "natural" limits to place and time (decay and season). But agriculture does not seem to fit his (industrial) exemplar of "production" and the tremendous implications for the location of the production of agricultural inputs receive no comment. GM will likely accelerate locational flexibility (and potential indifference to place) in agriculture. In addition the potentials for synthesizing inputs in the lab will facilitate shifts from field to factory, rural to urban. Conversely, GM research is being directed towards the production of organically based plastics, such that field production may increasingly be given over to industrial inputs, further blurring the line between rural and urban, agricultural and industrial. States are already vying to ensure that they, or regions within their boundaries, become "producing places" for these new technologies.

The lessons and potentials of the new biotechnology need to be taken more seriously in a project such as Hudson's for additional reasons. He wants to understand the contradictions that capitalist production engenders in its encounter with nature. His focus is not primarily the "internal" contradictions within socially produced "second nature" (where capitalist projects of control and domination produce monsters of unpredictability and risk such as climate change), but rather the external contradictions where the infinite logic of capitalist growth meets the "iron laws of thermodynamics" (p. 324). The aim is again to re-embed analysis, this time in corporeal quantities of mass and energy. His formalistic "deduction" of the contradiction from the laws of thermodynamics is at best metaphorical and at worst pseudo-scientific. These laws tell us that nothing "fundamentally real" is created in nature (mass and energy are neither destroyed nor added to) and that every transformation has an irreducible loss (to "waste" in the form of chaotic motion) such that all complex systems tend toward entropy. Somehow the infinite growth logic of capitalism is supposed to run afoul of this logic. Here it is crucial to talk in quantities – how much entropy in how many years? What exactly is the relationship between the accumulation of a quantity of profit and transformations of quantities of energy and mass? Is there any meaningful proportionality between the capital value and the thermodynamic implications of the production of a gene patent and the production of a cast iron widget in Birmingham? As far as time goes, most would recognize that we have a comfortable margin before reaching some inevitable entropic

end-state. As the sun winds down (we have a few million years yet) the biological systems that it fuels on this planet are, and are likely to remain (barring an *ecological* catastrophe), counter-entropic. They restructure mass and energy into increasingly complex and dynamic systems. My point here is not that we are not precipitating hugely destructive ecological effects, nor that the capitalist organization of production is not contributing to them, but rather that Hudson's somewhat dated materialism will likely not provide us with a good guide to understanding them.

A better grasp of the life sciences might also bring into question Marx's own understanding of the mystery of production – capitalism's apparent ability to “conjure from the ground” a world of things. For him, the only really productive force in the world was creative human labour. Animals and machines appeared to add to the accumulation of things and economic value only because they had been worked upon by human beings. Whether we like it or not the new biotechnology brings into question the philosophical distinctions between human and non-human, organism and machine upon which Marx's theories of production and (economic) value are based (see for example Haraway).

The ecological crisis is enlisted by Hudson to condemn capitalism but also to reaffirm faith in its ultimate demise. He writes, “The linked problems of environmental crisis, widespread poverty, and uneven development (within the core territories of a global capitalist economy and its peripheries as well as between them) cannot be adequately addressed through new forms of state policy and regulation within the confines of capitalism. Once again, the limits of capital are reached.” (p.324) It is comforting, in a way, to again hear people say that capitalism is doomed. Still, while certainly no text can say everything, it does seem to me that if one is going to re-mount a millenarian version of marxism, one should address, or have suggestions of how to address, the problems of vision (what happens after the millennium) and transition (who will bring it about and how). Neither Marx nor his followers have offered clear guides to the alternative. But in the 1970s (and the 1840s) there was a vague consensus, less a plan than a state of feeling within the counterculture about what the ideal society might be. We have lost that after 1989 and a decade of “there is no alternative.” The most recent turn in the anti-globalization movement (and theme of the recent Social Forum at Port Alegre) has been a search for a new vision.

On the question of transition, Hudson's few remarks serve only to put up road blocks. He still focuses on the working class, but emphasizes that it is fractured and slow to mobilize vis-à-vis capital. He is sceptical of workers' internationalism – potential hope against global capital. He has little to say about new social movements, or forms of global civil society and nothing to say about the new anti-globalization movement. Theoretically he suffers from the congenital neo-marxist deficiency on agency. Human agency receives lip service, but as an add-on. The real player is “capital” acting with intentionality and inexorable purpose.

In the 1970s there was greater tolerance for the sort of theoretical formalism that neo-marxism offered. Its analytical clarity about essential structure lighted a path through the confusing distractions of the phenomenally given. It delivered an attractive political promise, but even when it was pessimistic, it could claim the virtue of being true. Now it is a harder sell. Appearances are considerably more complex and troubling. Grand theory is still in disrepute. Epistemologically it is a bootstrap operation. If, to make things worse, the old paradigm cannot

deliver vision or direction, then why bother? This is not to say that *Producing Places* is not worth reading; it is. On key areas of his expertise (the behaviour of firms, localization) the author has insightful things to say. But the book will not succeed in resurrecting unreconstructed (or minimally reconstructed) neo-marxism for the 21st century.

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