LSE Research **Online**

THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Diane Perrons

Social theory, economic geography, space and place: reflections on the work of Ray Hudson

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Social Theory, Economic Geography, Space and Place: Reflections on the Work of Ray Hudson

Abstract

Economic geography, at its best, deploys economic and social theory to make sense of the economic, political and social transformation of regions and their impact on people's lives and opportunities. Nowhere is this approach more evident than in the work of Ray Hudson who has consistently focused on analysing the processes of combined and uneven development to explain the broad changes in the capitalist economy together with middle level theories to account for the complexity of regional development in practice. In so doing he has created a powerful Geographical Political Economy that provides a deep understanding of the last four decades of economic restructuring and industrial transformation of the North East Region of England and its impact on the lives of people living there. This article reflects on this aspect of Ray Hudson's work in the context of his broader contributions to the academy.

'*We seek to locate the emergence of overt expressions of attachment to place in the context of uneven capitalist development……… and to reinforce emergent links between human geography and social theory*' (Hudson and Saddler 1983).

'*The task then is to search for theories and policies beyond neoliberalism, to re-establish the values and priorities for social and spatial justice, and to learn from radical initiatives across Europe and beyond, without forgetting the lessons of the past* (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014:216).

These quotations stretch across four decades and reflect Ray Hudson's unwavering commitment to the significance of economic and social theory for making sense of the economic, political and social transformation of regions and their impact on people's lives and opportunities. This perspective epitomises an understanding of economic geography in its full sense as a chorographical science (Hartshorne 1939) which examines how economic processes combine with systematic, detailed description and analysis of a region or regions, though in practice, work in this tradition in practiced focused more on description.[i]

Building on Doreen Massey (1984), Beynon, Hudson and Saddler (1994) make an important distinction between space and place which is related to the differential mobility of people and capital and which changes over time. In particular, in the first phases of industrialisation 'capital was deeply embedded in places' (1994:4) and people moved to the new centres of industry, but from the 1980s this pattern reversed and capital has become global and more mobile, reorganising, fragmenting and even abandoning production altogether as it moves from space to space in search of ever greater profit (Hudson 2016). As it does so, it can leave 'labour stranded in its wake' so

*'locations that, for capital, are a (temporary) **space** for profitable production are for workers, their families and friends **places** in which to live; places in which they have considerable individual and collective cultural investment; places to which they are often deeply attached, and which may hold powerful emotional ties and socially endowed symbolic meaning for them'* (Beynon, Hudson and Sadler (1994: 4-5).

For this reason Beynon, Hudson and Sadler (1994: 4-5) argue that theoretically it is helpful to think of spaces as the domain of capital and places as the meaningful situations established by people, particularly workers, their families and friends.

This distinction between space and place is made for theoretical analysis and clarity but Ray Hudson never loses sight of the important connections between the two. As a result, his approach to economic geography has immediate political and policy relevance. His work is theoretically and analytically rigorous and what is particularly refreshing in contemporary times is that he recognises capitalism as an economic, social and political system and a part of social life that needs to be explored in context. Moreover, there is an underlying commitment to the idea that the purpose of the economy is to serve society rather than vice versa. This perspective contrasts with approaches in economic geography (and economics) which focus on exploring fragments of the economy via mathematical modelling and which may appear to be scientific and objective but in fact may serve only to mask 'the vacuity of content' such that much time is spent on 'proving the existence of a causal relation while forgetting that the question itself is of limited interest' (Piketty 2014:575).

Ray Hudson has consistently retained a personal and professional commitment to North East England, his region of origin, and has worked with activists, trades unions and community organisations as well as with local, regional and national government, especially with respect to coalfield politics and regeneration policies. From an academic perspective, this sustained focus has resulted in many publications which together arguably constitute a temporal as well as spatial ethnography of the region and provide a deep understanding of the last four decades of economic restructuring, industrial transformation and their impact on daily lives. He pays particular attention to economic and social well-being, social relations with respect to class and gender and more recently ethnicity, and to the politics of place. All this investigation and analysis is situated within a theoretical analysis of combined and uneven region development – which today perhaps 'sounds 'too political'' (Hajimichalis and Hudson 2014:214)

More specifically, *Wrecking a Region* (Hudson 1989) and *A Place Called Teesside* (Beynon, Hudson and Sadler 1994) provide detailed comprehensive accounts of how people lived through exceedingly turbulent times associated with the shift to neoliberalism and specifically to Thatcherism and the harsh politics of a militarised state set on defeating the trade union movement and culminating in the defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984. These changes mark the last stages of the change of the region from being the workshop of the world in the 19th Century to its current status as a declining old industrial region on the periphery of Europe (Hudson 2016). This body of research provides a rich, comprehensive and systematic account of geography in the making.

One strand of thought in these books and considered reflectively in *Economic Geography: Towards a Geographical Political Economy* (Hudson 2016) is the working practices and employment relations associated with the new industries attracted by the stronger regional policies that were designed to ameliorate the devastation. This strand is particularly interesting for two reasons. It gives

considerable attention to gender, which is often overlooked in Economic Geography. Moreover, the changes in industrial composition, employment relations and the decline of trade unions and bargaining power of labour, have intensified and are continuing to intensify in the 21st Century regionally and on a global scale.

Specifically employment in North East England became more feminised in the dual sense of women's increased labour force participation and the instigation of more flexible, precarious and less unionised working practices. These practises underlie the immense shift in the share of value added accruing to capital over the last four decades, evident also on a global scale (see for example UNCTAD 2012), as well as the colossal increase in inequality within countries (Piketty 2014). Despite these negative effects, employment flexibility continues to be put forward as a win-win scenario for workers and employers in response to increased global competition.

What is really fascinating in these early monographs and the working paper on "Women and Work in Washington Newtown" (Hudson 1980a; see also Hudson 1980b) is the detailed documentation of these changes as they happened, as well as their impact on people living through this transformation. Key sectors of the economy, especially the heavy industries of coal, steel and shipbuilding, all faced closure or the possibility of closure. They were only partially replaced by consumer goods industries - cars, electronics and other consumer goods. The new firms were associated with the development of a branch plant economy as large corporations decentralised some of their labour intensive operations to regions with lower labour costs, transforming the region to a 'global outpost' (Beynon and Austrin 1979). In addition, some public and private sector back office work was located in the region.

The new industries, the types of work they offered and skills required differed from those of men made redundant by the closure of heavy industries. While the new skills could have been learned quite quickly, this workforce did not match the new employers' ideal worker, specifically people without experience of workplace struggle and prepared to accept Taylorised work disciplines (Hudson 2016). So younger and female employees were selected, the latter being employed in consumer goods industries, back office processing work and jobs in health and education, especially caring and cleaning, associated with the expansion of public sector employment. The resulting shift led to significant changes in gender relations and household dynamics as women earned their own incomes and some became the primary breadwinners (Morris 1995).

Despite the comparatively strong regional policies, the number of jobs created was simply not enough to replace those lost: Nissan, the most stable firm in the region to date, initially had over 33,000 applications for 600 jobs and the global outposts came and went (reflecting the mobility of contemporary capital) (Hudson 2016); and Siemens built a £1.1bn plant that was opened by the Queen but never operated. This insufficiency of jobs has marked every new initiative to date. There has been a succession of agencies and governance structures for the region, including One North East, supported by regional development agencies and the Government Office for the North East. The irony of the acronym - GONE – was being picked up by several writers of the time. These problems remain with us today. The most recent central government initiative, the Northern Powerhouse does not even cover this region, and the region remains bottom of the UK Regional GDP league table of Great Britain (ONS 2016).

These changes profoundly changed the way of life in this region as well as the landscape – the latter perhaps encapsulated by the remark of Anthony Gormley during the construction of his sculpture, the Angel of the North:

'The hilltop site is important and has the feeling of being a megalithic mound. When you think of the mining that was done underneath the site, there is a poetic resonance. Men worked beneath the surface in the dark. Now in the light, there is a celebration of this industry.'

It would be interesting to know if his namesake the late Joe Gormley of the National Union of Mineworkers would agree. The sculpture was described as a collaborative work with engineers in the region and designed to remind us about us about the coal miners, to mark the 'transition from the industrial to the information age' and to be a 'focus for our hopes and fears.' Being a gigantic Angel made from steel and standing out on the top of a hill arguably it is an important symbol of the region, but rather than a celebration of the past industry perhaps reflects all that is left. Certainly, the attempts to replace past work by cultural industries may create iconic sites – such as the Sage Music Centre or the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, but these do not provide regular work necessary to sustain livelihoods.

> There is also some association between policy changes and different strands of thought in economic geography. Economic geography moved away from the political economy critique of the limitations of a branch plant economy to evaluating the possibilities of endogenous growth linked with the Third Italy or less radically to Porterian clusters. Subsequently it has passed through cultural, institutional and relational turns. Nonetheless elements of all of these theories and more orthodox approaches in spatial economics remain. Hudson (2016) wonders whether this represents a productive pluralism or whether economic geography is simply a dedicated follower of fashion of paradigmatic shifts elsewhere. Reflecting on his work it is clear that he maintains a strong belief in the value of Marxist political economy, in particular its focus on processes of combined and uneven development for explaining the broad changes in the capitalist economy. Nonetheless, he still searches for middle level theories to account for the complexity of regional development in practice. In this respect he has maintained an open mind to all these changes in economic geography, finding some value in evolutionary and institutional perspectives and now working towards a Geographical Political Economy which he, with typical modesty, outlines as a preliminary and not a definitive approach (Hudson 2016).

This account has focused on one of the important strands in Ray Hudson's work. It is also important to point out that he has also worked on a wide range of other issues including the social economy, the illegal and waste economies, as well as health. In addition to this astounding volume of academic work of the highest quality, he has always been committed politically to social justice. This is reflected – in his academic work, his allegiance to the region where he lives, and his dedication to his colleagues and students reflected in his teaching and willingness to take on heavy administrative roles. It is also reflected in his commitment to the discipline demonstrated by his establishment along with David Sadler and the late Jim Lewis, of this journal, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, which played and continues to play an important outlet for critical scholarship. In retirement, I hope his contributions will continue and even grow as he is now free from administrative constraints and

the constant monitoring and review that tarnish academic life by substituting audit and performance management for genuine quality.

References

Beynon, H. and Austrin, T. (1979) Global Outpost: The Working Class Experience of Big Business in the North East of England. 1964-1979, Department of Sociology, Durham

Beynon, H., Hudson, R. and Saddler, D. (1994) A place called Teesside, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Gateshead Council (2016) Angel of the North. Background and History citing Anthony Gormley, the Sculptor during the Angel's construction. Available at: http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/attractions/Angel/Background/Background2.aspx

Hadjimichalis, C. and Hudson, R. (2014) Contemporary Crisis across Europe and the crisis of regional development, Regional Studies 48 (1): 208-218.

Hartshorne R. (1939) The Nature of Geography. A Critical Survey of Current Thought in the Light of the Past, Annals of the Association of American geographers XXIX (3):22-412 Available on Line https://archive.org/details/natureofgeograph010994mbp

Hudson, R. (2016) Approaches to Economic Geography: Towards a geographical political economy, London: Routledge

Hudson, R. (1989) Wrecking a Region: State Policies, Party Politics and Regional Change in North East England, London: Pion

Hudson, R (1980a) Women and work: a Study of Washington New Town, Dept of Geography Occasional Papers No 16 (New Series) Durham: University of Durham.

Hudson, R. (1980b) Regional Development Policies and Female Employment, *Area* 12 (3): 229-234

Hudson, R. and Saddler, D. (1983) Region, Class, and the Politics of Steel Closures in the European Community, Environment and Planning D 1 (4) 405-27.

Morris, L. (1995) Social Divisions: Economic Decline and Social Structural Change, London: Routledge

ONS (2016) Regional gross disposable household income (GDHI): 1997 to 2014. Available on Line at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/regionalaccounts/grossdisposablehouseholdincome/bulletins/regionalgrossdisposablehouseholdincomegdhi/2014#regional-nuts1-gdhi-estimates

Piketty, T. (2014) Capital in the Twenty First century, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

UNCTAD (2012) Trade and Development Report. Policies for Inclusive and Balanced Growth, New York: UNCTAD

ⁱ Chorographical can be defined as a systematic, detailed description and analysis of a region or regions or which study the causal relationships existing in the complex of heterogeneous phenomena at one place and the causal connections among phenomena at different places. This perspective reflects the ideas of Richard Hartshorne though it is important to note that in practice Hartshornian analysis focused more on the description of regional characteristics rather than the analysis of processes of capitalist development within regions and shaped by those regions .