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MULTISCALAR UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AND THE SOCIOSPATIAL FRAGMENTATION OF LABOUR

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STEFANIE HÜRTGEN, NICOLAS SCHLITZ, NADINE REIS
**Multiscalar Uneven Development and the Socio-Spatial
Fragmentation of Labour**

1. Introduction

Capital not only draws on existing differences within the workforce to increase rates of exploitation, but also actively creates and reinforces such differences (Massey 1984). Neoliberal globalisation has therefore resulted in a diversification of the spatial (and territorial) constellations, as well as the social differences structuring the fragmentations of the global working class. Firmly situated at the intersections of Labour Studies and Human Geography, the emerging field of Labour Geography has addressed subsequent questions concerning the spatial agency of labour (Herod 1994), workers' socio-spatial fragmentation and restrictive, particularist agency (Hürtgen 2020a), practices of solidarity and of organising across and along the spaces of transnational production (Fischer et al. 2022a, 2022b; Fütterer 2022, 2023), and the gendered and racialised social relations at stake in alliances across difference (Dutta 2022; Strauss 2018, 2020).

In this special issue, we discuss current concepts and dynamics of uneven development, focusing on the multiple and multiscalar socio-spatial fragmentation of (wage) labour. We are particularly interested in how uneven development – understood as a constitutive characteristic of global capitalism – is producing class differences (and vice versa), how class differences articulate along other lines of social difference, and how centre-periphery relations affect the odds of labour struggles and workers' solidarity. We trace these questions by focusing on the transnationalisation of (re)production and accompanying forms of social fragmentation and (surplus-)exploitation. Following these lines of inquiry, the articles

compiled in this special issue shed light on multiscalar or *glocal* forms of worker fragmentation (a term that links the politics of workers' division to contemporary neoliberal-capitalist globalisation, Swyngedouw 2004; Hürtgen 2021, 2022, see also below) – and, to a lesser degree, worker alliances emerging in different contexts around the world. Together, they indicate how Labour Geography can contribute to a better understanding of the linkages between class-based exploitation, multiscalar uneven development, divisions within the working class, and worker alliances. However, they leave room for interpretation regarding how differences within the glocal workforce can be understood in relation to a shared basis of class-based socioeconomic exploitation, and what this, in turn, implies for the potential renewal of alliances among the global working classes.

This special issue is the result of debates and exchanges in the working group “Uneven Development” and a subsequent triple-session at the German Congress for Geography (DKG) 2023 on uneven development and Labour Geography, which was organised by Christin Bernhold, Márton Czirfusz, Stefanie Hürtgen, Nadine Reis, and Nicolas Schlitz as members of the working group. Our activities took place in the context of the DFG funded International Research Network “Global Transformation and Socio-ecological Reproduction: Perspectives of Labour Geography” (2022-2024), of which the editors and two of the authors were members (see Douth et al. 2022).

In what follows, we propose some lines of reflection on concepts of uneven development in relation to labour's exploitation, fragmentation, and agency, in order to bring these reflections into dialogue with the articles in our special issue.

2. Radical coevalness instead of a “Global Development Ladder”

The fundamental contribution of the perspective of uneven development remains relevant, again and again. This is because the dominant mainstream still tends to dissolve the systematically produced global inequality into a narrative of time, transforming it into a story of historical stages, as Doreen Massey (2015) pointed out. The focus thus shifts away from the contradictory functioning of the capitalist mode of (re-)

production – manifesting itself largely as a devastating class-race-gender order – to the supposed ‘traditionalism’ of certain people and regions, their alleged ‘backwardness,’ and their presumed failure to have already reached a ‘Western-modern’ stage of development. This uncritical notion of developmental stages is encapsulated in the widespread metaphor of the global *industrial development ladder* (Trade for Development 2020); a metaphor used, for instance, in United Nations investment reports to ‘explain’ that the glaring poverty in some world regions or the widespread socioecological devastation in special economic zones can be attributed to a lack of capacity to climb the global ‘development ladder’ (UNCTAD 2019).

In contrast, *Critical or Radical Geography* (Belina/Michels 2019; Castree 2000) insists on understanding the *dark sides* of global capitalist development, in opposition to their externalisation, naturalisation, and historization, as radically present, socially produced and therefore, subject to change (Phelps et al. 2018). Only in this mode of contemporaneity socio-spatial thinking, one can develop a perspective of what Doreen Massey terms “radical coevalness” (Massey 2006, 2015) – hence a horizon of socio-spatial solidarity against the social construction of subjects as hierarchically unequal.

However, this relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘subject’ addressed by Doreen Massey, reveals the challenging character of a dialogue between labour geography and uneven development approaches. For it is important, but not enough, to grasp the capitalist economy as globally connected mode of (re-)production in order to counter (“parochial”, Massey 2005) local, regional, and national containerisations, such as the imaginations of a ‘national working class’ (Hürtgen 2014; van der Linden 2008; see also Pries 2005). Beyond that, Labour Geography raises the fundamental perspective on subaltern, labouring subjects as emancipatory actors. But how to imagine that ‘within’ the given, unevenly oppressive ruling order? Andrew Herod urges us to stop thinking of (wage)workers’ agency as an outcome of ‘objective structures’. Accordingly, from the perspective of an emancipatory, and thus democratic, uprising against capitalist distortions, the question arises as to how (everyday) working subjects can *transcend* their dominant, particularising structuring in order to shape their multiscale social relations differently, namely in a solidary and caring manner, and as local and global responsible agents.

So, the interplay of uneven development and unequal agency is central, as the contributions to this special issue also demonstrate. If, in the perspective of uneven development, we consider (wage) workers as social actors, i.e. (co-)producers of space, then not only socio-spatially fragmented conditions of agency come into view, but contiguously also the construction of (wage) workers themselves as socially unequal (labour) subjects: namely, as workers whose employment conditions are often fragmented and largely precarious and informalised; as women whose work is devalued and relegated to the 'private sphere'; as supposedly 'unqualified' workers from the Global South or the Global East; and/or as migrants who are typically socially fragmented among themselves. Under conditions of capitalist (re-) production, emancipatory spatial labour agency must therefore on the one hand start from these given, particularising-hierarchical attributions – in order to transcend them on the other hand (Holloway 2002).

3. Capitalist uneven development and the restless landscapes of capitalist exploitation

Drawing on Marx, radical geographers such as Neil Smith (1984) and David Harvey (1982) discussed uneven development as the spatialisation of capitalist accumulation. Smith focused in particular on the competitive dynamics between the individual private capitals, which are reflected in socio-spatial fragmentation and the production of scales. Harvey developed the concept of *spatio-temporal fix* to explain capitalists' structural and uneven instability in time and space. Capitalism creates a *built environment* but breaks out of it at the moment when there is a risk of overaccumulation. Harvey states that, with the (geographical) export of surplus money capital, and the presence of surplus labour-power and surplus production capacities outside the spaces where they originate, capital avoids, at least for a period, the threat of devaluation. In addition, he also claims that there is an imperative of capital to create its own exteriority just to seize upon expelled regions and people again through a renewed process of "original accumulation" (Harvey 2003; for an overview of the different meanings of the spatial fix in Harvey's work see Jessop 2006). As a result, capitalist landscape is *restless*: there is a constant reconfiguration of manifold fixations, abandonment, and seizure of social spaces.

Building on Jennifer Bair's and Marion Werner's (2011) argument that (geographical) reconfiguration and externalisation are not simply inevitable outcomes of capitalist crises, but rather part of the ongoing reproduction of capitalist relations of production, we return to the lens of Labour Geography and the contributions to this special issue. We emphasise that ongoing socio-spatial fragmentation, continuous restructuring, and the abandonment or appropriation of capitalist-built environments substantially involve the 'structural' and 'subjective' (re-)configuration of (waged) labour – that is, the embodied labour process and its socio-spatial organisation as (re)productive work. The labour process is inconceivable without a concretely built social-spatial arrangement of the available means of labour and concrete working conditions, the (labouring) subject creatively refers to – whereas the former in turn are highly dynamic and always provisional.

The contributions to this special issue show that spatial configurations are decisive for the corporal and vivid, hence *living labour*. They are experienced as exhaustion and distress, but also as a possibility for obstinacy and resistance – and are, thus, intensely contested. *Angela Zapata* and *Sofia Luna Siachoque* in this issue report on rest rooms and canteens on palm oil plantations that were fought for and then lost again, exacerbating the exploitation of unpaid women's labour; *Christin Bernhold* discusses the consequences of the changing of technological equipment and spatial locations of oil plantations as changing the conditions for trade union organisation; *Márton Czirfusz* deals with the concrete mechanised configurations of assembly line work in battery production; and *Jan Kordes* demonstrates how the German/transnational recruitment infrastructure for Filipino nursing staff rests upon highly uneven local conditions for reproduction. In each case, (wage-)labour processes become visible as spatially *produced*, while at the same time profoundly *unstable* in time and space. They, hence, have to be understood as part, if not the core, of the *restless landscapes of capitalism*. (Re-)productive labour is constantly being restructured in line with the prevailing calculus of managerial rationalisation and 'optimisation', changing technocratic and technological forms of labour's organisation, control and surveillance, as well as politically institutionalised orders (or direct attacks) from the side of state and capital.

The reproductive and feminised work of (food) provisioning, for example, can sometimes be integrated into capitalist production relations, while at other times being split off from it. The latter means shifting these

work tasks into a ‘private’ space, thereby reinforcing the social construction of feminised work as pre-societal, subaltern ‘natural’ care work (*Zapata/Luna Siachoque* in this issue, s.a. Hürtgen 2021; Schlitz et al. 2023; Soiland 2018). *Jan Kordes* in this issue shows how the transnational recruitment policy for nursing staff is marked, in the perspective of the applicants, by an obscure combination of acceleration and stasis. Kordes shows in detail how these spatio-temporal ‘flexibility demands’ create the very social and bodily labouring subject as a *buffer*, fostering rather differentiated and flexible reproductive coping strategies on the side of the applicants (see for this also Harvey 1998). However, the concrete composition of the internally fragmented (wage) workers and their concrete spatial ‘deployment’ as core workers, as temporary and agency workers, as female or (unevenly racialised) migrant workers, bogus self-employed, etc. also varies depending on the (global) economic situation, restructuring calculations, and transnational as well as national and local (state) policies (*Christin Bernhod, Márton Czirfusz, and Eleonora Roldán Mendiivil* in this issue; see also Andrijasevic 2021). In short, the socio-spatial fragmentation and restlessness of capitalist landscapes is above all one of living labour subjects.

4. Multiscalar labour regimes and the question of uneven development

A multiscalar geographical perspective on uneven development is, thus, of particular relevance when we turn to the immediate transnational organisation of capitalist labour- and production processes, often referred to as global value chains or global production networks. In recent years, (wage) labour has increasingly found its way into their analyses. Central to this shift is the concept of labour regimes (Baglioni et al. 2022; López 2023), which is themselves conceived in multiscalar terms – that is, as the political-economic interplay across workplace, local, regional, national, and transnational scales (Smith et al. 2018; Hürtgen 2022). In a world where production and reproduction are globally interconnected, local working conditions can only be understood as the outcome of multiscalar interactions among political-economic actors and constellations (Hürtgen/Hofmann 2022). This becomes all the more apparent, as *Márton Czirfusz* and *Jan Kordes* vividly demonstrate in this issue, when the local social frag-

mentation of workers – such as in Hungary’s battery production sector, or in the recruited training pool of (future) nurses in the Philippines – is shaped simultaneously by national and European social and recruitment policies, global investment strategies of the state or corporate owners, and their mobilisation of migrant workers.

The significance of socially fragmented, largely precarious and informalised, as well as ‘privatised’ (reproductive) labour also becomes evident in the other contributions to this special issue that address glocal relations of production. These articles align with a renewed and more explicitly anti-capitalist focus in the discussion of transnational production networks, which brings together critical geography and critical development theory (Selwyn 2019; Werner 2016). Central to this debate is the empirical and theoretical rejection of the so-called upgrading concept (Lüthje et al. 2013; Plank et al. 2014; Schlitz 2020). In a sense, *upgrading* represents an application of the previously criticised stage- and modernisation-based development-ladder thinking to transnational production. It assumes a gradual social improvement in the situation of (wage) workers through their integration into globally interconnected networks of production and their capital-driven (technological, organisational, etc.) modernisation. Whereas research shows that economic and technological modernisation is indeed central, even in so-called peripheral locations, this modernisation on the side of capital does not result in social advancement for workers but rather in the continuous reconfiguration of social fragmentation – for example, through shifts in the employment conditions of particular groups of workers at the local level (Bair/Werner 2015).

Christin Bernhold in this issue critically engages with the upgrading concept from a class-theoretical perspective. Along with *Angela Serrano Zapata* and *Sofia Luna Siachoque*, as well as *Márton Czifusz*, she demonstrates how the changing forms of integration into transnational networks of capitalist production are increasingly combined with labour fragmentation that often leads to conditions which undermine the social reproduction of (wage) workers. Given the ongoing ‘optimisation’ of transnational production, (wage) labour is constantly restructured. Multiple and highly dynamic fragmentation is, again, the outcome. *Uneven disintegration* (Hürtgen/Hofmann 2022), hence, is an inherent part of uneven development, which, in turn, can only be adequately grasped from a multiscalar perspective.

5. Dependency, violence, and (surplus-)exploitation in a multiscalar perspective

A third key theoretical strand that foregrounds uneven development is the dependency approach. Opposing both modernisation theories and traditional Marxist ‘stage’ theories, this approach insists that development in one part of the world and underdevelopment in another are two sides of the same coin. Once again, the cause of underdevelopment in the periphery was not its ‘backwardness’, but its specific role within the global world economy. The forcible integration of Latin American societies into global capitalism through (European) colonialism and imperialism fundamentally shaped the social relations underlying capitalist development in the region (Marini 1973).

Jan Kordes’ contribution to this special issue illustrates the ongoing pattern of imperial state-led appropriation of labour resources from the Global South by the North – a process largely indifferent to the reproduction needs of the affected societies and framed persistently through a developmentalist lens. Furthermore, with reference to (post-)colonial plunder and repression, the dependency approach highlights the political violence at the heart of capitalist accumulation (Reis/Antunes de Oliveira 2021). Capitalism is not merely a self-operating, functional ‘system’ of wage labour and surplus extraction; rather, it is a violent and often bloody mode of rule that expels people from their land, militarily suppresses social protests, criminalises and threatens migrants, and represses trade unions and social movements. *Eleonora Roldán Mendivil*, in her contribution to this special issue, while discussing *super-exploitation*, refers to this *political* drive of production restructuring towards starvation wages and non-unionised-facilities (Smith 2016); also, *Angela Serrano Zapata* and *Sofia Luna Siachoque*, in their contribution, remind us with reference to Ecuadorian paramilitary groups, that contemporary global production networks, such as those surrounding palm oil, are deeply entangled with (structural) capitalist violence (see also Anner 2020).

Uneven development must nevertheless always be analysed in its historically specific form. The theoretical framework of dependency theory must continually be revisited and further developed in light of changing conditions (Pimmer/Schmidt 2015: 7). Still, we need durable concepts to

explain the global reshaping of capitalist accumulation and geopolitical power between changing centres, semi-peripheries and peripheries. These are not given structures but historically varying patterns. So, there are, for example, questions about the spatial rescaling of centre and periphery. Is it sufficient to fix socio-spatial inequalities at the national level? There is a strong temptation to do so, not least because, as dependency theorists themselves have repeatedly pointed out, the economic unit of measurement – GDP – encourages it. Many dependency theorists of the 1970s and 1980s emphasised that the unevenly structured world system must not be misunderstood as a system of national containers. André Gunder Frank (1969: 7ff.), for example, outlined a genuine cascade theory of dependency, which he described as a “world-embracing metropolis-satellite structure,” whereby centre and periphery are located at different levels – or, as we would say today, scales – with each higher level plundering the lower ones, globally, continentally, nationally, regionally, and locally. In Frank’s sketch, a system of hierarchically organized (re-)productive relations emerges, which he simultaneously conceptualises as relations of political domination. Osvaldo Sunkel (1970) theorised intranational socio-spatial disintegration as a South-North overarching feature of globalised capitalist production relations, and the debate around the concept of structural heterogeneity (Cardoso 1974) further highlights the link between globalisation and subnational peripheralisation. In a reception of dependency theory that focuses heavily on state actors, this multiscale tradition of engaging with uneven development tends to be lost – and thus has to be repeatedly reclaimed (Hürtgen 2020b; Madariaga/Palestini 2021: 3ff.).

The continuation and further development of a multiscale perspective on uneven development is particularly crucial when it comes to (wage) labour. As all contributions to this special issue show, today (wage) labour and conditions of social reproduction can no longer be conceived as simply ‘local,’ since dispossession, restructuring, and the concrete shaping of labour conditions are themselves dependent on regional, national, continental, and global (state) policies, accumulation rationalities and actor constellations (see already Massey 1984). Therefore, as to critical migration studies, Jan Kordes in this issue refers to the concept of the *multiplication of borders* (Mezzadra/Neilson 2013). In critical geography, this multiscale interplay has been conceptualised as *glocalisation*, in order to

highlight the connection between intra- and international uneven development (Brenner 2004; Swyngedouw 2004). The glocal perspective shows that multiscalar fragmentation, i.e. the multiple and dynamic socio-spatial particularisation of labour and reproductive needs, is the social form of an upscaled, i.e. socially and spatially generalised capital-valorisation calculus in contemporary (neoliberal) globalisation (Hürtgen 2021, 2022; see also Tsing 2015; Slobodian 2023 and below).

The class question also arises. In what way does the conflictive re-configuration of classes, e.g. so-called middle classes, play into this worldwide spatial rescaling process? One of the most important contributions of Marxist dependency theory was its emphasis on the class-based nature of dependency, and the fundamental alignment of interests between the ruling classes in both the core and the periphery were highlighted early on (Quijano 1968: 78-81). Dependency was seen as functioning and evolving through the class alliances and conflicts between dominant classes in metropolitan and peripheral countries alike (Kaplán 1973: 134). However, a key argument of this approach is that the economic structures imposed by global capitalism led to different conditions of exploitation and class formation in the core and the periphery, resulting in a fragmented global working class with differing levels of power, interests, and lived experiences (Marini 1973; Portes 1978). From the perspective of Labour Geography, this would also imply a division of labour agency between the Global South and North. This core idea of an objectively and subjectively divided global working class has re-emerged in recent debates, especially concerning the “imperial mode of living” and the “externalisation” of socio-ecological costs from the North to the South (Brand/Wissen 2017, 2024; Lessenich 2016).

However, can we uphold this dichotomy from a Marxist perspective? The question that arises is how we conceptualise transnational solidarity, particularly in light of developments such as the increasing penetration of ‘Southern’ working conditions into the Global North, especially for migrant workers (see contributions by *Eleonora Roldán Mendivil*, *Jan Kordes* and *Márton Czirfusz* in our issue; see also Scholz 2002; Hürtgen 2020b). This question also gains urgency when we consider the transformation of the former Northern (patriarchal) welfare state into an authoritarian workfare regime, which has undermined the capacity for social reproduction for large segments of the population (Peck 2002). Mean-

while, in the core, there is no longer a unified, welfare state-based working class (which, with regard to women, racialised populations, migrants and the ‘unqualified’, never existed as such anyway). In addition, the particular position of the Global East as a semi-periphery demands attention; it can be seen as Europe’s pioneer in the introduction of new technological and social forms of exploitation – and the rise of China topped this picture. So, class formation is even more fractured, especially in the periphery. There, we find not only informalised workers but also well-paid managers and government officials with access to social security. Many expatriates in peripheral countries are employed under contracts secured through companies or governments based in the core. In all, fragmentation persists along the lines of what Bernstein (2023) has called “classes of labour,” as well as race and gender – divisions long highlighted by feminist political economy.

We still do not have a conclusive answer to these and other pressing questions regarding the transnationally fragmented formation of class, and its implications for labour agency. However, the work of Maria Mies ([1988] 2014) and other (feminist) development theorists of the Bielefeld School – developed in parallel to dependency theory and now receiving renewed attention (Mezzadri 2025) – reminds us that recognising the objective reality of fragmentation and labour’s division by capital is a necessary foundation for what Doreen Massey has called ‘radical coevalness’. In other words, in opposition to the idea of a fundamental subjective split (between ‘the North’ and ‘the South’) we must come to see ourselves as equal subjects, in opposition to the forces seeking to divide us. In this vein, Mies and her colleagues insist on the need to identify material commonalities as the structural basis for a ‘transnational sisterhood’ – that is, a solidarity that stands against and transcends dominant forms of division and particularisation (Hürtgen 2024). On the other hand, positionality – who speaks – matters when we think about labour agency. The idea of the superiority of ‘core’ or ‘Northern’ workers was and still is a painful obstacle of the labor and trade union movement

After all, however, labour rights in Western Europe were hard-won, even though within a colonial entanglement. To interpret them only as parts of a consumerist lifestyle would be to adopt a neoliberal appropriation of social rights which were collectively fought for.

A third line of questions arises with regard to the concept of super-exploitation. In fact, in our working group “Uneven Development” and during the editorial process, we had lively discussions about the concept, without actually reaching a consensus. Questions arose not only about the very notion of ‘value’ or ‘normal exploitation rate’, but also about feminist perspectives which integrate subsistence (re-)production into capitalist (over-)exploitation (Mies [1988] 2014; see also Meillassoux 1974). The concept of “super-exploitation of labour” was at the core of Ruy Mauro Marini’s take on dependency (1973/1991). Referring to Marx’s theory of value, he argued that Latin American capitalists tend to compensate for their lower profit rate with a maximised rate of exploitation, leading to starvation wages and a severe undermining of even immediate reproductive needs in the Global South. *Eleonora Roldán Mendiál* in this issue takes up this concept to highlight the uneven conditions of exploitation to which fragmented groups of workers are exposed. Affirming the multiscale approach of this special issue, *Roldán Mendiál* insists that domestic, i.e. inner-national, inequality is central to the formation of imperial nation states, and that in particular migration serves as a structural catalyst of multiscale fragmentation. Similar to *Jan Kordes* and *Márton Czirfusz* in this issue, but from a quantitative data perspective, *Roldán Mendiál* discusses, with reference to Germany, how racist labour market policies and migration regimes work together (for this see also Maroufi 2017).

6. Concluding remarks

The contribution by *Eleonora Roldán Mendiál* to this issue is also the one that explicitly addresses (xenophobic and racist) discourse policy (in her case, in Germany). Her distinction between a colour-coded and non-colour-coded racism as a mode of ideological social formation shows how *uneven disintegration* is a general outcome of contemporary uneven development (Hürtgen/Hofmann 2022). In this context, Anna Tsing’s concept of “supply chain capitalism” (2009) refers to “the structural role of difference in the mobilization of capital, labour, and resources” (Tsing 2009: 148). *Translation processes*, she argues, are the way social differences across diverse social and political spaces are made to work for capital accu-

mulation. They are crucial, because “wildly diverse forms of work and nature are made commensurate – for capital” (Tsing 2015: 43). This is relevant for “gender, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and citizenship status” (Tsing 2009: 148), as we have discussed in this introduction, but also, we have added, for the very commodity-oriented capitalist labour processes in transnational or glocal production networks which are organising uneven development as labour fragmentation and uneven dis-/integration across scales and geographically dispersed places (see also Ouma 2018). Thus, from the perspective of Labour Geography in the sense of Massey and Tsing, one could argue that radical coevalness – and, by extension, radical multiscalar interrelatedness – requires that labour (in the broadest possible sense) be enabled through counter-translations that foster emancipatory agency. These counter-translations must transcend dominant particularist encapsulations and the corresponding political structures and discourses. A more detailed exploration of this point must be left for another occasion.

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