Making Workers

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## Radical Geographies of Education

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# 1

# Spatial Divisions of Labor and the Search for Jobs

How do children become workers? In his classic ethnography, *Learning to Labor*, Paul Willis wrote about how the children of the working classes were constituted as manual laborers through various kinds of structural constraints, but also through their educational and personal choices, including their own agency and resistance in the classroom.[1]

These choices and associated forms of agency and resistance reflected the prevailing ideologies of work, masculinity, and community of that time period and place: England in the 1970s. Instead of focusing only on structural issues, Willis discerned how young men of the working classes—the "lads"—found respect, how they learned to value themselves. His focus thus turned to questions of culture, which he tied to those of political economy.

Culture has changed in the four decades since Willis's book was written—cultures of childhood as well as cultures of work and value. So has the actual workplace. So how are we valued by society and how do we value ourselves now? And what are the forces that are creating feelings of self and broader webs of belief?

We need to reexamine the types of questions Willis asked in light of contemporary changes in culture and society. How do kids "learn to labor" in ways that are both similar and different in the current moment? The contemporary period for young people almost everywhere is one of increasing precarity, where insecurities in the economy and labor market have been transferred onto workers, and ultimately onto children. Education prepares future workers for their entry into society—now a global society. The risks that young people are required to assume are thus global in scope, reflecting the flexibility and volatility of financial and labor markets without borders. They are also highly geographical, in the sense of a world unevenly developed, with deep rifts between cities, regions and nations, and with ongoing spatial divisions of opportunity and vulnerability.

In this context, what and how children are taught, and how and what they learn, can tell us a lot about both prevailing cultural norms and the political economy of the early twenty-first century. It can also tell us about how these norms are produced and contested. We need to know the overarching policy shifts and key struggles that are currently being waged in the name of educational and personal value. Who is weighing in on the content of the curriculum, the use of technology in the classroom, and on the types of schools and school choice that society should provide?

In this book I point to some of the new actors, technologies, and practices now being brought to bear on making children into workers. Beginning with a discussion of the shifting geographies of employment, I then move to examine how spatial changes in the opportunities of work, and the technologies that facilitate these shifts, also lead to new understandings of self and new cultural narratives and ways of being in the world.

I show that an influential actor in these processes today is philanthropy. The importance of philanthropic foundations is not just in their funding and programing priorities, but also in the ways in which they recruit young people and their parents into a new sense of value and security in vulnerable times. Much of this "value" resides in the opportunity to choose schools and learning styles, an opportunity that dovetails with market-based logics of individual free choice. This freedom entails certain kinds of responsibility and certain kinds of mobility—the right to be place-less rather than place-bound—an option for some, but not others.

I also look at regional, national, and supranational forms of educational governance over this same period. How have ideas about educating children to become democratic members of a diverse national community fused with and/or been displaced by something else? I examine ideas about multiculturalism in the context of labor market vulnerabilities, and contend that cultural ideas about work and its connection to multicultural education have shifted in this realm as well. Strategic ideas of cosmopolitan competence and lifelong learning now transcend those of social cohesion and national harmony. Here the watchword is flexibility: the ability to nimbly leap between skills and across spaces to capture the open position in the global economy. Once again, those who cannot make this leap are left behind, in place.

In this book I make an argument for the importance of geographical thinking in education. How children become workers is tied to these new/old divisions of labor and flexible work, as well as to cultures of self that echo the vulnerabilities of the global marketplace. Education reflects and reproduces these tensions, but it can also be a site of resistance. We are now at a critical juncture in educational theory and practice, where it is imperative not only to critique market-based logics and forms of recruitment, but also to consider the ways in which these orientations can be effectively resisted.

In the final two chapters of the book I consider the role of new geographies of radical thought and action in forming these spaces of resistance. These spatial practices can take many forms. Here I introduce two projects conducted with middle-school students in collaboration with Sarah Elwood, a geography professor at the University of Washington. One consists of finding and mapping alternative historical sites that were important for marginalized groups. They may have been neglected or deliberately overlooked in mainstream maps and tourist guides, so finding them and placing them on the students' own collaborative maps is a move that gives power to the children and also to the marginalized groups themselves. We call this project "counter-mapping" to indicate a refusal to abide by the normative rules of map-making.

A second project involves tracing the history and geography of a river. In this collective program the researchers worked with young people to find, map, and discuss the transformative relationship between humans and nature. Thinking and talking about straightening, dredging, damming, draining, polluting, and ultimately cleaning and caring for this "organic machine" is a project about the past and the future. It enables understanding about human and nonhuman relationships. It also helps children consider and imagine alternative future partnerships with each other and with the natural world.

The world of work is formed by geographical relationships and visions. It is composed of certain kinds of partnerships, involving humans and sometimes involving nonhumans as well. This world is one of uneven development and inequitable relationships and opportunities, an unevenness that reflects spatial production within a capitalist system. Abolishing these inequalities is thus also a geographical project, and one that must be considered at every scale, from the classroom to the globe.

This book takes on these scales of injustice, beginning with the global divisions of labor and ending with radical geographies of education. Each

of the chapters draws on illustrative examples from research conducted in Canada, the United States, and England over the past two decades. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of these societies but rather to emphasize the geographical underpinnings of some of the key transformations now occurring in how children are educated and workers are made. I also hope to give some useful examples of radical geographies in action: pedagogies and practices of resistance that can form a broad bulwark against the fragmenting and dislocating forces of market-led globalization.

Geographers, especially those that study human dynamics, use the concepts of place, space, and scale to think about relationships between and across places. These heuristic tools lend themselves to critical, and even radical, perspectives to the degree that they force thinking about the uneven distribution of resources and access to sites of power and opportunity. In what follows I hope to introduce readers to some of the concepts most useful to radical geographers, beginning with the key concept of uneven development.

## *Uneven Development*

What work is available is a geographical question. There has always been competition for jobs, but up until a few decades ago, this competition was largely restricted by national boundaries. We are now in a global marketplace, where workers compete for employment across borders. This contemporary story of competition in a borderless landscape is set within a larger history of uneven geographical development.

Uneven development is related to the logic of capital accumulation within a capitalist socioeconomic system. Capitalism reshapes the world through its inherent dynamism, and also through its own internal contradictions. The first of these involves the competition to reduce costs and increase profits through various ways of exploiting labor—for example, through longer workdays or speeding up the production process. This often leads to efforts by workers to protect themselves by forming unions or otherwise resisting these forms of labor exploitation. A useful way of describing this is in terms of labor "constituting itself as a class," a process that generally results in conflict between labor and business management. Because this overall process of labor exploitation and ensuing efforts at class-based forms of protection is fundamental to

how the system works, and has worked historically, this is considered to be an inherent contradiction within capitalism.

The second major contradiction occurs when the production process actually works too well and excessive amounts of goods or commodities are produced. This is known as the tendency to "overaccumulation," where too many goods or too much capital is produced relative to the possibilities of its deployment. This is the direct result of individual competition between capitalists to produce more for less. This process often leads to a glut on the market, a falling rate of profit, and ultimately works to the detriment of capitalists' collective interests—hence it is a "contradiction" in the system as a whole.

The geographer David Harvey was one of the first scholars to make a strong connection between how capitalism operates in this dynamic but contradictory way, and how the built environment is transformed over time. He developed this thesis in his book *Limits to Capital* and other early work.[2] Harvey proposed a theory of uneven geographical development that drew explicitly on critiques of the workings of capitalism as developed primarily by Karl Marx. Among the many ways that he illuminated and expanded on Marx's critique of political economy, a key idea came to be known as the "spatial fix." This was the idea that crises of overaccumulation, such as discussed above, can be temporarily resolved through geographical expansion.

For example, investment in basic commodity production can build up to a crisis of overproduction. This overproduction leads to a superfluity of commodities that cannot be sold, and money, idle machinery, or unemployed labor that cannot be productively put to use. Harvey called this a crisis of overproduction in the "primary circuit" (the circuit of commodity production). He argued that a temporary "fix" to this crisis was to channel the excess into a secondary circuit: that of the built environment. Putting this excess capital, goods, and/or labor to work in producing urban infrastructure, office buildings, and housing "fixed" the problem of overaccumulation—on a temporary basis—by soaking up the unproductive capital and switching it into a new productive venue: the built environment.

While the intricacies of Harvey's arguments are beyond the scope of this book, his ideas are worth introducing because of the important connections he makes between capital, labor, and spatial production. Uneven spatial development stems from the logic of capital markets—of capitalism as a socio-economic system. The competition between

individual capitalists, the tendency to create monopolies and to explore and exploit new markets, capitalism's own internal contradictions, and the tendency to crisis, all come together to create unequal capitalist spaces and environments, and inequitable labor opportunities.

Neil Smith and many others have developed this intellectual project further, showing how the entire natural world becomes capitalized and subject to new rounds of uneven development under capitalism.[3] The scale of this process is now global, and has fed into various regimes of imperial expansion throughout history. Challenging these iterative processes and effects must be first and foremost a geographical project as well as a social struggle.

Uneven geographical development today takes place at all scales, from pockets of extreme poverty in the financial centers of major cities to unequal relationships between nations and world regions. Who works where, in what kinds of jobs, and under what circumstances is directly linked with this larger process of uneven spatial development. The divisions of labor, from internal workplace divisions to international and digital divides, reflect these geographies of imperialism and capitalism. Moreover, contemporary divisions of labor continue to transform in new ways and in novel configurations, mirroring the spatiotemporal context of both capitalism and technological change.

The processes affecting the educational constitution of workers are global ones. The focus of this book is on the developed or core economies and societies of the anglophone West, with most examples derived from research in the United States, Canada, and England. It is an investigation of how workers are divided, educated, and "made" in these specific milieus within the global context of uneven geographical development. In this book I also take a look at how this social-geographical project can be reworked and reconstituted as something else—through geographical education, memory, and struggle. Before proceeding further, however, what exactly are the divisions that impact workers today, and from where have they emerged?

### *Capitalist Development and Spatial Divisions of Labor*

The earliest divisions of labor within capitalist commodity production were in specific, individual factories. Rather than similar work being performed by all laborers on a whole project from beginning to end, work was divided into different parts and carried through in a series of

steps. Each of the steps could be conducted by individual workers with different specializations, hence the labor process was seen to be "divided." Adam Smith famously wrote about this in *The Wealth of Nations,* in his illustration of the specialized manufacture of pins in a pin factory.[4]

The technical division of labor in a single factory from Smith's era (the mid-1700s) was the first of many iterations of this process. Each one was an attempt to increase productivity through revolutionizing the work process. The organization and constant reorganization of labor in this manner was made possible through the structure of social relations under capitalism. Laborers working for a wage could be directed and utilized as factors of production similar to any other factor.

Through the new social relations of production beginning at the time of Smith's pin factory, but greatly expanding during the industrial revolution, workers were forced to concede power over their spatial and technical skills and positions within the work process. It thus became possible to "divide" them in terms of their skill base, their tasks, their physical location in a factory, and their geographical location at all scales from city to globe. Technological changes from new machinery to the digital revolution have enabled these technical and geographical divisions within the labor process to take place.

The constant reorganization of production to take advantage of these multiple divisions has been one of the greatest means of increasing profitability since the advent of the capitalist system. A good recent example of this is the rise of call centers in India. These new telecommunication sites employ educated and experienced workers at far lower labor costs than is possible in developed countries, leading to greater overall profits for corporate headquarters.

One of the most prominent efforts to conceptualize and link the geography of employment to these social relations of production was made by Doreen Massey in *Spatial Divisions of Labor*.[5] Focusing on the more recent divisions of labor in the period of modern globalization of from the 1960s to the early 1980s, she explained how the spatial distribution of employment has to do with the way in which production is organized across space. She identified the emergence of new international divisions of labor, wherein the complex hierarchies of functions within capitalist production systems become stretched over space.

Massey's scholarship addressed contemporary divisions of labor that were themselves established on the basis of prior international relationships and patterns. These included the "old" international division

of labor, where resources were extracted from the colonies and profit was made through the manufacturing process in core European cities such as Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. In the industrial era, less developed regions of the world supplied primary resources such as minerals, cotton, and other basic goods to these metropolitan centers. These primary resources were then made into commodities in factories in the core countries, producing value domestically through the manufacturing process.

The decline of manufacturing in advanced economies and the spatial shift of these jobs to developing regions in the 1970s and 1980s transformed this prior pattern. The "new" international division of labor (NIDL) also involves a production process linking people and places across national borders. But in this case it is characterized by industrial decline in advanced economies and the rapid growth of manufacturing and export-oriented assembly plants around the world. While these factories were initially located primarily in border towns in Mexico and the coastal cities of Southeast Asia, they have now rapidly expanded to other regions such as Pakistan, Malaysia, and China. These factories are owned or contracted by multi-sited companies known as "transnational corporations" (TNCs) that coordinate the assembly and processing of parts and materials on a global scale. The resulting global production networks allow TNCs to play off different locations against one another, often forcing local governments and communities to accept lower tax rates, lower labor protections, and weakened regulatory oversight as the price for local jobs in global networks.

TNCs are generally headquartered in cities that are financially influential and also highly integrated in the global economy, such as New York, London, Shanghai, Paris, and Singapore. These so-called "global cities" are the key nodes of the production process, performing the command and control functions of management and overall system coordination. TNC executives search for the regions with the lowest costs in labor, land, taxes, and environmental regulations, and outsource parts of their business to these overseas locations. Thus value is created and profits extracted through a production process that literally extends around the world. Shifts in geographical production are directly related to the social relations of production, spatial unevenness, and hierarchies that enable TNCs to find and exploit sourcing efficiencies globally.

While the geography of the NIDL looks quite different from earlier eras, it still rests on and is made possible by social relations of production

that enable the separation of workers and worker tasks into discrete parts. Transnational commodity chains involve a procedural or technical split in the production process—a so-called technical division of labor—in the same way that Smith noted for the pin factory. But they also increasingly involve a transnational political division of labor that—in a manner that often reworks the racialized divisions of labor of the colonial period—pits workers in different world regions against each other. Capitalist competition leads to the ceaseless reorganization of this process in the search for greater profitability, and technological innovations enable these transformations to occur.

The most recent geographical transformations of the division of labor—the development of global commodity chains—were made possible by multiple recent technological developments. A commodity chain is a shorthand way of describing the linked chain of places and events involving the initial drawing together of resources and production of a good all the way through to its eventual distribution and exchange in the marketplace. This process can now involve multiple sectors, players, and places across the globe. The technological innovations that facilitated this process over the past 50 years include telecommunications, containerized shipping, new forms of transportation including jet planes, and of course the revolution in computing and other digital technologies.

These new technologies have rendered the spaces of the globe easier to cross both physically and electronically, leading to the phenomenon known as "time–space compression." This is a geographical term meant to capture the ways that the temporal and spatial dimensions of the globe seem to be shrinking because of the ever-increasing speeds at which bodies and information are able to travel across space. Technologies have facilitated the acceleration of these processes in every conceivable way, from increasing the volume of goods, information, and bodies that can and have traversed space, to the speed at which these movements occur.

TNCs are the logical outgrowth of many of these processes and have grown enormously over the past four decades. They optimize the possibilities of the NIDL, restlessly searching for locations and workers that enable input costs to be lessened. They simultaneously probe for—and create—uneven geographies that can be exploited for maximum market penetration. These globalizing efficiencies and market quests have created rapid changes in where manufacturing occurs, how products are put together, and where and how products cross borders and are marketed to consumers.

For workers in core countries, the most widespread effect of TNCs' activities has been the offshoring of manufacturing. Many manufacturing jobs have been outsourced to developing countries, while the functions of research and development, producer services, and executive decision-making have remained primarily in the developed or core regions and cities. This process began in the late 1960s and accelerated through the 1980s, leading to what Bluestone and Harrison called, in the US context, "the de-industrialization of America."[6] The loss of certain kinds of blue-collar manufacturing jobs in the United States and most other advanced economies at this time was paralleled by the increase of low-skilled assembly-line jobs in many developing countries, often located in export zones along international borders.

These transformations occurred simultaneously with the rise of service-sector employment and other telecommuting and data-entry labor opportunities. A situation in which manufacturing declines, despite some growth in research, information, and services, is often termed a postindustrial economy. Initially, these "postindustrial" clerical and service-sector jobs grew most rapidly in developed countries, but in recent years this type of employment has now spread to other regions worldwide, such as India. Indeed, the call centers that first opened up in cities such as Delhi began as business operations outsourced from US-based companies like General Electric in the latter half of the 1980s. Now multiple cities across India offer IT services to TNCs across the globe, from tele-banking to tele-education and other communications operations. It has become more and more likely that the person answering a corporate call about a parking ticket, student loan, or airline dispute will be working in a cubicle in Mumbai or Bangalore.

These types of broad shifts are notable for the ramifications they have on social relations. Social divisions of labor include gendered divisions and divisions based on race and ethnicity, as well as class fractions. Many of the manufacturing jobs that were lost in advanced economies in the 1970s and 1980s were relatively high-wage, unionized jobs held predominantly by white men. Deindustrialization in core countries has been geographically varied, however. Some industries, especially low-wage branch plants and data-entry centers, opened up in suburban areas at the same time that steel and automotive plants were moving offshore.

Initially women were hired for many of these clerical and service positions in the United States and Europe. And in developing societies, women have been the primary workforce in the new assembly-line