

*A United Kingdom? Economic, Social and Political Geographies* by John Mohan .  
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The aim of this book is to provide an assessment of processes of uneven development across the UK, and the academic debates surrounding the interpretations of these processes. While it focuses largely on the effects of policies associated with the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, the book's publication during 1999 enables it to consider the significance of New Labour as a political force, particularly in terms of processes of devolution and constitutional change. The author seeks to steer a course between detailed mappings of particular patterns of divisions, on the one hand, and broader macro-scale treatments of economic and social change on the other (p. x). Furthermore, in contrast to edited texts offering discrete chapters in which authors summarise developments in particular fields, *A United Kingdom* promises a more integrated treatment of its subject matter where key themes and arguments are pursued and developed thorough the course of the book. This promise is largely realised in an engaging and accessible text which provides not only a coherent summary of key changes in the human geographies of the UK since 1979, but also an introduction to the main theories and approaches which academic researchers have developed to represent and understand these changes.

The structure of the book is coherent and logical, offering a framework which supports and enhances the author's argument. The opening chapter positions the text in relation to other work, summarising general debates on spatial divisions of labour, flexible specialisation and localities. Given that the author's broad approach is influenced by relational approaches to place which emphasise that particular places are constituted through wider sets of networks (see Allen et al., 1994; Massey, 1994), it is appropriate that chapter two situates Britain in a broader global and historical context, assessing debates over economic decline and considering the impact of globalisation. After a discussion of state restructuring, the next group of chapters concentrates on economic geographies in relation to deindustrialisation, new industrial spaces, labour markets and finance. The next two chapters focus on social divisions in the context of debates on class

and the restructuring of the welfare state. These chapters seemed, to my mind at least, to be among the strongest in the book, perhaps reflecting the author's specialist interest in health and welfare. Subsequent chapters consider place and political mobilisation, sub-national governance, policies for managing uneven development and sustainability before a brief conclusion considers some of the key influences which will shape the future development of the UK.

In overall terms, Mohan paints a depressing picture of widening social and economic inequalities. While this is partly a function of the coherence of the text relative to edited collections, in the sense that the accumulation of specific observations across chapters generates a broader pattern, these connections and relationships could have been drawn out in a more explicit fashion. In this respect, the conclusion is somewhat disappointing, neglecting to draw key arguments and themes together from previous chapters. Having said this, much of the value of the book will be to prompt further investigations of these connections. The book's implications in terms of political change are also depressing, with Mohan rightly sceptical of the New Labour government's ability to introduce far-reaching reforms in the view of its acceptance of basic neo-liberal assumptions and the veto power of international financial markets.

Mohan generally succeeds in communicating some key issues which have been the focus of academic debate in British geography to a broader audience. One slight criticism would be that issues which are emphasised in the early part of the book in relation to globalisation, identity and relational approaches to place are not always developed fully in subsequent chapters. The summary of spatial policy in chapter 12, for instance, provides a fairly conventional, if highly competent, review which would have benefited from an application of the relational approach introduced earlier. A United Kingdom also lacks an integrating theoretical framework which would enable readers to locate detailed arguments and observations within a broader context. To be fair, it is difficult to envisage where such a framework might come from, given the widespread suspicion of integrating meta-narratives which threaten to simplify and distort understandings of change. I would suggest, however, that recent re-workings of the regulation approach which move beyond

simplistic notions of Fordism and post-Fordism (see MacLeod, 1997; Painter and Goodwin, 1995) may have offered a useful framework for this book, particularly in terms of the rejection of Keynesian welfarism as a mode of regulation, the introduction of neo-liberal strategies during the 1980s and 1990s, and New Labour's search for a new institutional 'fix' that maintains the perceived benefits of flexibility while offering more social protection to marginalised groups. In comparison to earlier models of regulation theory which are briefly discussed by Mohan (p.15-15, 34-35), later versions are sensitive to the contingency and unevenness of political-economic restructuring, enabling them to accommodate, for instance, tensions within New Labour over the specific direction of change. Adopting such a framework might also have brought heuristic benefits to a book which succeeds in clearly delineating the effects of political and economic restructuring since the early 1980s, but is perhaps less successful in explaining these changes. Here, a regulationist perspective could have been deployed to emphasise the connections between processes of globalisation and the promotion and implementation of neo-liberal strategies which the author touches on in several places. In combination with the inclusion of a limited amount of comparative material from other European states in individual chapters, such an approach may have helped to bring out the specificity of the UK experience more clearly. While this might seem to be an odd criticism of an analysis of the changing human geographies of the UK, the book is perhaps too UK-centric in not offering enough reflection on the similarities and differences between the British case and the experiences of other developed Western economies.

None of these rather laboured criticisms should, however, be allowed to detract from the very real qualities of *A United Kingdom* as an accessible and engaging introduction to issues of uneven development within the UK. This reasonably priced text is likely to become a standard reference for students following a range of courses on the geography and politics of contemporary Britain. It will be particularly useful in terms of encouraging further investigations of particular topics and relationships.

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## References

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