

## ***The Regional World: Territorial Development in a Global Economy***

Michael Storper (1997) (The Guilford Press, New York) 338 pages, (UK £25)(US \$18.95)  
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'The Regional World' makes a contribution to the literature concerned with developing more complex and sophisticated understandings of the territoriality of socioeconomic processes in late capitalism. In this challenging account, Michael Storper pulls together and revisits his recent work in the context of a more developed theoretical framework. The book engages critically with an array of current approaches and attempts to develop a distinctive project based upon understanding the persistence of regional economic specificity in the context of a 'globalising' economy. Two dimensions of specificity are said to underpin territoriality: "knowledge as the basis for technology" and "the human relations that are essential to many types of economic coordination" (p. ix). Economic geography is seen as the focus through which the key relations of "specificity and difference, divergence and convergence, mobility and immobility" (p. ix) that underpin the dynamics of territorial development can be addressed. The book explores these themes within eleven chapters, divided into five sections.

As might be expected from an author who has been a prolific contributor to regional development theory, this book is both ambitious and wide-ranging in its intent. It contains links to broader debates in social science and an holistic approach is developed as a way of thinking about a world that is sometimes claimed to be too complex and heterogeneous to understand. Storper develops rich and dense arguments which centre upon incorporating the iterative flavour of the "reflexive" and "relational" turns (p. 30-31) within theorising about the "holy trinity" (p. 26) of technologies, organisations and territories at the heart of regional economic analysis. The approach recasts fundamental ideas and conceives of the economy as "relations", the economic process as "conversation and coordination", the subjects of economic action as individual and collective "reflexive human actors" and the nature of accumulation as dependent upon "relational" in addition to material assets (p. 28). This detail of the approach deepens the ideas that have been commonly cited from Storper's work. Wherein, the region is seen as the locus for an array of "untraded interdependencies" (p. 5). These are interpreted as conventions, informal rules and habits that coordinate economic actors under the conditions of uncertainty endemic within a capitalism endowed with new "metacapacities" (p. 28). Such inter-relations are seen as "region-specific assets" (p. 5) that are scarce and form the central basis of geographical differentiation in regional development trajectories and prosperities. Particular attributes are seen as slow and problematic to imitate and allow territorial economies to be rethought of as "stocks of relational assets" (p. 28). The context that values these processes is the emergent 'learning economy' which has emerged as a result of heightened reflexivity between economic entities and constitutes an advanced phase of capitalism. 'Competitiveness' is achieved by territorialised sets of relations that can learn faster or better than others the knowledge that furnishes them with the regionally-specific advantages to outrun the inevitable forces of imitation and standardisation in the capitalist world economy.

The book contains much more than these increasingly commonplace ideas. The approach builds

a rich analytical framework that blends thinking about how traded and untraded assets evolve regionally-specific and relational dimensions with insights concerning the development and importance of conventions (i.e. the mutually and collectively comprehensible routines that provide frameworks for action) in the territorial differentiation of regional economic development. These insights come together in the discussion of the regional 'worlds of production' that echo the book's title and are defined as "the interlinkage of people, organisations, objects, and ideas, with a certain indivisibility and wholeness" (p. 112). The book provides a fresh interpretation of the usual suspects of regional industrial agglomerations in Italy, France and the US (Chapter 6) and current debates in urban theory (Chapter 9). Overall, 'The Regional World' is a conceptually weighty book. It challenges established approaches and provides mechanisms for considering the role of the territory as a "fundamental basis of economic and social life" (p. 3) rather than simply a manifestation. The book promotes an understanding of regional development as the complex and indeterminate coevolution of technologies, organisations and territories. Much of the language and meaning in the book is new, opening the door to accusations of neologism, but the arguments provide analysis of causal mechanisms and some of their roots in the historical traditions of regional political economy are acknowledged (e.g. Hirschman, Perroux).

'The Regional World' addresses a wealth of problematic issues but not always in a wholly convincing manner and some points are overdone. Storper contends that the structure/agency debate has been "empirically left behind" (p. 30) by the current socioeconomic revolution. Empirical margins within structures are said to have widened and path-dependency means agents are seen to have long lasting effects upon structure. This appears to signal a renewed interdependency in the structure/agency question and the increased saliency of contingency in explaining the current phase rather than their growing irrelevance. Similarly, the book's emphasis upon 'human relations' seems to imply a more individualised socioeconomy in some way different and not marked by a political economy of social relations. But such a claim requires a more thorough explanation of how power in this emergent socioeconomy is structured. Indeed, throughout the book questions of ownership, power and control are skirted around with often only passing recognition that some interests shape the agenda and basis for (re)creating 'relational assets' more than others.

Oddly, given Storper's historic contributions, the sense of ambivalence toward or, perhaps, attempt to move beyond, the traditions of regional political economy continues in the book's preparedness to think and work within the confines of the current capitalist order. The current 'learning economy' variant tends to be accepted as the current 'rules of the game' within which theory and policy must work. Storper's rich analysis could perhaps have underpinned new and critical thinking about real alternatives that address class, gender and racial divides in the interests of a more progressive regional development. Although these issues get a mention, they are not fully incorporated into the analysis. In this regard the current 'learning economy' is a problematic concept. Given that it implies an increased volatility and velocity to the accumulation dynamic, it appears to systematise an increased rate of both material and relational asset building and scrapping with their associated socioeconomic costs. Growth can therefore wax and wane in a growing number of territories and underpin a deepening of combined and uneven development under capitalism. The economic geographies of this 'learning economy' are shaped by the increasing extent of specialisation necessary to (re)create not easily replicable assets, which is shrinking the map of prosperous regions, and a sharpening of the divide between

these new cores and their expanding peripheries. While recognising that these create real issues for territory beyond the core, described as “a strong split between exit territories (peripheries) and voice-and-loyalty territories (cores)” (p.298), Storper goes little further than admitting the intractability of this problem. Increased inequality appears to be an integral feature of the ‘learning economy’ but it is often neglected in the dominant accounts.

‘The Regional World’s discussion of policy attempts to move beyond the current orthodoxy toward a new heterodox agenda. Unconventional issues are raised including the importance of ‘soft’ measures aimed at underpinning the creation of ‘precedent’ through ‘talk’ and ‘confidence’ (p. 271) to create a common context of an “ensemble of conventions” (p.267) to underpin regional learning and adaptation. The discussion contains an underlying emphasis upon endogenous development but, again, this presents a fundamental problem for less advantaged areas which lack or retain material and relational assets which restrain and/or condition their ability to learn. Again, Storper is alive to this but offers relatively weak responses. The other main emphasis on formal and informal institutions often lacks a politics of regional development, although not in the empirical passages, with little said about issues of democracy, legitimacy, accountability and transparency and the critical role or otherwise of the nation state. The book’s conclusion is disappointing since it contains some insight but is perhaps somewhat firm-centric and brief in its nature given the groundbreaking and holistic nature of the analyses presented earlier.

Generally, the book is well written, although it contains some overly long and confusing sentences, sometimes lacks clear linkages between sub-sections, and the ‘worlds of production’ seem to change names within Chapter 5 (i.e. ‘Marshallian’ to ‘Interpersonal’?). The chapter structure is also awkward in part (e.g. Chapter 4 stands out), perhaps reflecting the nature of the book as a reworking of substantial amounts of already published material, and a significant number of references were missing from the consolidated list. The length and price are about the going rate. Overall, ‘The Regional World’ is (anti-?) essential reading for its huge wealth of insights and thought provoking analysis that situates the regional development question firmly in the context of current social science debate. The real challenge ahead is for these new understandings and the research agenda to which they point to prove their worth to the practice of regional development theory, method and policy.

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