



Labour geography II: Being, knowledge and agency

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Abstract

This report builds on an examination of different approaches to labour precarity and precarious employment to argue for the need for labour geographers to examine the foundations of our approaches to agency. The debate about agency has become the terrain on which many labour geographers meet, but the dominant epistemology of agency has an (implicit or explicit) grounding in debates about labour's spatial fix. This grounding rests on assumptions about the activities and sites that 'count' in analyses of labour, with implications for theory-building and the politics of knowledge production in labour geography.

Keywords

agency, epistemology, knowledge production, labour geography, ontology, politics

I Introduction

The first report in this series, subtitled 'Towards a geography of precarity?' (Strauss, 2017), raised a number of questions about how labour geographers engage with the concept of precarity. Unpacking the intellectual genealogies of the concept, however, and asking how it might enter our 'fixed capital of concepts' (Strauss, 2017: 5), also makes space for examining the kinds of claims, and politics of knowledge production, that underpin approaches in labour geography. Put another way, a critical examination of precarity highlights what can be characterized as ontological versus epistemological approaches to the concept, which opens up to scrutiny our sub-discipline's own foundations – the state of labour geography's *existing* fixed capital of concepts and their groundings. My second report does this by further unpacking some of the differences in approaches to precarity, and then by linking those differences to an examination of the foundational role played by

the idea of labour's spatial fix (Herod, 2001; for a summary see Herod, 2017), and its relationship with labour geography approaches to agency. I end by arguing that this process is important for considering how labour geographers meet current and future intellectual and political challenges, which are the subject of my final report, including in the areas of non-human labour and racial capitalisms.

II Being and knowing

As noted in overviews of precarity and precarious work, there are different – sometimes inter-related, sometimes separate – trajectories to the development of the concept of precarity (McDowell and Christopherson, 2009; Strauss, 2018; Waite, 2009). They are often characterized

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in binary or oppositional ways: academic versus political, European versus Anglo-American, post-structuralist versus political economic. While I argue that there are problems with such neat dualisms in labour geography (Strauss, 2017: 3–4), it is nevertheless true that approaches to precarity and precarious work tend to have either an ontological or epistemological starting point. Broadly stated, approaches grounded in post-structuralism and political philosophy, often taking Judith Butler's work as a starting point, are ontological. They make claims about the nature of being, the inherent vulnerability of bodies and social relations, and the precariousness that results from the political construction and uneven distribution of forms of insecurity (Butler, 2004; in geography see for example Harker, 2012). Work on precarious employment, again broadly characterized, is more interested in examining, describing and analysing labour relations and regimes that create insecurity for workers, usually those in some form of paid employment relation (Kalleberg, 2011; Vosko, 2010). Here, precarity is a conceptual framework for understanding dimensions of economic restructuring and labour market change, as experienced by workers, in relation to forms of insecurity and vulnerability that emerge out of political-economic structures and relations.

Why does this distinction matter? For at least two reasons. First, different intellectual orientations shape different kinds of political orientations (and vice versa). Ontologies of precarity are explicitly relational and do not seek to return to or restore a position of ontological security, because vulnerability is fundamental to being. This can, however, result in insufficient attention to the particular ways that capitalism as a social relation structures insecurity, especially through labour market attachment (Waite, 2009). Epistemologies of precarity, on the other hand, carefully map, analyze and often seek to intervene in debates about regulation, rights and distributive justice. In doing so, they sometimes assume the possibility of recuperating a position

of security, explicitly or implicitly related to the restoration of the norm of the standard employment relationship (SER) and the 'golden age' of Western capitalism (cf. Vosko and Latham, 2014). Feminist political economy approaches to precarity, including in geography, often seek to bring these approaches into conversation. These approaches are relational in the sense that they link labour market subordination to both the social construction of difference (social location) and identities, and to the institutionalization of hierarchies (Fudge and Owens, 2006). This is a theory-building exercise, concerned with elaborating a multi-dimensional concept of precarity.

Second, then, is that the relationship between ontology, epistemology and theory matters for the politics of knowledge production. Elwood, Lawson and Sheppard (2017: 746) demonstrate this in a recent paper on relational poverty studies, starting with the concept itself: relationality, they write, 'is persistently invoked in geographical scholarship, but often with insufficient clarity, running the risk of seeming to be everything and nothing'. This is a point also made in debates about relational economic geography (e.g. Sunley, 2008), and one that resonates with Castree's (2007: 859) concern about the lack of precision in labour geography's deployment of 'meta-terms'. Elwood et al. argue that geographical relational ontologies should be understood as a starting point for theory, however, not as a firm foundation or bedrock from which to 'speak in the name of reality' (Joronen and Häkli, 2017: 652).

Rather than viewing society and space as agglomerations of 'self-made persons' or discrete, bounded sites within which processes are in relation (as in locality studies or conventional case comparisons), geographical relational ontologies posit that spatiality can and must be theorized through diverse webs of causal relations that extend beyond the boundaries of specific places and that mutually constitute space, place, human agency and the more-than-human world (Gregory, 2000: 564). (Elwood et al., 2017: 749)

They suggest, moreover, that a relational spatial ontology is capacious enough to encompass approaches that emphasize both fixity and fluidity. What links these disparate, sometimes oppositional approaches in their account is how processes and structures are always already socio-spatial, which also connects geographical spatial ontologies with epistemologies that ‘render the world knowable through an anti-essentialist causality’ (Elwood et al., 2017: 752). Whether ontological positions that take ‘fixity’ or ‘flux’ as their starting points are in productive tension, or in fundamental ways incommensurate, is left to one side (cf. van Meeteren et al., 2016; Williams and Pierce, 2016).

The arguments that the authors make about geographers’ contributions to relational poverty studies are similar to the one I sketch in my first report in relation to labour geographers’ blurring of the lines between different approaches to precarity. What is valuable about Elwood et al.’s approach is that they explicitly structure their arguments around the interrelationship of ontology, epistemology and knowledge production; they are thus able to link an exploration of the foundations of relationality in poverty research to their argument for an understanding of poverty as ‘both a theoretical and always already political project that necessarily calls for making new poverty knowledge politics’ (2017: 755). Labour geography, I would argue, can learn something from this approach. While labour geography research has paid explicit attention to praxis (Herod, 2003, 2017), left political commitments (Featherstone and Griffin, 2016), and the specific issue of how we understand worker agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2008; Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017; Kiil and Knutsen, 2016; Ramamurthy, 2000; Rogaly, 2009; Sportel, 2013; Sweeney and Holmes, 2013; Warren, 2014), the time has come to also examine the ontological and epistemological foundations of theorizing and some of the exclusions or path-

dependencies they engender. This process can help solidify new directions and clarify labour geography’s distinctive contributions (see, for example, Crossan et al., 2016, on material practices of community building; Dutta, 2016, on complexities of social being of workers; Hurl, 2016, on state formation and organized labour; Nowak, 2016, on mass strikes; Prentice et al., 2018, on everyday health and well-being of workers in global supply chains; and Stenning, 2003, 2008, on post-socialist working-class politics). Such self-examination can also help us to think through how we address current blind spots and contribute meaningfully to broader debates about conjunctural crises and politics (Peck, 2017), and workers’ roles and experiences within them.

III Taking stock

There are now many ‘state of the discipline’ discussions of labour geography that summarize its development and highlight gaps and ways forward (for example, Castree, 2007; Hastings, 2016; Lier, 2007; McDowell, 2015; Rogaly and Qureshi, 2017; Tufts and Savage, 2009). My goal is not to re-summarize these here (see Bergene et al., 2010). Rather, I want to argue that despite the ‘panoply of geographic concepts [...] now in play [in labour geography]’, which Castree (2007: 859) noted as problematic for our ability to ‘synthesize better with and between the work of different labour geographers’, Herod’s reworking of David Harvey’s concept of the spatial fix remains a touchstone that defines the ‘core’ of labour geography because of its relationship with how labour geographers think about agency. This is also why the theorization of worker agency has become the terrain on which labour geographers meet. Importantly, however, and especially as labour geography has developed, the ontological and epistemological foundations of debates over agency have receded from

view, leaving us more concerned with defining, identifying and documenting agency and resistance than with asking what kinds of intellectual and political engagements this focus might preclude.

Herod's genuinely foundational work was grounded in a critique and extension of the development of historical geographical materialism in economic geography, with an emphasis on re-theorizing the spatial fix to foreground the agency of labour in shaping, contesting and re-making the economic landscapes of capitalism. In his book *Labour Geographies*, Herod (2001) outlined the importance of Harvey's theorization of the spatial fix to the Marxist-inspired new economic geography (not Paul Krugman's variety!) that emerged from the late 1970s on, characterized by important contributions from, inter alia, Neil Smith and Doreen Massey on uneven development and the spatial division of labour. Herod critiqued these contributions, however, for their ontological privileging of capital as the driver and shaper of the space-economy. He invoked Henri Lefebvre's 'production of space' as the inspiration for the idea that capitalism actively creates new spatial forms and relations, or landscapes for accumulation, but highlighted the theoretical privileging of capital in Lefebvre's account, 'implying that capital and the state may dominate and control space but workers may only appropriate space' (p. 26).

What is worth remembering, however, as Herod himself briefly notes (p. 26), is that Lefebvre includes the family in the category of agents that 'dominate and control space' and both communities and elite groups in the category that appropriates space. In other words, Lefebvre was interested not (or not only) in discrete individuals, groups or categories, but rather the institutions and dynamic power relations enrolled in, but not reducible to, capitalism. Workers and families are, of course, not separable; workers belong to families and are also consumers. In seeking to invert the

'capitalocentrism' (Gibson-Graham, 1996) of Marxist-inspired analyses, Herod replicates rather than disrupts the category of worker. Thus the notion of agency and workers' 'self-reproduction as social and geographical actors' (p. 29) is anchored in an ontology of production defined by the wage relation and the workplace as the public sphere of politics. Later engagements (e.g. Gialis and Herod, 2014) with a broadened notion of agency – incorporating informal and non-unionized workers, for example – do not question this ontological stance.

There is no doubt that Herod's work not only gave rise to labour geography as a sub-discipline but also drew important attention to workers as geographical actors. Unions and the politics of organized labour were the primary focus in this move away from passive geographies of labour to active labour geographies (Cumbers et al., 2010; Ince et al., 2015; McGrath-Champ, 2005; Mills and Clarke, 2009; Rutherford and Holmes, 2007; Ruwampura, 2015; Sadler, 2000; Sweeney, 2013; Tufts and Thomas, 2017; cf. Tonkin, 2000), as has been thoroughly documented, celebrated and critiqued. Mitchell's work on the bracero program was formative of that critique, which emerged in relation to the valorization of organized labour and celebratory accounts of worker agency. Mitchell questioned the idea of labour's spatial fix – not the concept in toto, but rather the idea that it reflects a *reality* in which workers always desire and can enact spatial fixes that differ from those sought by capital. As he argued of labour geography, the 'project had better become a lot more realistic about precisely those times, and those places – those socio-spatial contexts – when labor, however defined, is largely incapable of shaping, "through its actions, the geography of capitalism"' (2011: 565). His attention to migrant worker organizing, riven by racism, the brutal tactics of capital, and the complex

politics of the state's construction and management of precarious legal status, anticipated the growth of labour geography research on migrant workers and the efforts to add complexity and nuance to theoretical and empirical accounts of worker agency.

What I would argue, however, is that critiques of agency in labour geography largely approach it as a critical epistemology: a framework for examining, theoretically and empirically, forms and instances of workers' struggles and their impacts. Where agency is concerned, then, critical theorization has been hampered not only by selectivity *and* a lack of specificity (seeing worker agency everywhere or nowhere), but also by rather superficial borrowing from feminist geography that does not acknowledge differences in ontological positions underpinning the understanding of who counts as a worker and what counts as work. Let us not forget that Katz's (2004: 152) articulation of the diversity of practices enacted by people experiencing 'almost overwhelming changes in the political economy, political ecology, and socio-symbolic forms and practices', expressed in the now widely-quoted formulation of 'resilience, reworking and resistance' (for a discussion see Hauge and Fold, 2016), emerged out of a study of childhood and its material social practices. For Katz, the '[t]heoretical questions at the heart of this project concern social reproduction' (2004: x).¹

Katz's interest in agency, in other words, arises out of, and is informed by, her commitment to a *social* ontology (Bakker and Gill, 2003). Holloway, Holt and Mills' (2018) critical exploration of the importance of agency to the also-growing sub-discipline of Geographies of Children, Youth and Families (GCYF), which focuses on the tension between foundational conceptions of children's agency – representing an ontological break with previous approaches to child development – and post-structuralist critiques of structure-agency dualism, also draws on Katz. The authors, grounding their

arguments in feminist theory, argue that agency itself in GCYF is inflected with liberal conceptions of the subject and romantic ideas of youth virtuosity, which should ring a bell with labour geographers: the 'agency problem' is not ours alone.

As Mitchell also argued, the move to centre worker agency is both a political and an ontological move. But analyses of agency in labour geography, which implicitly or explicitly trace back to the idea of labour's spatial fix, may also assume a particular materialist ontology that tends to privilege particular forms of labour (paid), particular spaces and places of work (sites of capitalist production), and particular forms of state intervention (investment/divestment). It is still the case that informal labour, unpaid work, and feminized sectors and occupations – such as retail, food services, and 'low-skilled' care work – are less likely to be studied by labour geographers, and are the focus of research in other parts of the discipline (as in cultural geographies of retailing and consumption, or health geographies). This is true even though in Canada, for example, according to the 2016 census, the health care & social assistance and retail sectors were the largest in the economy by total employment. Harvey's exhortation (quoted by Mitchell) that '[t]he world must be depicted, analyzed, and understood not as we would like it to be but as it really is, the material manifestation of human hopes and fears mediated by powerful and conflicting processes of social reproduction' (Harvey, 1984: 7), highlights the gap between this idealized goal and the way the ontology of capitalism is translated, through the application of theory, into epistemological frameworks that facilitate selective analyses of how people labour, and how they experience, understand and represent that labour.

In labour geography, then, the issue of ontology is often pre-settled and implicit. Labour geography has yet to move beyond stock-taking to the kinds of debate that have both

broadened and diversified economic geography through the questioning of ontological positions (Bathelt and Glückler, 2003; Harvey, 1999; Jones, 1999; Sunley, 2008), epistemologies and modes of theorizing (see, inter alia, Barnes, 2001; Barnes and Sheppard, 2010; Coe, 2012; Massey, 1984; McDowell, 1997; Peck, 1996, 2012; Schoenberger, 2001; Sheppard, 2012; Yeung, 2005, 2007). So when Castree (2007: 856) wrote that ‘it is no exaggeration to say that most labour geographers operate with some version (often-times mixture) of Marxian, feminist, anti-racist or institutionalist approaches to work and employment wherein power and social relations get central attention’, it is also no exaggeration to write that this admixture tends to include feminist and anti-racist approaches as minor ingredients. Scholars writing about workers from feminist, anti- or post-colonial standpoints often do not identify as labour geographers (Pratt and Philippine Women Centre of BC, 2012; Silvey, 2004; Werner, 2012, 2016), and feminist geographers continue to need to make the case for attention to social reproduction (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2016; Hopkins, 2017; Kelly, 2009; Schwiter et al., 2018; Strauss, 2012, 2015). Such biases amplify the favouring of sites of paid work for analyses of agency and struggles over spatial fixes. At the same time, and rather ironically given the important relationship between urbanization and the concept of the spatial fix, attention to the fixing of landscapes of labour over, for example, capital and labour *flows* can paradoxically curtail conversations between urban and labour geographies (cf. Buckley, 2014) and labour and financial geographies (Dawley et al., 2008). This focus insulates labour geography from a broader engagement with the questions of how labour matters to the theorization of urbanization and financialization, and how categories like the ‘the urban’ implicitly or explicitly shape what we understand as the sites and spaces of labour’s spatial fix.

IV And moving forward

My concern in this review is not critique for its own sake, nor to argue against the contributions made to analyses of capitalism and labour in debates about the concept of the spatial fix. Rather, I am interested in using a critical analysis of approaches to agency as a starting point for thinking with the diverse ways that labour geography can intervene – intellectually and politically – to address systemic and conjunctural crises and oppressions. Instead of shuttling backward and forward from ontology to theory-building to praxis, labour geography can engage dialectically with grounded political commitments, critical epistemologies and questions of ontological groundings – including our understanding of ontology itself (cf. Joronen and Häkli, 2017) and its role in shaping the politics of knowledge production in our field. As I will argue in my final piece, the stakes are illustrated by our need to engage (not solely or exclusively) with racial capitalisms and ongoing colonialism, and the related but distinct issue of labour’s ecological-material foundations and how the category of labour constitutes, conversely, what counts as human. What is at stake is not only *if* we engage, but how we do so. It is imperative that we find ways that do not involve using Black, Indigenous and decolonial scholarship simply to bolster labour geography’s radical credentials or to stand in for radical otherness – such as when Indigenous ontologies are invoked in debates about ontological approaches, before European philosophers are re-centred as the foundational sources of authority on matters of being (Hunt, 2014; Leeuw and Hunt, 2018). It is also imperative that we question who identifies as a labour geographer, and why a diversity of geographers with interests in labour might not. These questions involve more than an expansion of labour geography’s thematic concerns or a re-theorization of agency: they involve asking from what foundations we find the ground to move forward.

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Note

1. In reviewing papers I have had to insist, more than once, that authors using the phrase cite Katz, and not the labour geographers who use her work, as the originator of this approach to agency. This is a common experience of feminist geographers: to cite, but not be cited! For a thoughtful discussion of the politics of citation in geography, see Mott and Cockayne (2017); also Derickson (2016) on the politics of recognition in urban geography.

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