

The Triumph of the Placeless:

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Abstract

Although three centuries of industrialisation and growth have led to unimaginably better lives for most people, economic and health outcomes differ widely across places, both between and within polities. We suggest that understanding these differences requires considering the role of ‘placeless’ agents in shaping places – here, subnational regions. Prior economic development and globalisation have rewarded and empowered placeless agents: firms, people and institutions which rely for wellbeing, identity and profits not on a specific place, but rather on a type or types of place. Their mobility and lack of embeddedness means interactions with specific places is functionally narrow, voluntary, self-interested, and hence potentially problematic for embedded actors, and for the health and viability of the places within which they operate. We look to operationalise this concept by developing notions of economic, socio-cultural and civic placelessness, and reflect on how the power of the placeless may shape local responses to critical challenges.

Key Words: Regional Development, Globalisation, Inequality, Theory

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1. Introduction

Two notable characteristics of the industrialised, fossil fuel age have been the sheer speed of development, and the unevenness of this development over space. Despite almost two hundred years of academic inquiry, there is limited agreement on what causes places to develop at different speeds and in different ways, let alone on what policies might economically ‘even up’ or best ameliorate the negative impacts of spatial disparities.

Uneven development is not unique to the industrial age. Significant spatial differences in levels of income have been evident for thousands of years both within and between polities. Development paths within even the earliest complex societies resulted in large part from ‘unequal exchange’ resulting from mismatches of political, military and cultural power between cores and peripheries (Allen, 1992; Liverani, 2013). Since around 1600CE especially however, the ability to express such power across the globe has exploded, in turn encouraging the movement of information, goods, people and capital, largely in pursuit of profit (Darwin, 2012; Wood, 2002). Given the clear importance of non-local (and often coercive or economically dominant) forces in shaping global systems through the industrial period, their influence at subnational scale has been underexplored.

This paper suggests a way of thinking about place development that foregrounds the role of non-local actors – firms, people, and institutions. However, rather than positing a rural-urban divide, or following *dependencia* scholars in unpicking the influence of a political-economy core on the periphery, we develop the notion of *placelessness* in opposition to *embeddedness*. We bring a socio-economic lens to the notion the interactions between places, people, and also institutions, are nuanced and impactful (Relph, 1976; Dicken & Malmberg, 2001; Di Masso et al 2019), and that mobile capital and labour are different, and differently important, to embedded agents (e.g. Schragger, 2009; Agosin, & Huaita, 2011; Hambleton, 2015). We classify placeless agents, consider how they are in many ways not of *any* specific place, and discuss how have they been advantaged by macro civic and economic structures to such an extent that they have become a key force in shaping current and future outcomes for many ‘local’ places and the people embedded in them.

Our focus on placelessness seeks to reflect a complex landscape where average income per head in successful cities can outstrip the poorest parts of their host countries two or three times over, yet these same cities can have higher levels of deprivation, poverty and the excluded than the poor hinterland – and where the homogenisation and non-local ownership of retail, leisure and cultural provision is equally problematic (Ralph, 1976; Madanipour, 2015; Feldman *et al*, 2021). It is not enough then to set places against each other; we must consider social, economic and political actors who have choice over where and how they operate, and who then exercise power to shape these chosen places for functionally narrow self-interest, and in a voluntary and reversible (for themselves) fashion. The placeless then are those whose profits, wellbeing, identity or success does not depend on a specific place, but rather on a type of place or places. We emphasise that placelessness/embeddedness is no simple binary distinction; for example a high-value London worker may be embedded socially in their geographic community, whilst placeless in terms of their remote workplace or their investments. An important element here is that the high-value worker makes choices in these regards not available to those more fully ‘embedded’ (Flecker & Schönauer, 2016). Moreover, some agents may be placeless from a ‘local’ perspective, but ‘rooted’ at higher level; consider the civil servant who hops between roles and cities in search of promotion, whilst remaining locked inside their national civil service.

The past and current influence of placeless actors is of course plain to see: in the crop plantations of India, Africa and the Caribbean (either via direct ownership or the funding and siting of local farmers in global ‘value chains’); in the chain-store meccas circling and centring Doha, Detroit and Doncaster; in the holiday homes of north Wales and island Greece; and most recently in the provision of services of innumerable type by the tech ‘platform’ economy. These incursions into places are so common as to be axiomatic of the global economy, and their value-capture from places is colossal, yet they are absent from most study and discussion of local and regional economic development. These instead mostly focus on internal innovation and entrepreneurship, access to resources and markets, skills and qualifications, on weak-and-strong-ties, and latterly quality of governance (McCann, 2016; Jones, 2015, but with notable exceptions; e.g. Froud *et al* 2020). One would imagine from a review of the literature then that it is local structures and characteristics that matter, rather than a more basic

question as to whether the owners of key economic and physical assets, and the holders of political and cultural power, actually care in any meaningful way about the wider and longer-term prospects of the place in question (Danson, 2020).

The issue of control over places and their development is becoming no less important as humanity faces up to worldwide multiple and inter-related crises of climate, ecology, conflict and migration, that impact the roles and liveability of almost everywhere. Only by ‘placing the placeless’ fully into economic development theory can we hope to understand and then influence how responses to these crises will be shaped to protect the wellbeing of all people, irrespective of their status, power and location, as opposed to enabling ever more rounds of remote exploitation of resources and people to the benefit of an already advantaged few.

With this in mind, the next Chapter of this paper briefly recounts how (national and regional) development theory has focussed on the quantity of economic assets within a place far more than on the qualitative nature of key actors within these landscapes, and of power relations between them, before moving in Chapter Three to unpack our concept of placelessness, and to present four hypotheses about the nature and behaviour of the placeless. Chapter Four considers how we might operationalise our concepts to start to understand ‘on the ground’ how different places are developed in service to mobile and narrowly interested agents as opposed to those ‘of’ a place – and perhaps differently in different ways. Chapter Five concludes with a reflection on how far tensions between the embedded and the placeless might become more significant as key scarce resources, especially those fixed in peripheries, become more valued in a future that is in some ways more weightless, but at the same time more challenging.

2. Theorising place development

Our conceptualisation of economic development at subnational scale (and indeed in the global South) is based squarely on a tradition that focuses on the scale, complexity and material throughput of an economy as an outcome metric, and which explicitly places the resources and internal functioning of that economy at the centre of a ‘Smithian’ story of linear and virtuous development (Rostow, 1959;

Solow, 2016; see Lewis, 2013 for a broader look at the same framing). Places (e.g., cities, regions, and countries) exist in a context where these resources and functioning enable them to ‘compete’ with other, conceptually alike places for investment, jobs and pre-eminence, with this framing especially strong since the 1980s (Budd & Hirmis, 2004; Porter 2008; Bristow, 2010; Gardiner *et al* 2013; Nasi *et al*, 2022). In this reading, flows to and from the reference economy (imports, exports, migration, knowledge, FDI, financial capital) and related influences are treated in a passing fashion, with limited consideration of where they come to and leave from (or indeed how long they stay), and instead a concentration on the ‘attractiveness’ of the reference place to such flows (e.g., Florida & Kenney, 1988; Capello & Lenzi, 2013). The focus on internal capitals perhaps made (some) sense when Smith was writing and England was the only industrial economy, but most place-development theory since has treated regions as self-governing ‘little-Englands’ (and countries as ‘later-Englands’) in ways which obscure the centrally important role of external forces on place development (Frank, 1966; Hobsbawm 1979; Hopkins et al 1996; Ortolano, 2015).

At country (and even continent) scale, this lacuna has been addressed in several ways. As just one example, a seam of work on foreign direct investment has investigated the motives and frameworks for investments, and considered the potential developmental impacts on host nations (Lipsey & Sjöholm, 2005; Driffield & Love, 2007). Meanwhile, many scholars have moved away from Euro- and US-centric focus on factors of production, innovation and investment as explanations for the nature (or at least rate) of development (for which read; growth). Instead, the ‘dependencia’ and related schools have posited that an early-developing global core has centrally shaped the nature and path of the global periphery and semi-periphery by persuading or coercing them into lower value (primary etc.) activities, whilst exploiting their natural and human resources via unequal exchange (see Nkrumah *et al* 1963; Frank, 1966; Amin, 1987; Braudel, 1992; Harvey *et al* 2010. Hickel *et al* 2022 provide a topical quantitative estimate of the resulting material and financial flows).

Neither of these broad schools has, however, fundamentally dragged the economics profession away from its conceptualisation of how and where development occurs: i.e., following the rational employment of internal factors of production, combined with a soupçon of (unexplainable)

innovation. This classical framing has influenced economic geography and regional science since the disciplines were born; for example in von Thunen's writing of the early 19th century, which saw the internal activities of an isolated city-spread over the featureless space region in pursuit of profit maximisation, and with the key later milestone of New Economic Geography mostly building new place-competitive structures on the same narrow, rationality-dependent foundations (von Thunen, 1826; Fujita & Krugman 2004). Where 'mainstream' regional science has moved away from the notion of a level competitive development landscape, it has focussed largely on hierarchies (Plane et al, 2005; Tabuchi & Thisse, 2006) and scale, and especially the productivity benefits of the latter (Audretsch, 1998; Ciccone, 2003; Glaeser, 2010 and many others). These scale and agglomeration arguments however rarely disaggregate these benefits within places, or beyond purely economic characteristics (Kline, 2010).

Wider place-development framings of course exist including, relevant to this paper, those interested in the relative influence of different agents (and elites) within economic or institutional hierarchies, for example in cities (Saito & Truong, 2015; Schragger & Schragger, 2016) and in peripheries (Shucksmith, 2006; McAreavey 2009). Most of this work is (more) focused on the role of actors in and 'of' the place in question, but by no means exclusively. An interesting and well-developed stream of work uses the lens of iconic sports events, sport infrastructure and cultural festivals to reflect on who shapes (usually city) development, how, and for who (see Gratton & Henry, 2001; Smith, 2005; Santo, 2007; Jepson & Clarke, 2014 for a flavour). Here is revealed the role of non-local, mobile institutions in shaping cities using mechanisms of economic *and* cultural power and elite capture; playing places off against each other to reduce cost and risk for the rights-holders and sports bodies, whilst capturing economic value added, media attention (for non-local event sponsors), and (literally) cementing non-local activities, institutions and firms into the heart of the city, culturally and commercially (Drummond & Cronje 2019). Outside of sport and culture, opposition of the local and non-local has also received detailed attention in developmental contexts such as tourism (Bahaire, T. and Elliott-White, 1999; Mason & Cheyne, 2000), and in the rural sociological debate (Burnett, 1998; Akgün, 2011; Bosworth & Atterton, 2012). Findings of problematic outcomes for local stakeholders

across these strands of work are rife (if not universal), suggesting the role of the ‘non-local’ in shaping places deserves wider and deeper attention.

3. Placing the Placeless

We suggest that there is a further distinction required beyond the ‘non-local’ to better understand the shape of economic development – that between agents who are based squarely in a different place, and those who are in some key characteristic(s) *placeless*. These are firms, institutions and people whose success – measured in profits, wellbeing, influence or other internally-important outcomes – depends not on a single place, or set of specific places, but rather a type or types of places (Figure 1). We further contend that this placelessness enables (and encourages) these actors to behave in ways which are qualitatively different from ‘embedded’ stakeholders, and which may have negative consequences for the (again internally-important) outcomes of these embedded actors – and as much for the wider socio-economic and ecological functioning of the places within which they live.

Despite the simple opposition implied by Figure 1, placelessness is a complex and mutable concept across time and function. Moreover, the nature and success of the placeless is critically tied to the nature of the global economy and attendant socio-political structures. We unpick these elements more carefully with a series of short contentions.

	Placeless	Embedded
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to move themselves & their resources across regions or borders, with limited cost. • Applying different capitals in different places to optimise returns. • Fluid and useful networks. • Economic, politically and/or culturally influential. • Resource rich, widely informed. • Long-horizon planning. • In competition with alike agents at larger geographic scale. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resident in a single place, facing significant (economic, socio-cultural) costs of movement. • Resources limited in scale, scope and/or place of application. • Less or infrequently influential on economic or socio-political outcomes and structures. • Slow-to-change and geographically tight networks. • Outcomes highly dependent on local conditions.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listed multinationals. • Highly qualified, (physically-or ICT-enabled) mobile workers. • Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) • The International Olympic Committee. • A second/holiday-home owner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation-economy SMEs and micro-businesses • Under, non- and obsoletely qualified workers • Community enterprises • ‘Local’ amateur sports teams

Figure 1 Indicative Characteristics of Placeless and Embedded Agents

1.1. The Placeless are largely and increasingly outcome of the industrialised, globalised economy

We made the point early in this paper that the development of places has forever been affected by outside influences; from the earliest agricultural times up until the 17th century CE, when the spaces of both Europe and then the ‘new’ world were ploughed in service of absentee and lordly owners. Even in the latest part of this period however, the returns to non-local owners were mostly tied to the fortunes of their specific holdings – as even the King of France was to discover with respect to Louisiana (Giraud, 1950) – and non-local owners were resolutely *local* to hub cities such as Paris, London and Vienna (in season at least). The explosion of transport, military, fossil and financial technology before and following the English industrial revolution saw investment and migration (including slavery) ‘go global’, enabling the monied and information-rich to earn increasing returns from portfolio investments whilst delegating the actual ‘business of business’ to others – a process that continued through second revolution of the 19th Century (Woods, 2002; Moore, 2003; Darwin, 2012). More recently, the abandonment of international capital controls in the 1970s; the ‘neoliberal turn’ and financial deregulation of the 1980s; and the single European market and Chinese opening of the 1990s have combined with waves of information technology development to enable global placelessness in the exploitation of low-cost resources, and *equally* in lived experience – through tourism, or the archetypal placelessness of Twitter and Netflix; a virtuous (or vicious) circle of placelessness (Jones, 2015; Feldman *et al*, 2021).

1.2. Large scale and inequitable socio-economic structures reward placelessness

Our globalised, ‘free’ and technologically advanced economy not only enables placelessness, but also rewards and at times requires it. Multinationals’ chasing of lower costs and refashioning of supply chains is axiomatic (Butler, 2016). Less discussed is the way that workers uproot and move to gain income, seniority and prestige in a swathe of industries from retail, to manufacturing, to higher education; within large firms and between firms; within and between countries (Webster & Randle, 2016; Choudhury, 2020; Johnson *et al* 2020). This has relevance even within political parties operating in a notionally geographically representative electoral system, where successful candidates ‘parachuted in’ to constituencies where they did not reside end up with a higher profile (and different

behaviours) compared with local candidates (Koop & Bittner, 2011). We then end up with the commanding heights of economies held by rootless firms and people, existing within *chosen*, rather than *given* contexts, and with behaviours different as a result. The control over embedded resources enjoyed by placeless actors is increased by inequality. In societies where the redistribution of income and (especially) wealth is limited, or where there is an increasing concentration of market share in individual or oligopolistic firms; ‘one dollar one vote’ means that key, immobile resources (including energy, land, and human capital) will be subject to bidding wars where well-resourced placeless actors move first or bid highest (Jones & Munday, 2020; Orefice et al, 2015).

1.3. Placelessness implies choice – across space and time

We reinforce the point that placelessness is a multifaceted and complex set of characteristics. The multinational firm may be fluid and mobile in its supply chains, yet ‘rooted’ in a strong and positive geographic identity for marketing or other purposes (Meyer et al, 2011). Hedge funds will locate legally where tax advantages are greatest but operate *de facto* where financial networks are most dense. Professional sportsmen may be continentally peripatetic as contracts come and go, but cluster with other athletes within regions (Jones & Jordan, 2019). The placeless have a choice in how and when to deploy their mobility for greatest reward. This choice then operates across nuanced domains (for example choosing a holiday home from a variety of peripheral but accessible towns, whilst remaining rooted in the primary home to ensure stability of employment or child-schooling), but also across *time*. Places that have been abandoned by mobile capital (and people) can be re-visited and re-acquired should circumstances change: for example, if once-best-avoided Hackney becomes city-proximate and desirable, or if the faded glory of south Wales coal is replaced by the attraction of renewable wind. Placeless actors – or a new set of the same – retain the ability to command, control and derive returns from immobile resources far beyond the ability of those who have been ‘always there’ (Smith & Williams, 2013; Gratton & Henry, 2001).

1.4. The dominance of placeless actors is (differently) socially and ecologically problematic

We finish these contentions by suggesting placelessness is problematic, at least to the extent we see it today. Firstly, placeless agents engage with ‘real’ places in partial fashions, often to exploit a

particular resource in ways which denude the resource itself, or even the wider social ecology that has created it. This may be as prosaic as a firm ‘upping sticks’ and leaving when a resource is exhausted or becomes more costly – and perhaps not covering the wider cost of exploitation in the meantime, especially in poorer places (Khan & Ozturk, 2020). Or it may be that the holiday-home owner makes full use of the beach and pubs in the summer, but none of the school which becomes unsustainable in places where second homes ownership is extensive (Farstad, 2011), and where the cost of owning an empty second home can be ameliorated via Airbnb, capital gains or sheer wealth (Paris, 2010). Interactions with places of operation can be functionally narrow, time limited and voluntary, with potentially limited cultural proximity (Ryan, 2002). Moreover, we contend that the placeless have more than proportionately accumulated wealth and influence through ‘rootless success’ in a mega-scale and deeply unsustainable and inequitable economy (Moore, 2003). The result may be behaviours that do not just ignore the needs, desires and outcomes for local people, firms and institutions – as well as good ecological function – but actively hinder them. To contend that the placeless are damaging is not, of course to imagine that conversely those ‘of’ a place are automatically benign and knowledgeable stewards of nature and people; human societies have over-exploited local and remote resources for as long as they have existed (Ponting, 1991), and insular communities are rarely utopias of inclusivity and fairness (see Roscoe *et al*, 2019 for a review). Rather, we contend that placeless incursion leads to different or specific dysfunctions.

Our four hypotheses suggest that placeless actors share characteristics born of a globalised approach to production and consumption that rewards and reinforces a partial and distant relationship with the places within which they operate. It might be reasonably asked whether these contentions can be proved or rejected, and actual different behaviours and outcomes revealed for placeless agents, or places where development is more (or less) at the ‘whim’ of the placeless? Can we operationalise these concepts?

4. Revealing and Understanding the Placeless

We might take one or more of a number of methodological and conceptual approaches in seeking to identify the placeless and record their impacts. For example,

- A *systematic approach* would identify placeless agents in, for example, the global economy and seek to establish causal links between the size and actions of (sets of) these agents and outcomes of interest. This might parallel the way time-series or panel regression approaches are used to examine the impact of resources or structures on economic growth in regions, countries, or across a set of the same (see, e.g. Barro, 1996; Mewes & Broekel, 2020 amongst many papers). Given our hypothesis that placeless agents act at the largest macro scale available, such an analysis could only be global; country-level studies would miss key international interactions. This would then probably require a definition of the placeless that was robust to different cultures and statistical systems.
- A *sociological approach* might examine in depth the nature and behaviour of placeless agents, revealing characteristics and behaviours that could intuitively and narratively (rather than in-aggregate-statistically) be linked to outcomes for themselves and in the places where they operate. Whilst this approach has merits, a widely inter-disciplinary approach would be needed to reveal the political-economic mechanisms which attribute wealth, choice and place-agency to (different sorts of) placeless actors, whilst understanding (in a way economics rarely does) the complex institutional, network and personal-identity drivers of the resultingly-important actions (see Smith, 2019 for an Agri-Food example).
- Finally a *place based* approach would examine a specific locale to establish the extent to which placeless versus embedded actors were important, for example in creating, changing or controlling socio-economic structures, leveraging rents and generating impacts (positive and negative; local, regional or global). Here, statistical issues and the scope of inquiry might be more manageable, but of course with attendant tensions in terms of universalisation. Also, placeless and non-local actors (rooted firmly in another place) may be difficult to distinguish at this analytical scale.

Taking the last of these approaches, we can consider how we might move to examine at least the incursion and position of placeless actors in a place, in advance of considering potential impacts. For our illustrative discussion, we suggest a disaggregation of placelessness into *economic*, *socio-cultural*

and *civic* is a useful analytical tool, albeit not denying the arguable nature of these distinctions, the interrelationships between them, and the ability of actors to cross multiple domains. Figure 2 then sketches the nature of our ‘subsets of placelessness’

	Economic	Socio-Cultural	Civic
Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural resource owners & controllers • Financial Institutions • Employers • Tech-Platform firms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Incomers’ • Second home owners • Sports teams • Cultural venues & groups • Tech-Platform firms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media • Charities & NGOs • Politicians & political parties • Civil Service & servants
Potential impacts of placeless incursion in place (+/-)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Land use for export goods/services via unequal exchange – Reduced biodiversity – Constraint of local agents via debt & related mechanisms (e.g. mortgages) – Lack of control/ economic shocks + Jobs created + High quality goods & services + Knowledge & expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Social, family fragmentation (e.g. via property affordability) – Fewer outlets for local/diverse cultural output – Reduced linguistic & other cultural capital + Increased economic demand + Access to global social/cultural assets + More leisure choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘Crowding out’ of local issues in favour of national/global – Key decision-makers focussed on outcomes for macro structures, or their own position within them + Management expertise + National ‘voice’ for local issues + More information & choice
Indicative examples of identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land ownership & controlling leases • Debt-holders of local agents (farmers, firms householders...) • Use of non-local IP in production • % of employees in non-locally headquartered firms • Household consumption patterns by geography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second & holiday home ownership • Indicators of cultural capital (membership of local orgs; health of minority languages etc.) • House price-wage ratios • Patterns of leisure expenditure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embeddedness of political reps • Health/power of hyperlocal democratic structures • Profusion of locally owned media • Membership of key governance structures/bodies • Legal weight of local consultations

Figure 2 The Placeless in Places

Accepting this broad-brush, tripartite distinction enables us to consider how the incursion of the placeless might occur in different realms, with different impacts and indicators. We can envisage each realm as an axis, with the extent of placeless incursion increasing away from the origin – with the origin then constituting a place devoid of outside influence: the archetypal ‘uncontacted tribe’, or von Thunen’s (1826) isolated state.

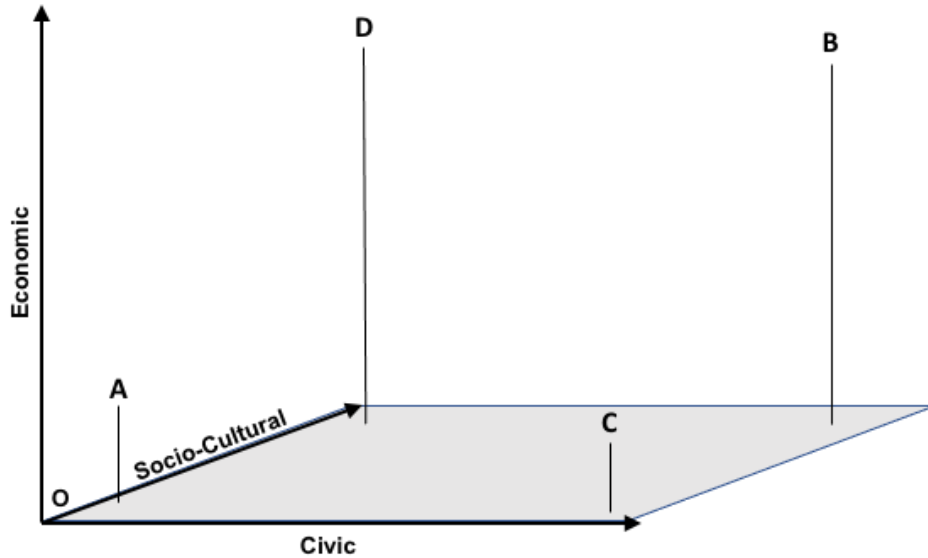


Figure 3 Conceptualising Placeless Incursion Along Three Axes

This approach allows us to place locales with respect to how far external, placeless actors are important, and ask whether it is ‘better’ to be Place A, relatively insular and removed from the placeless economy, or open to placeless incursion along one or more axes – and to what extent? For example, might a certain level of economic investment may spur development and support local incomes, but then with ever increasing levels (in Place D) resulting in a lack of local control, over-concentration in key sectors and vulnerability to external economic shocks; i.e. an ‘inverted U shaped’ relationship with (broad and long term) economic wellbeing (Gravina & Lanzafame, 2021)? And are there interactions between axes? Does the ‘all-in’ placeless intrusion of Place B confer synergies, or multiply costs? We might also reflect on how this framing sits within more traditional approaches to understanding regions; for example further assessing places in terms of how they perform roles for placeless actors, meaning incursion into the periphery has different implications than that into ‘core’ regions and cities (Amin, 1987). Clearly this conceptualisation and disaggregation has significant potential for further development and empirical investigation. Such work may help in understanding how places might respond to inevitable future shocks and change.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that to fully understand place development, it is not enough to look at places in isolation, or to shallowly consider flows between them; or indeed even to look at how places act in competition or collaboration, as equals or in hierarchies. Instead, we argue that the story of industrialisation – and especially the ICT age – is one written by a class of agents who can manipulate geography, arbitraging selectively across space whilst exercising choice in how and where they live. Further, that this has strong implications for those more ‘embedded’ in place, who do not have the same resources and influence. Our ‘placeless’ actors might cluster in places – hub cities, the English Shires, or pretty seaside and sunbelt villages for example – but this obscures the ways and geographies in which they are free to act.

We think this is important because this framing both helps explain why development processes have typically favoured a small number of people and places at global scale, and why within-country and within-place disparity has been difficult to address: key mobile ‘influencers’ in relevant process are simply different in their identity and behaviours, and have increasingly shaped financial, regulatory and other systems to capture value and cement their advantage (Galbraith, 2008). Moreover, these processes are becoming, if anything, more important. Global systems have long advantaged ‘core’ regions – countries, regions, cities - and those living in them by directing material, energy and value flows from poorer places (Jones, 2015; Hickel *et al* 2022), but these resources and the capitals that generate them are degrading in the face of climate change and the over-exploitation of nature. Novel tensions and areas of conflict are emerging, not just with respect to who ‘owns’ and benefits from increasingly scarce resources, but also in terms of who national and supra-national regulation, and environmentally-oriented trading schemes, will advantage – and who can prepare best to *take* advantage (Jones & Munday, 2020; McAfee, 2022). These tensions are becoming clear in resource rich and (relatedly) relatively poor regions in South and North – and with transnational actors increasingly visible in processes that shape places to capture new and diminishing value, and insure against regulatory and industrial change (Hein *et al*, 2019; Bueno *et a*, 2018; Beauchamp & Jenkins, 2020; Feldman *et al* 2021).

We would argue the importance of classifying and understanding these hyper- and choosily-mobile actors is thus increasing. But we should not paint a picture of ‘placeless bad, embedded good’ (although perhaps this paper has somewhat given in to this tendency). We have already made the point that humans in societies have done *very* well at dysfunction whether networked or isolated. Additionally, recent local reactions to globalism have shown that where communities are partially networked – for example, excluded from employment and hence economic stability and (feeling) ‘culturally ignored’, yet still fully embedded in global information networks operated by (a handful of) placeless firms for their own ends, outcomes can be extremely problematic, reinforcing prejudicial and damaging attitudes and behaviours (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Berti, 2021).

In conclusion then, identifying placeless actors is thus only a first step, but a necessary one. Only by recognising that important agents within a place have a partial and time-limited engagement with that locale can we understand their attitudes, incentives, behaviours and impacts. We should place such agents within a holistic analytical framework that draws on disciplines across social science and is fully cognisant of issues of social justice and environmental impact. But explicit identification and understanding is indeed only the first step. Then we must, where necessary, do something clever.

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