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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, wellbeing and health outcomes differ widely across places, both between and within polities. We suggest that policy to reduce such differences and ameliorate their impacts requires a consideration of the role of ‘placeless’ agents in shaping places – here, subnational regions. Prior economic development at macro scales has 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 choosy mobility and lack of embeddedness means interactions with specific places are functionally narrow, voluntary, self-interested, and potentially problematic for embedded actors, and for the health and viability of the places within which they operate. We operationalise this concept by developing notions of economic, socio-cultural and civic placelessness, make some suggestions for measurement, and assess a number of government policies developed in the region of Wales that are in part reactions to the incursion and impacts of the placeless.

Keywords: Regional development, Theory, Globalisation, Inequality, Policy

JEL: O10, R00, R12, R38

The Triumph of the Placeless

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 ‘even places up’ economically, or best ameliorate the negative impacts of spatial disparities. Uneven development is of course 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, driven by ‘unequal exchange’ resulting from mismatches of political, military and cultural power between cores and peripheries, and with these mismatches having implications for development at global scale since around 1600CE (Allen, 1992; Darwin, 2012; Wood, 2002). However, despite 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 that policy to reduce and ameliorate regional disparities must acknowledge the role of place-agnostic ‘non-local’ actors – firms, people and institutions – in place development. We develop the notion of *placelessness* in opposition to *embeddedness*, suggesting placeless actors are those whose profits, wellbeing, identity or success do not depend primarily on engagements in a specific place, but rather in a type of place or places (Relph, 1976; Dicken & Malmberg, 2001; Di Masso *et al* 2019; Hymer, 1982).

Further, we suggest mobile capital and people, and macro-scale institutions, impact differently on places to embedded agents (Schragger, 2009; Agosin, & Huaita, 2011; Hambleton, 2015; Feldman *et al*, 2021). Their comparative engagements with any given place are voluntary, functionally narrower,

more overtly self-interested and with disengagement and extraction easier. A dominance of placeless agents in a particular place – within socio-economic, environmental, or cultural spheres – will have important implications (potentially positive as well as negative) for the possibility of inclusive and sustainable development, and for the basic shaping of places (Madanipour, 2015; MacKinnon *et al* 2019). Policy actors at varied scales should thus recognise that socio-economic agents may be *in* a place but not necessarily *of* a place.

Placelessness/embeddedness is of course no simple binary distinction. For example, high tech workers may choose to employ their human capital anywhere in the world (although likely in a small number of global centres), whilst being embedded socially in their geographic community, and placeless in terms of their investments. Multinational investors may be short-term embedded, but free to move when key resources become depleted, or fixed investment costs have been amortised (for example at the end of a product cycle (Benito, 1997); The important element here is that such entities make *choices* in these regards in ways 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 (with such processes themselves perhaps cementing inequities; Henry-Brown & Campbell-Brown, 2005).

The past and current influence of placeless actors is of course plain to see: in the crop plantations of the global South (either via direct ownership or the funding and siting of local farmers within the global financial system; German *et al* 2011; Green, 2022); in the chain-store meccas circling and centring Doha, Detroit and Doncaster; in the holiday homes of Cornwall and island Greece; and most recently in the provision of services of innumerable type by the tech ‘platform’ economy (Feldman *et al* 2021). These incursions are so common as to be axiomatic of ‘modern’ places, and their value-capture is colossal, yet they are absent from most study and discussions of local and regional economic development, that instead mostly focus on internal innovation and entrepreneurship, access to resources and markets, skills and qualifications, on weak-and-strong-ties, and latterly on quality of governance (see McCann, 2016 for a review and Froud *et al* 2020 for an exception). Further

investment *into* places (public or private) is in general still treated by politicians and policymakers as unquestionably desirable, despite potentially problematic results for the poorest within them (Tomaney & Pike, 2020; Etherington & Jones, 2009). Yet 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 shape policy responses to these crises 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. Place policymaking must understand 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 next Section 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, or on power relations between them. In Section Three we unpack our concept of placelessness, and present four contentions about the nature and behaviour of the placeless. Section Four considers how we might operationalise these 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. Section Five reflects explores our framework by examining Wales, a devolved region of the UK, where recently emergent policy innovations respond (albeit implicitly) to the dysfunctions created by placeless incursions. We conclude 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

The dominant conceptualisation of economic development at subnational scale (and indeed at larger scales) 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 story of linear and virtuous development (Rostow, 1959; Barro, 1996; Solow, 2016). Within this tradition, 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 somewhat lesser fashion, and with very limited consideration of where they come to and leave from, or 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).

It is notable however that even before Adam Smith, the role of trade between *unlike* economies in shaping development was a subject of great debate – for example, that between Mercantilism and Free Trade (Darwin, 2012; Magnusson, 2015). This debate, of course took place within (and rested upon) wider Enlightenment-era political-economy and state theory debates that for the first time (in the West at least) sought to treat social organisation ‘scientifically’ – in both diagnosis and treatment (vom Hau, 2015) – and with significant real-world consequences, for example for the new USA. This debate was initially from the perspective of the unitary state: *subnational* issues of social organisation, social contracts and governance were of far lesser importance, and when they arose at all, were posited in terms of political organisation, political relationships, and the allocation of responsibility and power between spatial scales rather than on subnational economic organisation, discrete regional development objectives, economic flows, or the drivers and appropriate remediation of within-nation uneven development (Giraudy *et al* 2019). Where national-subnational structures existed, and economic competence was divided, early debate focussed on preserving market function in the face of these complicating factors (Wibbels, 2003). Within this theoretical gap, place-development theory borrowed from classical and neo-classical economic theory to treat regions as self-governing small nations whose development (i.e. growth) prospects depended centrally on the availability and use of

internal capitals, on the interactions between them, and latterly on (local) structures and innovation (Cooke & Morgan, 1998; Solow, 2016; see Helpman, 2009 for a review).

These developments however obscured the centrally important role of external forces, exercised both within and outside markets, 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), whilst Trippi *et al* (2019) emphasise the importance of exogenous knowledge for regional innovation systems. 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 quantitative estimate of the resulting material and financial flows. The extent to which this is an integrated ‘world system’, hierarchical and self-perpetuating (see Wallerstein, 1979) is an interesting one. These approaches emphasised the role of non-local actors, and of economic power (and coercion) in appropriating natural and other resources, whether in the global periphery or in financially poorer and politically weak peripheries of richer states (Jones, 2015)

None of these developments has, however, fundamentally dragged the economics profession (and its followers) 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-state spread over the featureless hinterland 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 and market-obsessed foundations (Fischer, 2011; Isard, 1956; 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, 2002; 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, 2016) and in peripheries (Shucksmith, 2010; McAreavey 2009). Whilst most of this work is focused on the role of actors in the place in question, this is by no means exclusively. The role(s) of places (or at least cities) as ‘circulatory sites’ within dynamic, multi-actor and multi-level has long been recognised by geographers (Amin, 2002).

MacKinnon *et al* (2019) suggest we cannot understand place development without considering the ability of ‘knowledgeable’ actors to negotiate multi-scaled systems to control and shape regional and extra-regional resources, and Tomaney *et al* (2010) make the key point that local and regional development (and the planning thereof) is deeply shaped by cycles in the global economy, for example with place-based solutions often sought for systematic problems, and the state and other actors impinging on the local in new ways and places as a result of global change, often in ways which embed inequality (see for example Monastiriotis, 2011). 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; 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 & Elliott-White, 1999), 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 shape economic development policy – to recognise 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 (Table 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 outcomes of the embedded – and also for the wider socio-economic and ecological functioning of the places within which they live.

Despite the simple opposition implied by Table 1, placelessness is a non-binary, 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. Next, these elements are unpicked more carefully with a series of short contentions.

Table 1 Indicative Characteristics of Placeless and Embedded Agents

	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. • Private individuals acting as city-hotspot landlords • A sovereign wealth fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational-economy SMEs and micro-businesses. • Under, non- and obsoletely qualified workers. • Community & social enterprises. • Local amateur sports teams. • Local charities.

3.1. The Placeless are largely and increasingly an outcome of industrialised economies that operate at macro scales

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 the Louisiana Territory (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 that forced through 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 industrial 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 and embedded 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).

3.2. 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 advantageous location (including both close to key resources and within innovative ecosystems), and refashioning of supply chains is axiomatic (see Dunning, 1998; Butler, 2016; Rong *et al*, 2015 amongst many others). Many (possibly most) places depend on this investment for employment and prosperity, albeit in complex and context dependent fashions (Hymer, 1982; Buch *et al*, 2015; Bailey & Driffield, 2002). Less discussed is the way that workers uproot and move to gain income, seniority and prestige in a swathe of industries; from retail and manufacturing to higher education; within large firms and between firms; within and between countries (Webster & Randle, 2016; Choudhury, 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).

3.3. 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).

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, becomes more costly, or the ecosystem advantage disappears (Procher & Engel, 2018; Peters *et al* 2021) 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 no use at all 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). Indeed, recently work by Tabbush (2022) has made it clear that ‘disappearing children’ and closing schools are as much a trend in inner London as in rural tourism hotspots – albeit driven by similar housing cost mechanisms. 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) – when then influences their ongoing behaviours. 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 suggest that placeless incursion leads to different or specific dysfunctions.

The four hypotheses above 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?

5. 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.

Each of these approaches would imply policy responses at appropriate scale. Taking the last of these, we can consider how policymakers might move to examine the incursion and position of placeless actors in a place, in advance of considering potential impacts and formulating ameliorative policy (as discussed in Section 5). Here we suggest a disaggregation of placelessness into *economic*, *socio-cultural* and *civic* arenas 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.

Table 2 then sketches the nature of our ‘subsets of placelessness’

Table 2 The Placeless in Places

	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 + Direct, supplier and competitor wage increases + Economic multiplier effects + High quality goods & services + Knowledge & expertise spillovers 	<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

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.

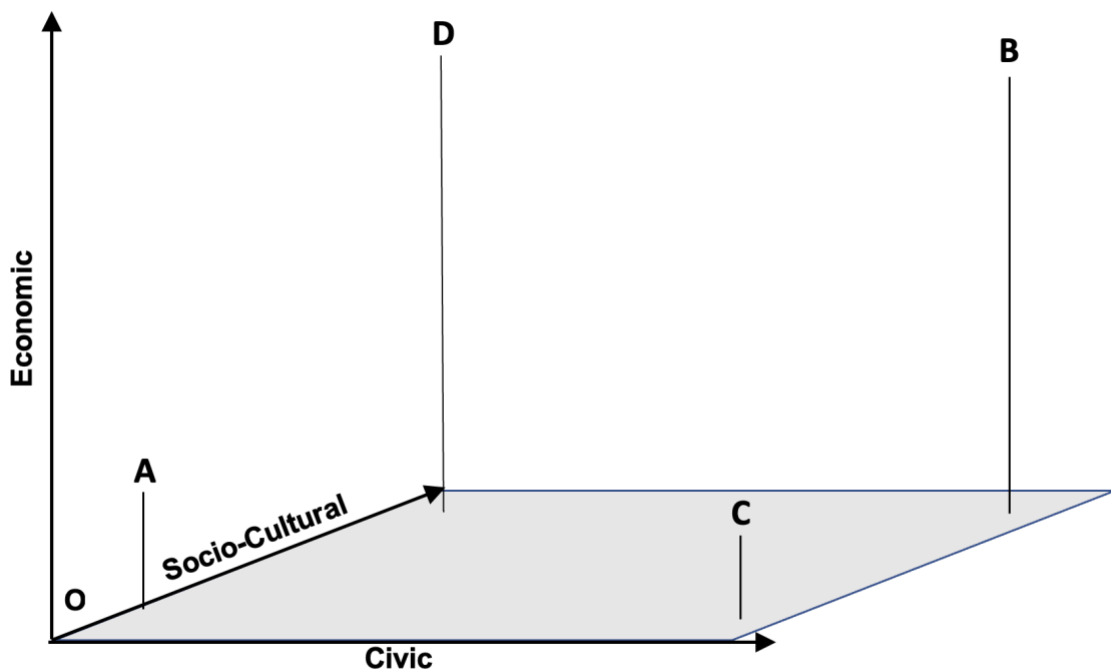


Figure 1 Conceptualising Placeless Incursion Along Three Axes

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 refinement and empirical investigation; such work may however help in understanding how places might respond to inevitable future shocks and change, and in the development of policies to better direct such responses.

Whilst ‘placelessness’ as a concept has not been developed and applied holistically, the impacts of choosy, place and time-mobile socio-economic actors has been visible across many contexts – and indeed spurred policy responses, including attempts to restrict the ability of non-local agents to purchase assets (Sun *et al* 2017), or to better ‘embed’ mobile actors such as firms and graduates (Wren, 2005; Groen, 2011). The extent to which such issues are a factor in regional development policy – and the likelihood of their success – is now considered with reference to Wales, a region of the UK which has enjoyed policy autonomy in relevant areas since the turn of the Millennium, and which has recently increased policy divergence from other parts of the UK in number of areas.

6. Sketching the Policy Implications: A Case study of Wales

Wales occupies a territory that has been extensively shaped, socio-economically and physically, by non-local actors for over a millennium, most notably following its conquest by Edward I at the end of the 13th century (Morris, 2010; Williams, 1985). The English crown was not, however by our definition a placeless actor: Edward built castles across the West of the British Isles to cement his political and economic power, but he failed to do so in Scotland, and the prospect of the King deciding dispassionately in which of Europe’s less developed regions to place assets like Conwy Castle is fanciful. Later, non-local agents in Wales however do exercise such choice. For example, plans by City investment group Foresight to generate carbon offsets by planting trees on Welsh agricultural land – as part of a wide geographic portfolio – have generated significant concern over the potential socio-economic and cultural impacts (Mersinoglu, 2022). Concerns about the influence (and in some cases and localities dominance) of non-local agents has led to recent policy interventions by Welsh Government and others, that in effect and in part seek to the ameliorate the negative impact of placeless actors, or to rebalance influence towards more embedded agents. Table 3 presents a selection of these policy innovations that place ‘clear red water’ between Welsh and UK Governments. A number of observations can be made about these interventions.

Firstly, they clearly aim at rebalancing some of the impacts of placeless incursion described in Table 2 above, by either advantaging ‘the local’ (people, communities and enterprises) in areas where market power is (perceived as) overly balanced toward non-local agents, or by changing the behaviours of

non-local agents to better align with wider regional objectives – and with these regional objectives clearly outlined in Wales’ Future Generations Act (Jones, 2022). The extent to which (unfettered) placeless incursion might hinder progress towards Wales’ aspirations is thus an interesting question. For example, Wales has commitments to net-zero carbon which will require very significant afforestation, but with carbon sequestration of the landscape clearly limited; there is thus a tension emerging between the ‘claiming’ of carbon credits by territorial entities, or by mobile investment funds that buy or lease land – unless an unfortunate ‘fudge’ enables double counting of emissions reduction.

Table 3 Placeless-Relevant Regional Policy Innovations in Wales

Policy Intervention	Target(s)	Description	Comment
The Economic Contract (2018) https://businesswales.gov.wales/economic-contract	Firms seeking government support in inward investors	Firms required to demonstrate contributions across four areas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Strength & Adaptability (secure employment, productivity, multiplier effects) • Fair Work • Promotion of Wellbeing (healthier society, cohesive communities and vibrant Welsh culture) • Low Carbon and Climate Resilience 	If successful, would shape FDI to deliver greater regional economic benefits, and positively impact the wider regional aspirations exemplified in Wales’ Future Generations Act. However, very limited information on operationalisation, audit, sign-up or impact has been made available since 2019.
Foundational Economy (2019) https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/6045#A54684 (for background Bentham <i>et al</i> 2013)	Firms, social enterprises, public procurement; peripheral & post-industrial places	Move away from sectoral to economic policies based on ‘mundane’ but wellbeing-important commodities & services, and seek to use public levers to grow the missing Welsh-owned <i>mittelstand</i>	Initial interventions comprised the funding of ‘learning pilots’ with c. £6m of Government support. In 2021 the initiative was extended to health & social services, seeking to reshape procurement to better serve Welsh communities and firms
Council tax premiums for long-term empty and second homes (2023) https://www.gov.wales/council-tax-premiums-long-term-empty-and-second-homes-guidance-local-authorities-html	Second homeowners (especially in tourism hotspots).	Weighting of up to 300% of council tax on second/empty homes. To be implemented at the discretion of local authorities.	Five Las – Môn, Gwynedd, Conwy, Flintshire, Powys – have increased the 2 nd home premium homes for 2023-24, with Gwynedd the highest at 150%. The power has now been announced by the SNP in Scotland.
Renewable Energy Developer for Wales https://www.gov.wales/renewable-energy-developer-wales	Rest-of-UK and Multinational energy investors leasing and buying renewables-suitable land	A publicly owned entity to manage (and potentially own) renewables developments on the Welsh Government estate (c 7% of Wales)	Intended to increase the retention of renewables returns in Wales, and especially to geographically close communities. Only relevant to (largely forested) public land.

<p>Visitor Levy (in development)</p> <p>https://www.gov.wales/a-visitor-levy-for-wales</p>	<p>Tourists (especially where environmental consequences of visitation are problematic)</p>	<p>Under development, but likely to be a modest per-person-night levy charged in commercial accommodation. To be implemented at the discretion of local authorities.</p>	<p>Intended to give councils financial resource to better manage tourism & ameliorate its impacts, hence local precepting & spend. Has generated considerable debate, and pushback from an industry still recovering from COVID19</p>
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Secondly, these policies demonstrate that placelessness is a spatially malleable concept. Whilst the two tourism/second home related interventions have been characterised by some as ‘anti-English’ it is notable that they apply to Welsh residents as well as extra-regional visitors – about a quarter of overnighing visitors in Wales are residents, and the 2021 Census reports 17,500 regional residents with second addresses that are holiday homes (although many of these may be outside Wales). Here then, the placelessness is a community-level rather than regional or city level phenomenon of interest. If a quarter, or even two-fifth of the homes in a coastal or rural village are empty for the majority of the year (Welsh Government, 2021), it is of marginal interest whether the owners are from Cardiff, Coventry or Cairo.

Thirdly, whilst the cited Welsh Government policies are wide ranging and high profile, they are uncertain in their level of impact. Whilst the tourism and council tax may provide useful public income, have caused industry disquiet, neither is likely to be at a level that will change ownership or visitation behaviours at a large scale (Mak, 2008). Meanwhile, across the potentially broader intervention arena of the Economic Contract, a decade of austerity, exit from the European Union, and the UK’s ‘muscular unionism’ has left the Welsh Government far less in the business of supporting investors with cash or other incentives compared to the early part of the Millennium (let alone the halcyon days of the 1980s and 1990s Welsh Development Agency), meaning again that impacts may be modest. However the extension of the Foundational Economy approach to health and social care (a £9bn annual spend) could be transformational if fully embedded (with one eye, of course on the UK Government Internal Market Act which may constrain action in this area). Somewhat worryingly, it is

not clear across the piece how the implementation and impacts of any of these policies are being or will be rigorously assessed, meaning their influence on the Wales – in terms of placeless incursions or otherwise – will be hard to discern.

Finally, it is worth noting that these Welsh Government policies are sited within an increasing feeling (by many if not most) in the region that local socio-economic and cultural concerns, and regional natural resources, have been under-valued and are at threat from outside interests. These concerns are exemplified by renewed (if rather crude) debates about the export and ownership of “Wales’s” water, energy, homes and land, in the renaming of Wales’ national parks and largest mountain in the original *Cymraeg* (Jones, 2023), and in increased (if still very much minority) support for Welsh independence. These phenomena can be perceived as anti-English (and sometimes are), but they often contain elements which decry the impact of mobile capital, of ‘blow ins’ (as the Irish have it), and the selfish concerns and ham-fisted actions of remote institutions – not least the Welsh Government itself. These concerns, and the policies that might address them are thus largely about the placeless.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that to encourage more even and wellbeing-oriented place development, it is not enough to look at places in isolation, or to look at how places act in competition or collaboration, either as equals or in hierarchies. Instead, policy should recognise a class of agents who manipulate geography, investing selectively across space whilst exercising choice in how and where they are based. Further, that this has strong implications for those 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.

Development processes have brought prosperity to places (for example via migration and investment, and through accelerating and underpinning wider innovative and sustainable ecosystems; Bailey & Driffield, 2002; Nylund, 2021; Huggins *et al* 2023). They have also typically favoured a small number of people and places. Policy has largely failed to recognise that agents *in* places are not

necessarily *of* places, and that key mobile ‘influencers’ have increasingly shaped financial, regulatory, and other systems to capture value and cement their pre-eminence, whilst long advantaged ‘core’ regions – and those living in them – direct material, energy and value flows from poorer places (Galbraith, 2008; Jones, 2015; Hickel *et al* 2022). Moreover, this failure is becoming more consequential. The resources and the capitals that generate wellbeing critical resources 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 will lever advantage from national and supra-national regulation, and environmentally-oriented trading schemes (Jones & Munday, 2020; McAfee, 2022). These tensions are becoming clear in resource rich and (relatedly) relatively poor regions in global 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 al*, 2018; Beauchamp & Jenkins, 2020; Feldman *et al* 2021).

Our brief examination of Wales in the UK suggests that within governments and beyond, the need to manage placeless incursion – capturing the benefits mobile agents bring whilst better managing the downsides – is gaining salience. At this scale however, there are constraints on how far policy can influence the extent to which market-origin power structures can be rebalanced in favour more ‘fully local’ people, enterprises, and institutions. These constraints, of course extend to development policy in a more generally, at least in the UK context. For example, staying in Wales, it is notable that calls for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) have been answered by Welsh Government in the *Basic Income Pilot for Care Leavers* (Welsh Government, 2022). This programme loses the ‘U’ from UBI, targeting the (very needful) but narrow demographic of young people leaving care (Welsh Government, 2021). This narrow focus avoids the constraints of devolved authorities that might wish to undertake radical schemes like UBI. These include here firstly, the requirement (unlikely to be met) that the UK-administered social security system does not simply reduce Universal Credit to account for the receipt of UBI at the level of the individual, rendering the payment pointless; and secondly, the sheer lack of financial resource (or borrowing power) to fund a widespread scheme (Thompson, 2021). If a

regionally-driven upending of the economic status quo is then unlikely, perhaps instead the placeless can be made less mobile, as, for example Chinese authorities have attempted with coercing the ‘obligated embeddedness’ of MNCs via legal mechanisms such as joint ventures, but with this requiring local governments that are willing, able and knowledgeable enough to control market access and manipulate firms (Lui & Dicken, 2006). This is still however rare. One thus suspects that the global phenomenon of placelessness requires a holistic, supranational (and indeed multi-level) approach to governance and regulation, of the sort suggested for areas such as tax regulation (Picciotto, 2022). In part, the goal might be to embed the placeless more fully and permanently in places, linking identity more fully with place and retaining and spreading value added and other benefits. Whilst we would argue the importance of classifying and understanding these hyper- and choosily-mobile actors is increasing, we should not paint a picture of ‘placeless bad, embedded good’. We have already made the point that humans in societies have done *very* well at dysfunction whether networked or isolated. And recent local reactions to globalism have shown that where communities are ‘partially networked’ – for example, excluded from employment and hence economic stability, feeling ‘culturally ignored’, but still fully embedded in global information networks operated by (a handful of) placeless firms for their own ends, outcomes can be extremely problematic (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Berti, 2021).

This paper has argued the notion of placelessness is a useful lens through which to view place development – and is applicable across many different types of places. The concept, however, requires significant unpacking and empirical testing, as suggested in Section 3 where we suggest Placelessness might be measured across different themes or axes (see Table 2 and Figure 1). Related, but different, we might also consider whether there are *varieties of Placelessness*, differently applicable to different places. For example, an examination of ‘rentier’ cities like London, Manchester and San Francisco shows places that are shaped by both mobile global financial capital (in search of property returns) *and* (relatively) monied individuals within those cities who seek similar returns through choosing property investments across a city; and state-level actors who see places only as ‘ready receptacles’ for investment in the physical realm, whilst ignoring those who already live there

(Reades *et al* 2022; Tabbush, 2022). Placelessness here is thus simultaneously global and community in spatial scale. Meanwhile, coastal towns far beyond Wales are challenged by both an economic mismatch between embedded and ‘part time’ residents, but also by a state-level response to (often displaced) migrant refugee populations that is effectively place-blind, and resource-light (Grillo, 2005; Peck, 2021). Data from 2020 and 2021 Censuses now provides an opportunity to dive deep into the types of people and places affected by placelessness, as both cause and affected, and to link these data with business and institutional datasets that can start to unpick why, where and how placelessness impacts. In conclusion then, identifying placeless actors is thus only a first step, but a necessary one towards a more nuanced policy that recognises the value of place distinctiveness, and the need to manage places in ways that protect their natural functioning, and the wellbeing of all who live in them. 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 about the related problems.

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