

Counterpoint: confessions of a reluctant state theorist

Jamie Peck, Sept '05

- *Everyone has to start somewhere*
 - Manchester and “Thatcherism” circa 1983
 - Paradoxes of neoliberal state intervention: the Youth Training Scheme (YTS)
 - From countercyclical interventions (make work) under Labour
 - To structural interventions (remaking workers) under Conservatives
 - Different modes of labor-market regulation?
 - “Don’t get carried away with state theory!”
 - Applying big, abstract concepts to (the study of) small, prosaic interventions?

- *Sidebar: geographers and theory*
 - Contingent, if not fickle, commitments
 - Reading around and theoretical-cum-methodological churning as normal practice
 - Strong influence of (neo)Marxism and critical realism, with a substantive focus on industrial (and regional) restructuring
 - “Geography matters” was more than a self-serving slogan—reflected a concern to explore the contingent and conjectural outcomes of generalized processes and tendencies (e.g. deindustrialization; deskilling of the labor process) at the local/regional level
 - Seen by some geographers on this side of the Atlantic as a “retreat from theory,” stoutly defended as an elaboration and extension of theory (not to mention as a form of politics)
 - Initial sensitizing to the problematic of “scale:” examining international restructuring of capitalism, mediated by national state policies, at the local level

- *So how did the state fit in?*
 - Haphazardly theorized, or not theorized at all
 - *But*, the embrace of an increasingly “integral” conception of the economy (economy + culture + politics) drew attention to the active role of state policies in shaping the geographies of the economy (e.g. divergent local consequences of “national” policies like public ownership of industries such as steel and coal; uneven spatial consequences of small firms policies or tax cuts)
 - The influence of regulation theory
 - Forged through historical analysis of the “Fordist” development path in North America and Europe
 - (Neo)Marxist analysis at a lower level of abstraction than capitalism as a “system”—explores the institutional and political means through which the (inherently contradictory) reproduction of different historical “types” of capitalism takes place
 - Regimes of accumulation = structural coupling of a technically feasible pattern of accumulation (i.e. production-consumption-reproduction relations) with ensembles of institutional and political forms known as “modes of social regulation” (MSR); for instance, Fordist mass production/consumption and the Keynesian welfare state)
 - Each regime of accumulation is associated with a qualitatively different pattern of economic growth, together with different forms of state intervention
 - “Regulation” is seen to be theoretically necessary for growth (which is crisis prone), but at the same time the form of regulation is regarded as a “chance discovery,” subject to politics
 - A kind of post hoc economic functionalism, revealed through historical analysis of C20 capitalist trajectories: virtuous circuits of Fordism-Keynesianism *qua* “Golden Age”
 - But what of “post-Fordism?” Open questions. There is no theoretical predetermination of a MSR
 - Various forms of “neoliberalism” have been in an ascendancy since the 1970s, but are they in any sense “functional” for post-Fordist growth?
 - Or might neoliberalism be a creature of the crisis itself, a marker of some kind or regulatory “deficit”?

- In the meantime, we would *expect* an acceleration of experimentation and institutional searching, but how to separate failing experiments from precursors of new regulatory forms?
- *Meanwhile, back inside the state ...*
 - Daily practices of the state: mundane policy evaluation as a pathway into “the state”
 - Complexity and contingency, by the barrow load!
 - Thatcher’s management of unemployment: political cover, muddling through, or regulatory transformation?
 - The Training and Enterprise Councils ... definitionally “post-Fordist” institutions?
 - Business led
 - Free market philosophy
 - Local alternatives to municipal socialism
 - TECs fitted the profile, but in the final analysis represented more of a conjunctural intervention
 - Unresolved regulatory dilemmas (e.g. concerning skill shortages)
 - Self-destructive internal political dynamics
- *Between state theory and state practice*
 - Admittedly, a selective use of “state theory,” developed as an adjunct to/elaboration of regulation theory (Jessop’s strategic-relational state theory; Brenner’s analysis of state spaces)
 - Jessop’s thought experiments as means of (re)classifying contemporary trends in state form and function
 - Principles of theoretical pertinence: tendency to focus on the “experimental edges” of the state/certain aspects of the “reform” process “in motion”
 - e.g. rise of “governance”
 - e.g. welfare reform
 - Tendency to construct relatively enduring elements of the state apparatus in terms of residual leftovers, or theoretically insignificant inertia (e.g. limited reach of many welfare reform efforts)
 - Tracking back and forth between macrotheoretical claims and the study of (usually) mundane local practices
 - Risk of methodological “bends,” given the different levels of abstraction here
 - But a sense of the high and low politics of state restructuring
 - In place of a method: intensive interviews and participant observation around selected state restructuring projects
 - British labor-market policies
 - Urban governance and business elites
 - Welfare reform and workfare in three countries
 - Think tanks in Washington and London
 - Does this add up to a view of the state ... ?
 - Expectation of a complex and multifaceted state, an assemblage of projects, powerful and weak “agents,” stubborn and malleable structures
 - Understanding the situated interpretations of actors in and around this complex state
 - Emphasis on the state’s scalar constitution—and the gulf between state(d) aims and the realities of “street-level” implementation
 - Understanding institutional change from the bottom up, outside in, etc: getting close enough to see the whites of their eyes