Contesting power/knowledge in economic geography: Learning from Latin America and the Caribbean

The task of connecting economic geography to regions located outside the North Atlantic has been on the disciplinary agenda for quite some time. Diagnosing the sub-discipline’s geographic commitments as “parochial” (Dicken 2004), as centered on “core” capitalist countries (Smith 2002), and as Anglo-centric (Sheppard 2006), many have called for an extension of the sub-discipline to the global South (Dicken 2004; Murphy 2008; cf. Pollard et al. 2009; Yeung and Lin 2003). Such questions of linking economic geography to “other” places invite reflection on how this dilemma is framed. While these authors and others identify and problematize the epistemological centricity of anglo-American experience in the discipline, research conducted in and emanating from this location continues to appear as universal. De-centering economic geography remains largely understood in terms of extending its hegemonic framework to other places, rather than provincializing the field itself (Chakrabarty 2000). In this chapter, I argue that this projection of particular experiences and expertise as universal is maintained by the relationship between power and knowledge in economic geography, one that privileges knowledge in and about centers of capitalist industrial production and strips this knowledge of its specificity. My argument is not that the field simply suffers
from a sectoral or geographical bias. If this were the case, the solution would be to advocate for more research on “other” places and “other” sectors. The reproduction of (post)industrial heartlands as centers of the economic, and as privileged spaces for geographic knowledge about economic processes, could still easily be maintained in a more plural field. As a first step towards transforming this power/knowledge relationship, then, I seek to clarify how it is produced by elucidating the silences and erasures that maintain it.

To this end, I begin by examining the field’s engagement with industrial restructuring, a core concern that both reflects and reproduces this power/knowledge relationship. Drawing inspiration from Edward Said and postcolonial theory (1994 [1979]), I read this literature to elucidate the practices that create economic geography’s subject, “the West,” and its Other, the global South. Debates surrounding new production geographies, dynamics of de/industrialization, and post-Fordism have largely centered upon developments in North Atlantic countries. To the extent that regions in the global South are deemed relevant to these debates, they are generally invoked as evidence of phenomena conceptually located in transformations in the global North. Since the late 1990s, geographers have moved on to new concerns including global production networks and institutional shifts associated with neoliberalization, while the ambit of the field has expanded to include emerging economic powers in East Asia. Yet, the field risks reproducing a similar relationship between power and knowledge by following the leading edges of capitalist industrial production as the privileged sites for the production of knowledge that we call economic geography.
Following my sketch of the workings of power and knowledge in the core of the field, I then explore the possibilities for an economic geography that can transform this relationship. Such a transformation, I contend, cannot be effected solely by extending frameworks from North to South. Thus, in the second section of the chapter, I discuss instances of geographical thought and practice intersecting with Latin America and the Caribbean to suggest possible ways to advance the twinned goals of de-centering the sub-discipline and contesting the relationship between power and knowledge that informs it. Diverse theories and political movements in Latin America and the Caribbean have long sought to de-center capitalist accumulation, if not to overcome it, by altering the position of countries in the South in relation to centers of capitalist accumulation controlled in the North, and to create conditions for autonomous development. These efforts range from structuralism and dependency theories in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, to autonomist social movements and state-based reform programs of the 90s and 2000s. Latin American and Caribbean theorists and collectivities associated with these projects have greatly enriched political economic thinking about “the periphery” and, more generally, about relational geographies in and far beyond the region. I trace a trajectory of counter-hegemonic thought in Latin America and the Caribbean prior to, and in the face of, neoliberal reforms, and the subsequent political openings forged by social movements and, more recently, states, spaces that are created by the faltering of neoliberal hegemony. I argue for an engagement with these counter-hegemonic practices as forms of economic geography, and suggest these can serve as a source for rethinking the discipline and its constitutive structures of power/knowledge.
1. Eurocentric Geographies of Industrial Restructuring

Based on studies of the U.S. and northern Europe, the most cited contributions to debates on industrial restructuring in the 1970s in the Anglophone literature drew upon Marxist frameworks. These critical scholars rejected agent-centered explanations of industrial location in an effort to grapple with the profound social and spatial transformations of their day. Analysts identified changing links between so-called post-industrial spaces of capitalist accumulation, associated with disinvestment in North Atlantic countries, and “new” or “emerging” industrial locations in the global South (Harvey 1989; Lipietz 1987; Sassen 1988), popularized as the new international division of labour (NIDL) (Fröbel et al. 1980). Countries of the South, long integrated into the global economy through the exploitation of natural resources and state-supported industries, were increasingly becoming sites of labor-intensive manufacturing established through arms-length contracting and foreign direct investment. Firms based in the North relocated new manufacturing centers to these locations, reorganizing the labour process across vast geographic and social differences, facilitated by new technologies, state practices, as well as particular gender and class relations. Early analysts of the NIDL, such as Fröbel and his colleagues, interpreted the emergence of what they called “world-market” factories in the South as evidence of a zero sum transfer of jobs from the North, sounding the death knell of full employment in northern Europe. Subsequent studies took a more nuanced view, however. Certainly, deindustrialization was a process of job loss and the hollowing out of cities and towns in what were quickly becoming rust belts (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Massey and Meegan 1982). It was also clear, however,
that both firms and gendered forms of work were being transformed in ways that were not expressly evident in a narrow focus on deindustrialized manufacturing. The nature of work was changing – from full-time and permanent, associated with the male breadwinner, to more precarious forms – and considerable variation in economic fortunes existed at the sub-national regional level (Massey 1995 [1984]; McDowell 1991; Storper and Walker 1989; Vosko 2000).

Two broad and inter-related approaches emerged in the 1980s to grapple with the complex relationship between industrial restructuring and uneven geographies: regulation theory and industrial districts. The regulation school theorized the institutional and cultural conditions that facilitated the reproduction of national regimes of accumulation, principally Fordism in North Atlantic countries (Aglietta 2000 [1979]; see Tickell and Peck 1992). Scholars sought to contextualize broad shifts in production geographies as a crisis of Fordism and to understand new arrangements in terms of a shifting accumulation-regulation nexus, identified by terms such as flexible accumulation or post-Fordism. The global South figured at the margins of these accounts. Despite warnings to “beware of the international division of labour” (Lipietz 1986) – i.e., fixed understandings of production geographies along rigid core/periphery lines – an implicit geography of industrial restructuring was nevertheless ascribed in this literature to the North and the South. Harvey summarized these most clearly: in the North, Fordist labour (and gender) relations were giving way to new flexible production relations in order to extract relative surplus value from labour. The search for absolute surplus value was leading to the proliferation of branch assembly plants in the global South and the sweating of immigrant labour in the global North (1989; also Sassen 1988). Feminist
scholars studied the gendering of labour that facilitated this new geography of absolute surplus value extraction in detail (e.g., Cravey 1998; Wright 1997), highlighting the limitations of the mainstream literature to understand the gender regimes articulating with new globalized assembly lines. Neither the mainstream scholarship nor the feminist scholarship on new branch plants was successful, however, in challenging the reduction of the South to the site of flexible – i.e., cheap and disposable – labour, on the one hand, and the framing of the North as the site of complex production relations with a focus on multiple forms of flexibility, on the other (cf. Ong 1991: 285).

My point is not that studies of restructuring in the South should have focused on more forms of flexibility. Rather, in keeping with the predominant understanding of the global division of labour that I have outlined, the establishment of manufacturing sites in the global South was largely framed as evidence of a crisis of Fordism in the global North. While there is considerable variation in regulation school approaches, these factories were generally seen as either epiphenomenal to -- or as an external, compounding factor in -- the shift to post-Fordism in North Atlantic countries. Feminist studies of these factories, furthermore, remained marginal not only to regulation theory, but also to other “master” narratives of global economic restructuring like globalization (Nagar et al. 2002). In sum, although Atlantic Fordist countries were not necessarily the locus of innovation for restructuring (in fact, the literature was turning to new regions like the Third Italy for inspiration, see below), they nevertheless localized the motor force of global economic change. It was thus possible to assert that “[i]f we wish to understand what is happening ‘on the periphery’… we must begin by looking at what is happening in the advanced capitalist world” (Lipietz 1987: 29).
If the regulation school focused on the national scale and the broad (if Eurocentric) contours of an international division of labour, institutionalists trained their attention upon regions of new industrial dynamism emerging in the wake of the crisis of Fordism. The flexible specialization thesis as proposed by Piore and Sabel (1984) drew upon the experiences of craft production in the Third Italy to construct the possibilities for competitive regions of networked and cooperating firms forged in the crucible of the so-called second industrial divide (i.e., from mass to flexible production). Geographers influenced by regulation theory and the institutionalists crafted a kind of middle ground, focusing largely on emerging economic sectors (e.g., high-technology, design, and financial and producer services) in new production heartlands in the United States, particularly California (e.g., Saxenian 1994; Scott 1988; Storper 1995). Debates surrounding flexibility were of course deeply politicized. Advocates of flexible specialization and its variants argued that these new industrial districts offered a high-road development path based on a virtuous circle of innovation, local cultural assets, and cooperation, while also balancing workers’ rights. Their arguments were based upon the study of a small number of successful regions (Silicon Valley, Baden-Württemburg, and as mentioned, Third Italy), studies that in turn circulated widely as ideal-typical models (Markusen 1996). These models formed the basis both of academic texts and regional development policies in the global North and South.

Detractors of the new regions scholarship criticized these models for their idealized form, abstracted from particular political and social relations germane to and stretching beyond these apparent “islands” of production (Gertler 1992). Critics also argued that the literature was far too sanguine about the outcomes of flexible industrial
districts for labour (Harvey 1989). Moreover, the industrial districts approach implicitly privileged those of the successful variety, sidelining regions that had failed to thrive altogether, and ignoring the waning moments of districts studied only at the crest of accumulation (Gertler 1992). Yet, few scholars identified the Eurocentric compulsion of this literature as a problem (see Chari 2004; Hart 1998). If in neo-Marxist approaches to Fordism, the South was imputed largely as an effect of a structural shift proper to the North, in the new regions literature, the structural relationship between North and South was elided. In its place, what emerged were studies that compared the productive capacities of regions against regional models based on US and European experience. The focus on emerging zones of flexible production reproduced power/knowledge by centering these economic geographies upon the leading edges of industrial growth located firmly in the global North. Regional studies in the global South could thus be portrayed as a “specialized corner of the field,” of interest only to the extent that lessons learned from North American and European regional studies might be applied to “lagging” or “backward” regions in the South (Scott 2000: 32). With respect to the treatment of Latin American developments in the industrial restructuring literature broadly, it is no wonder Mexican sociologist Alfredo Hidalgo concluded that “[s]een through the mirror of concepts minted in Europe or the US, the picture of Latin American reality always appears deformed” (2003: 94, author’s translation).

The inheritances of regulation theory and new industrial districts remain important to the sub-discipline, even as new theoretical frameworks for understanding global economic change are acquiring a more central position. Perhaps the most influential of these newer research programs is that of global production networks
GPNs. The GPN framework studies connections across difference and space beyond the sub-discipline’s traditional geographic heartlands. GPNs draw on actor-network theory (ANT) and institutionalist approaches to create an alternative to the perceived structuralism of world-systems influenced global commodity chains (GCCs) (Dicken et al. 2001). Contrasting the two approaches is difficult since they continue to develop, and, I would suggest, share increasingly more in common. For example, whereas GPN scholars once claimed that firms as described in the commodity chain literature were beholden to structural forces beyond their control (Henderson et al. 2002), commodity chains (renamed value chains) have come to place more emphasis on firm agency through the notion of industrial upgrading and a revised understanding of governance drawing on transaction costs theory (Gereffi et al. 2005). Both approaches represent an attempt to break with strict territorial understandings of industrial restructuring by focusing on the networked relationships of firms, workers and inputs (in GCCs), and firms and institutional assets (in GPNs). In particular, with its emphasis on ANT, GPNs are offered as an uncentered morphology, allowing for the conceptual inclusion of a broad range of places on equal epistemological grounds. Advocates stress the potential for GPNs to extend the geographical scope of economic geography, while including marginalized regions not only as sites of production processes, but also as sources for our understanding of them (Kelly 2009; Yeung and Lin 2003). To date, this framework has been particularly successful in tracing connections between production arrangements and regions in East Asia and those in the North Atlantic (see Yeung 2009).

GPNs hold much promise for de-centering economic geography. Yet, the extension of production geographies across North and South does not necessarily
overturn the power/knowledge relationship I have identified thus far. GPNs and GCCs continue to privilege the location decisions of transnational capital, and particularly their industrial and value-extracting processes, as sites of research and as sources of knowledge production. Scholars tend to follow the paths of these lead firms. To date, regions connected to broader networks largely through disinvestment and decline, resource extraction, migration and remittances, unpaid care work and other forms of non-wage work, or some combination of all these, continue to remain marginal to economic geographies as currently conceived (see Kelly 2009; Werner and Bair, forthcoming). Capital extension and expansion, and the conflation of these with industrial growth, appear privileged over a dialectics of accumulation and disinvestment within and beyond industrial cycles, and the forms of politics that emerge in relation to the uneven geographies engendered by these cycles. In sum, while GPN scholars are making important headway in mitigating Euro-centered geographies, the inclusion of regions and firms framed as “emerging” capitalist actors into this framework may continue to reproduce, rather than contest, the relationship between power and knowledge that structures the field.

2. Economic Geographies from Latin America and the Caribbean: Reworking power/knowledge

In the previous pages, I have argued that economic geographies of the South are insufficient for contesting the workings of power/knowledge. While it is certainly important that more scholars conduct research outside the discipline’s anglo-American
heartlands, and communicate in languages other than English, I want to suggest that the problem at hand is not one to be solved by generating more empirical research on the South in North Atlantic academies and frameworks. Rather, let me venture a more provocative suggestion: that geographers based in North Atlantic institutions should proceed from the premise that economic geographies are already widely practiced in the South in both academic and non-academic circles. The task at hand is to engage with these practices and, in so doing, re-imagine what is meant by economic geography.

Rather than a problem of extending the field from North to South, then, a different set of questions comes to the fore. *What worldviews inform economic geographies produced in Latin America and the Caribbean? How do these geographical practices intersect with, and how might they re-shape and de-center, the Eurocentric sub-field? Can economic geographies in Latin America and the Caribbean contest the privileging of knowledge production in and about centers of capitalist power, and the projection of this knowledge as universal?*

My reflections on these questions are invariably shaped by my academic work and activist experience in the North Atlantic and the circum-Caribbean. I have long grappled with ways to understand economic connections between North and South, and the possibilities to forge political solidarities created through what Chandra Mohanty calls “cartographies of struggle” (2003). In organizing around and studying the spaces and times of industrial change in the circum-Caribbean, I am struck by the possibilities of engagement with economic geography from this epistemological location, one that potentially defies hegemonic notions of ‘the West’ -- being ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the West, as CLR James put it (Hall 1996) -- and the universalist trajectories of capitalist change that
‘the West’ implies. There are, of course, limitations. My own position in the anglo-American academy invariably determines the authors I read, the audiences I write for, and in what language I communicate. How to be part of producing knowledge emerging from and contributing to counter-hegemonic positions? How to engage seriously with both academic and non-academic thinkers, writers and activists working for social justice in/from the global South? These questions are informing my practice as I begin to work at a U.S. university. To date, I am making small steps like translating and publishing work in the Dominican Republic, building upon relationships that I made there during my dissertation research, and writing essays like this one to force me and my readers to make space for critiquing and transforming the power/knowledge relationship in economic geography.

In pursuing an economic geography from the South, the relational South – as subject to domination and exploitation and the site of different kinds of resistances – cannot be conflated with the geographic South. Consider the vast and highly differentiated territory of Latin America and the Caribbean. The region represents a heterogeneous space of theory production contributing both to hegemonic projects of capitalist development and to counter-hegemonic ones. Latin America and the Caribbean cannot be essentialized as a space of “pure resistance” conterminous with knowledge that de-centers power, just as knowledge produced in the global North does not fortify Eurocentric positions per se. Yet, as David Slater reminds us, the historical experience of subordination and forms of exclusion in the South “tend to generate a subjectivity that is… more critically conscious than is generally the case within societies that have benefited, no matter how differentially, from initiating and controlling… processes of
expansion and incorporation” (1998: 666). Latin America and the Caribbean’s subordinate position is inseparable from the geopolitics of resource extraction that shape economic geographies and the political possibilities of many nation-states in the South, circumstances that have engendered rich traditions of critical political economic thinking (Bebbington 2009). This critical consciousness is also inseparable from the region’s historical experience of cycles of industrial growth and decline, producing a layered and uneven social and geographic trajectory within capitalism that is summarily erased by the tendency to view the region through historicist terms like “emerging” or “developing.” Considering economic geographies from the South, then, can offer important counter-perspectives to knowledges produced in centers of power.

In what follows, I draw selectively on instances of what we can understand as economic geographical thinking that emerge from and intersect with counter-hegemonic practices in Latin America and the Caribbean. These examples contest the privileging of Eurocentric experience and spaces of industrial expansion as sites of knowledge production for economic geography. My choices are inseparable from geographies of publishing and translation, and my own institutional position in the North Atlantic. Neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, then, the examples I draw upon – the legacy of structuralist and dependentista thought and resistance to neoliberalism, counter-hegemonic projects of regional integration, and the travels of Doreen Massey’s concept of “power geometries” – illustrate on-going economic geographical practices informed by, and shaping, places and political processes in the region and beyond.

a. Positioning the South from the South

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In Latin America and the Caribbean, the impact of colonialism and neocolonialism, and the region’s subordination to capitalist accumulation in the North, has long placed the structural constraints on economic change at the forefront of theory and politics. The work of Raúl Prebisch and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America established a tradition of economic theorizing from a position of subordination to global capital, or what Prebisch framed as the core-periphery system in the 1950s (see Sunkel 2000). Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, dependentista scholars drew upon a wide array of influences – from ECLA-school structuralism, to Marxism, and theories of imperialism – to challenge the prevailing strategy in Latin America of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) inspired in part by Prebisch. In the wake of the failures of ISI, dependency thinkers developed a diverse theoretical corpus that addressed Latin American positionality with respect to centers of capitalist power, and the universalist assumptions of national capitalist industrialization as the process to alter these structural relations (Dos Santos 1998; Kay 1989). Sharp divides existed between the Marxist and reformist (also called structuralist) schools of dependency thinking. The former emphasized dependency through global relations of unequal exchange, while the latter, associated with the work of sociologist and former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, focused on heterogeneous forms of national development in the region (see Grosfoguel 2000; Sotelo 2005). During this period, dependentistas were joined by scholars and public intellectuals in the newly decolonized anglo-Caribbean, members of the “New World” group who, similarly, advanced theories of colonialism,
especially the legacy of the plantation, and the prospects for development in small
countries (see Beckford 1972; Best 2005; Levitt 2005).

Structuralism and dependency theory provide powerful examples of theorizing
political economy from a geographic-cum-structural position. I suggest that these
theoretical traditions – which continue into the present – provide important lessons for
forging an economic geography from the South. To date, in the sub-discipline, Latin
American structuralism and dependency theories serve as a departure point for framing
the complex and fragmented geographies of uneven development. The rise of “newly
industrializing countries” has justified a disavowal of the core-periphery model,
ostensibly discrediting the dependency thesis (e.g., Lipietz 1986). Certainly, the
conflation of core-periphery relations with a rigid inter-national geography limited the
usefulness of the framework, as did its economic reductionism (Slater 2004). Yet, the
core concerns of structuralism and dependency – class relations, global structures of
power, the limits of national economic analysis and action – continue to be of enormous
relevance to contemporary analyses of neoliberalism. Moreover, considered in light of
the prevailing relationship between power and knowledge in economic geography,
structuralist and dependency theories can also be understood as an act of counter-
representation (Ibid.). Dependency scholars forged what Mignolo calls a locus of
enunciation (1995) to make space for autonomous development under conditions of
imperial and national elite domination. The point, then, is to engage with structuralist
and dependency thought as an historical legacy and as an inspiration for political projects
to build alternative economic possibilities through the creation of counter-hegemonic
knowledges grounded in the experiences of the South.
During the long decades of neoliberal counter-reforms in the region, these theoretical traditions were in retreat institutionally, and faced strong criticism from a transforming Left. Social movements and activist scholars challenged not only neoliberalism, but also the developmentalism that pervaded structuralist and dependency thinking (Chavez et al. 2008; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Slater 2004). Social movements emerging in the wake of market reforms reflected the uneven territoriality of states and capital accumulation, and the historical legacies of racism and colonialism that structured this unevenness (Quijano 2000). Movements created spaces of counter-hegemonic theory-making, renewing critiques of Latin American and Caribbean positionality from feminist, indigenous, African-descent, urban migrant, and peasant subject positions, and their combinations. From these hybrid subject positions, they opposed deepening forms of neoliberal capitalism, as evident, for example, in free trade agreements that privileged market agendas of the North and the sectors of capital that could capture returns from these reforms in the South. The Zapatistas in southern Mexico, for example, created and defended autonomous non-market spaces, notions of radical democracy, and indigenous subjectivity in the face of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and its emboldened assault on already imperiled forms of collective land tenure and public goods. In diverse ways, movements against the privatization of water in Bolivia, mobilizations by the unemployed, or piqueteros, pauperized by currency crises in Argentina, and the landless people’s movement in Brazil, signaled the growth of resistance to dispossession wrought by neoliberalism.

Since the late 1990s, extensive organizing and resistance to neoliberalism in Latin America and the Caribbean have brought political parties and leaders with strong
reformist agendas to power through democratic elections across the region. In Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Ecuador, the locus of enunciation of counter-hegemonic thought and practice is now, in part, being assumed by the state. Many governments are seeking ways to either reverse or rework the neoliberal paradigm, and, especially in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador (at the time of writing), to address the legacies of racism and colonialism that have structured the national state through the marginalization and exclusion of indigenous and African-descent peoples. Turning the tide of dispossession and reconstructing urban and rural livelihood possibilities are all on the agenda of a political opening some have called “post-neoliberalism” (Sader 2008). States and social movements face the task of re-making economic and political geographies through new and renewed paradigms of sovereignty, autonomous development, solidarity, and radical democracy. Programs of social and economic change under new banners such as neostructuralism, Amazonic-Andean capitalism and 21st century socialism draw their lineages in part from the region’s tradition of counter-hegemonic thought (Bielschowsky 2006; Romo 2007; Leiva 2008; Ferrer 2010). The contradictions and complexities of these projects are all the more reason to engage with these transformations and ask what can be learned about de-centering economic geography from these experiences.

b. Regional integration and territorial ordering

By way of example, let me briefly outline two very different state-led efforts to transform prevailing relations of power and rework economic geographies of the region.
Both are tied to the contemporary political process in Venezuela, underway since the election of Hugo Chávez Frías to the presidency in 1998, inseparable from (but irreducible to) the politics of oil extraction (see Lander 2008). The first is a regional integration project called the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas/The People’s Trade Agreement, or ALBA-TCP in Spanish. President Chavéz and former Cuban President Fidel Castro launched ALBA in Havana in 2004 to oppose neoliberal free trade agreements that dominated regional integration efforts since the 1990s, and to provide an alternative for countries (especially Cuba) and producers who suffer the deleterious effects of U.S. trade policy. With eight member states currently participating, and informed by solidarity principles developed by social movements in the context of the World Social Forum, ALBA purports to create spaces of alternative trade with direct government participation. ALBA expressly aims to foster commercial exchange and infrastructural investment to de-center economic flows in the Americas and the patterns of unequal exchange – especially volatile prices and declining terms of trade for primary products – that structure the region’s subordinate position in contemporary capitalism (Altmann Borbón 2009). The most important exchanges to date in monetary terms are those organized under the banner of transnational energy arrangements, the largest of which is Petrocaribe. Open to members and non-members of ALBA, Petrocaribe has institutionalized forms of international barter and low-interest loans in exchange for fuel between oil-rich Venezuela and its eighteen member countries in the circum-Caribbean. Venezuela finances oil purchases at reduced interest rates with the option of payments made by purchasing countries in goods and/or services.\(^4\)
ALBA is among several south-south integration and finance initiatives (for example, new banks including the ALBA Bank and the proposed Banco del Sur) being created in an effort to forge spaces for policies independent of Washington-based institutions. ALBA, in particular, claims a collaborative approach with indigenous peoples and social movements more broadly, incorporated through advisory councils within the organization’s structure. Whether such initiatives can defend spaces of autonomy from neoliberal policies, and create alternatives that lead to more distributive modes of accumulation and radical forms of democracy, is certainly not guaranteed. This process, nevertheless, is among many being created to alter economic geographies of the macro region in the face of neoliberal failures.

One final example raises important questions about power/knowledge and counter-hegemony in making economic geographies from the South. In 2007, the Venezuelan government adopted what it calls “a new geometry of power” as one of the five “motors” of the Bolivarian process, leading up to the failed referendum on constitutional reform that same year. The concept, subsequently extended through various legal reforms, is explicitly borrowed from the work of Doreen Massey (2008; 2009a; 2009b). Venezuelan geographer Ricardo Menéndez introduced geometrías del poder as part of the government’s program to give priority to the territorial dimension of uneven development that structures relations in the country. In concrete terms, under the banner of a new geometry of power, the state proposes the formation and incorporation of community councils governed by popular assemblies constituted by community members with some autonomy in decision-making over planning and policy (Riveros Quiróz 2007). The concept also refers to a system of transfer payments between Venezuela’s
grossly unequal regions, and the prioritizing of productive sectors in each of these (as part of the 2010 *Ley del Consejo Federal del Gobierno*). Whether the concept of a new geometry of power represents an effort to construct popular democracy via territorially-based forms of participatory democracy, or a scaffold to support top-down measures to centralize power in the hands of the government is a subject of considerable debate today in Venezuela, not least among geographers and planners in journal pages and on websites like *Scripta Nova, La Revista Geográfica Venezolana*, and *Aporrea.org* (e.g., Di Gimiani 2007; Estaba 2007).

Through the travels of “power geometries” from the North to “geometrias del poder” in the South, we glimpse the contradictions and complexities of counter-hegemonic knowledge production. For reasons particular to the Venezuelan political process, Massey’s notion is useful for supporting a series of projects and programs that place the uneven development of the country at the center of the country’s political reforms, and the fomenting of participatory democracy to redress these sociospatial inequalities. Of course, these travels are more than simple translation, or a kind of operationalization of a concept originally thought through and from anglo-American experience. Perhaps, we can best understand the journeys of geometries/geometrias across north and south as a creative appropriation, one that politicizes taken-for-granted geographic differences and at the same time transforms the “original” concept through the political tradition of participatory democracy in Latin America.

*Conclusion: Contesting power/knowledge in economic geography*
(Post)industrial activities, and the places that localize these activities in the global North, remain at the center of economic geography either as objects of research, or as taken for granted points of reference for designing and conducting research elsewhere. This center reflects the institutional locations of the field’s practitioners, locations that are themselves products of the uneven geographies of capitalism. The resulting frameworks of industrial restructuring are stripped all too easily of this specificity, constructing places in the global North as indisputable centers and motors of global economic change, or as the sources of universally applicable models. In order to contribute to destabilizing structures of capitalist power, and engendering alternatives, a de-centering of the discipline is needed, not through the extension of frameworks and sites of research but through actively challenging the relationship between power and knowledge. Such a de-centering is not one achieved by a sort of geographical pluralism (more places, more sectors), but rather one that contributes to understanding and contesting existing relations of power.

The counter-hegemonic practices and theories from Latin America and the Caribbean briefly discussed here offer at least three important lessons for such a project in economic geography. First, they invoke the specific and particular experience of places produced through structurally subordinate positions within capitalism. Positionality, rather than universality, is taken as a fundamental premise, one that could well inform knowledge production in economic geography more generally (see Sheppard 2002). Second, as the counter-hegemonic practices and theories forged in the wake of the dependentistas make clear, structural position and questions of identity are bound up with one another in indeterminate ways. Counter-hegemonic positions are forged from hybrid
experiences, related but irreducible to economic relations. What one might consider “relational” economic geographies, then, could be further developed through engaging with theories and experiences from Latin American and the Caribbean that articulate identity and structural position in forging counter-hegemonic politics and spaces of autonomous development. Finally, the relationship between power, knowledge and geography is very much at stake in the “post-neoliberal” projects I have discussed. As the lines between hegemony and counter-hegemony, and between neoliberalism and “post”-neoliberalism, are drawn and contested, these projects, and many others, offer the opportunity to learn how geography is re-imagined from these spaces of political opening, and what such re-imaginings may offer for re-working centers and peripheries of the discipline and of economic power.
Works Cited


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1 I use the terms “global South” and “global North” to mean a relation of power sustained by linking up economic exploitation with gendered, racialized and other forms of domination (e.g., caste). The geography of this relation is continually reproduced along existing and new spatial contours. Although far more complex than a binary hemispheric imaginary of south and north, the terms place this racialized and gendered relation of power in the center of my analysis, as well as the possibility of solidarities among those who resist this relation of power both in the geographic north and south (cf. Mohanty 2003).

2 For an early discussion of this tension as it relates to regulation-theoretic approaches in Japan, see Peck and Miyamachi (1994).

3 I am grateful to Victor Ramiro Fernandez, economist at the Universidad Nacional Litoral in Santa Fe, Argentina, for orienting me towards new sources and providing invaluable insights on this literature. All errors of interpretation are mine.

4 Acuerdo de Cooperación Energética PETROCARIBE. Available at [www.mre.gov.ve](http://www.mre.gov.ve). Accessed February 23, 2008. At the time of writing, these agreements were in the process of renegotiation.