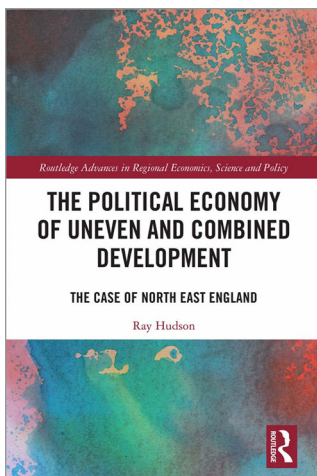


Hudson, Ray (2025): The Political Economy of Uneven and Combined Development. The Case of North East England

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The title of this book is not without ambiguity as to what its primary focus might be, but early on (p 13), Ray Hudson makes clear his book's intentions and the balance between case study and theory. The account that follows of the trajectory of growth and decline in the economy of North East England is informed by a political economy of uneven and combined development that provides a powerful framework through which to understand these changes. As such, this is also a book about long-period changes in the trajectory of uneven and global capitalist development.

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It thus outlines and analyses the region's trajectory from being at the core of a developing national and global system of capitalism based on coal, to becoming peripheral, as endemic system crises, conflicts and contradictions play out, with state attempts at management and amelioration having at best mixed and often unexpected consequences.

The reader is given a richly detailed history of the growth and decline of key industries in one of the regions which powered, and hugely benefited from, the UK's global political and economic rise, and suffered the most from the often-rapid changes of a dynamic global capitalism, wracked by social conflict and war. Overt theorising is confined to part of an introductory chapter of some fourteen pages and amounts to a broad sketch of the author's Marxist perspective, conventional enough for him to suggest that readers familiar with that literature might skip it. That this introduction is not given a chapter number underlines that Ray Hudson does not want to distract the reader from immersion in the warp and weft of the North East's industrial story.

The remainder of the book is a detailed account of the rise and decline of coal mining, iron and steelmaking, shipbuilding and (more recently) chemical manufacturing in the North East of England from the late eighteenth century to the current day. What is presented and some of the causal connections mooted are, of course, shaped by the author's perspective, but, in truth, the account, buttressed by a wealth of statistics, tables and twenty-five pages of footnotes, will not jar with readers who do not share his theoretical positions. The book does not provide an extended discussion of the political and policy directions that should be taken to help this area escape its long-term economic decline, which means that another potential point of disagreement with, or alienation of, theoretically unsympathetic readers is avoided.

Five of the book's six chapters present a chronological account of the challenges for and development and vicissi-

tudes of those industrial sectors employing the majority of men in the region: coal, iron and steel, and shipbuilding and associated engineering until the 1914–1918 war; these with the addition of the chemical industry in the inter-war period; and from 1945 the lingering demise of the older, heavier industries, the later gradual marginalisation of the area's chemical plants within the changing global spatial structure of the sector; and faltering attempts by the state, locally and nationally, to 'modernise' the economy by promoting other kinds of manufacturing and, latterly, routine service sector employment such as call centres and consumption-related employment (for example, tourism and retail distribution), some of which tend to employ women rather than men.

Some themes emerge clearly from this history. Perhaps foremost is the significance of regionally based networks of industrialists, landowners and banks in the early growth of coal, iron and steel, and shipbuilding. These typically involved a mix of old and new money, and even those with relatively little money but with expertise and aspirations. Major landowners (wanting, for example, to exploit coal reserves on their land) needed to work with engineering expertise, managerial and entrepreneurial flair, and finance. Commercial networks came to involve interlocking board memberships across industries, increasingly buttressed by social networking, while individual enterprises sought vertical and horizontal linkages to protect supplies and markets and seek oligopolistic market advantages. This sense (and reality) of a coherent regional economy dissipated over the twentieth century, as enterprises and industries fragmented and key commercial decisions affecting plants in the region were made by boards outside it (and often outside the UK).

Ray Hudson describes some of the largely ineffectual state interventions from the 1930s onwards intended to bolster the region's economy. From his theoretical perspective, there will always be severe limits to what isolated state initiatives can achieve. Yet there can still be more or less radical/better (or worse) thought-through interventions. In some regions, radical initiatives find a constituency – as happened in London and Sheffield during the 1980s. In some regions, a sense of regional identity can become politically potent and help mobilise resources to lobby national and international agencies (as has happened in Wales and Scotland). There is a complementary political sociology of the North East that could accompany this book and that would help us understand why these kinds of outcomes do not appear as prominently in the North East – i.e. why the Labour-

dominated politics of the region over more than a century took the particular form it did – a sociology that would take into account (among other things) the reproduction of the labour force, and gender relations more generally, which are absent from this book.

Ray Hudson, born within the region, a long-time resident and worker within it, and now holding an emeritus position at Durham University, one of the region's major universities, draws upon a lifetime's research as well as a wealth of published and unpublished work (doctoral theses, but also masters theses). This wealth of knowledge – appropriately, both formally research-based and tacit, given that he consistently points out the significance of practical knowledge in stimulating (especially) nineteenth century innovations – is a basis for a persuasive and, dare one say, authoritative, delineation of the lineaments of the region's economic fortunes and travails.

This breadth and depth of knowledge and mastery of detail has its drawbacks. There are times when a reader might feel that there has been over-compression of an argument, or that the lists of coal mines, steelworks and shipyards that opened or closed in a given period threaten to distract those unfamiliar with the area from getting to grips with key points. But against this must be set the fact that this is essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in understanding the North East over the last two hundred years: because of the clarity of its account, its distinctive perspective – which challenges a reader to explore and develop her own ideas – and the portal it provides to additional literature.

These virtues easily outweigh a minor gripe my background as a planner and geographer forces me to raise – the maps, of which there are many, are generally useful, but too many could be improved by better keys and labelling. There are also occasional irritating lapses in proofreading, but no more than is usual in contemporary publishing. Overall, my recommendation is unambiguously that any institution with an interest in uneven regional development under late/mature capitalism should ensure its library stocks this book.

Full reference of reviewed title

Hudson, R. (2025): *The Political Economy of Uneven and Combined Development. The Case of North East England*. London. ix + 252 pages.