

CLASS, RENT AND THE STATE:

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT IN WESTERN BOOMTOWNS

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## I. Introduction

This paper attempts to decipher the uneven development process that currently characterizes Western U. S. boomtown growth associated with energy. It hypothesizes that two features of this process produce a class configuration that is ambivalent about development: rent that accrues to the production process from various sources, and sectoral disruption that destroys an older economic base. In general, the rural working class will support energy development, while segments of the petty bourgeoisie will oppose it. Gains for the local working class will be short run and may coincide with losses for the U. S. working class as a whole. Much of the struggle over energy development takes place in the state sector, where a populist coalition of organized labor, Western agricultural interests and environmentalists oppose multinational corporations. The future of boomtowns depends on the outcome of this struggle, as well as on local stakes in development in particular cases.

## II. The Law of Uneven Development

The cleavage between Marxist analysis of advanced industrial economies and Third World experience under capitalist domination has revived Marx's Law of Uneven Development. The Marxist model begins with the premise that surplus value is extracted from labor by capital in a system of production of commodities for exchange where capital controls production in order to accumulate capital through profit. Of the Third World experience, however, more needs to be said. Theories of imperialism, in addition to identifying the sources of capitalist world-wide expansion, address the effect of that penetration with models of dependency that encompass more than the introduction of wage labor. Capitalism's deformation of Third World societies includes forced cultural degradation, manipulation of reproduction, physical exhaustion of resources and environmental plunder. Comparison of this experience with that of the U. S. is referred to as evidence of the operation of "the Law." (Examples are Hymer and Resnick, 1970; Hymer, 1973; Gough, 1975 and Best, 1960). Increasingly, events in our own backyards resemble Third World uneven development. Boomtowns are a lurid example.

The beauty of the Law is that it evokes powerfully the paradox of destruction accompanying capitalism's drive for efficiency. Its descriptive contribution is thus considerable. However, as a law it remains an assertion: capitalist development must produce such unevenness. It has not been derived formally from the basic propositions of Marxist theory. Instead, it describes particular (and varying) contradictions which are then analyzed with the Marxist method in a given historical context.

Uneven development connotes multiple situations. It can describe different growth rates across sectors or space (industries, regions, national economies, occupations, ethnic groups, households) and it can describe a disruptive experience for any one of these over time. Thus it has at least three important dimensions: sectoral, temporal and spatial. An adequate theory of uneven development would have to address all of the links between capitalist production dynamics and its manifestations in diverse places and times. Development is the growing domination of the

