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The difference of local from national capitalism, and why local capitalisms differ from each other: a Marxist approach

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1. Introduction

The comparative capitalisms (CC) literature has been focused on differences between nations or groups of nations. Yet a cursory glance at any sizeable nation suggests that there are important differences in capitalism between localities (cities, towns, rural districts) and between regions within the same nation (henceforth, 'localities' for conciseness). Localities often differ from each other in terms of their dominant economic sectors, their forms of capital, the relations between firms, their systems of technological change, the labour force and its relations with employers, and the roles of the local state – that is, the issues most often analysed in the CC literature on nations. Moreover, localities within a country often differ in their social spheres, including in gender divisions in domestic and caring work, forms of household, housing systems, welfare services, and so on.

There is now extensive critique of CC literature for its focus on national capitalisms abstracted from international processes (for example Radice 2000). But although some CC authors have mentioned the local scale as worthy of analysis, there is no extant work giving a systematic theorisation of the significance of the local scale for CC and comparison of local capitalisms within a nation. This chapter is a preliminary exploration of this question, using a spatial-Marxist approach, and drawing on the rich body of radical research on cities and regions over the last forty years. For this task, I develop a theory of capitalist locality as a totality. This enables one to specify what is significantly different between localities, and to understand how these differences arise. It also enables us to understand the similarities and differences between local and national capitalisms respectively, a particularly important task since the CC literature is so strongly focused on nations; in other words, what difference does scale make to capitalism? Throughout the paper, then, I deal with two types of difference, 'horizontal difference' between local capitalisms and 'vertical difference' between local and national capitalism.

The chapter analyses local difference within capitalism as such, and is not specific to a particular period. It assumes a country where wage labour dominates production.

2. Spatial capitalism, structure and contradiction

To understand, rather than merely describe, differences in capitalism, one needs a theorisation of capitalism; and this in turn is closely connected with one's political outlook. These banal premises of critical theory have been neglected in much of the CC literature: disagreements in a large part derive directly from the authors' understandings of capitalism,

particularly between various brands of institutionalism, old and new regulation theory, and various Marxist approaches; but this dependency is often not made explicit, leading to fruitless disputes (Radice 2000). Accordingly, I shall briefly set out here my theoretical assumptions about capitalism. I assume that space (that is, territory, distance and scale) enters into capitalism not only contingently but at high levels of abstraction (Cox 1991; Gough 1991).

I adopt a Marxist approach to capitalism, which I understand not merely as an 'economy' but as a society. The bedrock of society is a set of social relations; those of class, gender and ethnicity/ 'race' are central. Waged production is organised by capital through the exploitation of labour power, with the aim of accumulation of capital as value. Labour power is produced in the 'social' sphere, through a complex system comprising unpaid labour organised within households by relations of gender and age, goods and services bought with the household's income, and, in modern capitalism, free public services. While production and social spheres are under different ownership and control and take place in different spaces, they are moments of a single process of reproduction of the classes, a differentiated totality. Both gender and 'racial' relations are also constructed across production and social spaces, the latter in dialectics with international separations between ethnicities.

My focus on social reproduction might suggest a smoothly functioning system. But a presupposition of Marxist theory, and a conclusion of its use in concrete research, is that many fundamental social processes are contradictory, that is to say, contain elements which are mutually constitutive and at the same time in conflict; disruption and change are endemic to capitalist society. A corollary is that the state exists within capitalism because of the myriad instabilities of production and social life which their contradictions give rise to; the state is therefore fundamentally not a distinct institution with its own proper dynamics, but rather a moment in the contradictions and historical evolution of economy and the life world (Clarke 1991).

The abstract structures so far mentioned are common to all capitalist societies. How, then, may we understand empirical difference in capitalism? The passage from abstract to concrete can proceed in three different modes. The first is to mix additional social concepts into the picture; thus production in the abstract may be differentiated by the type of production technology used or product produced. The second is to investigate the relations between previously distinct entities either diachronically or synchronically; thus the interaction of production and reproduction within a locality generates gender relations which then give rise to difference and change within both spheres. These two modes both make the account increasingly complex by weaving together different threads in ways increasingly specific to place and time.

The third mode of theorising difference is less widely used: to investigate how contradiction within a social entity leads to its differentiation (Ollman 1993). For example, reproduction of capitalism in general depends on both women's unpaid work within the home and her exploitation within waged production; but these roles are in material tension with each other;

this contradiction is played out in different ways in the long-term development of different territories. Differences in women's respective roles in the home and waged work by territory, social group or individual are thus not simply a result of complexity but of this contradiction within gender in capitalism. Or to take another example, well-known in the CC literature: the difference in industrial relations between Britain and Germany, the former distant or disciplinary, the latter cooperative. This can be understood partly in terms of the complex histories of the respective capitalisms. But these evolutions were founded in a contradiction in capital-labour relations in all times and places, between the need for capitalist discipline to ensure surplus value extraction, and the need for a certain degree of cooperation and initiative by labour: these are complementary to each other, but also in tension (Friedman 1977; Burawoy 1985). Britain and Germany ended up with different emphases in this 'balance'; but the underlying contradiction is ever-present in both countries. In this chapter, then, I emphasise the role of contradiction in generating differences between capitalisms.

Different territorial capitalisms evolve through uneven and combined development (Trotsky 2004; Smith 1984): 'uneven' in that each territory develops specific social relations and durable resources; 'combined' in that the development of territories is subject to flows of commodity, money and productive capital between them, and reciprocally creates the pressures for these flows. The fundamental contradiction here is that productive and money capital and workers have good reasons for both fixity within a territory and for mobility between them (Harvey 1989 Ch.5; Cox 1997; Swyngedouw 1992). Fixity is underpinned by resources of long turnover-time and by relations between actors where a degree of learning, mutual knowledge and trust can develop, thus enhancing productivity and innovation. Mobility, in contrast, enables productive capital to escape territories where social relations have become problematic and profitability insufficient, and tap into the accumulated resources of other territories. Mobile money capital may be the medium for such territorial switches. And people may see better employment opportunities than in their existing place, despite often having supportive networks there (Cox 1998). Uneven and combined development, and fixity versus mobility, are then the bases for the development of state structures and actions at varying spatial scales.

The close link between social theory and political perspective is clear in the literature on capitalist difference: authors who use new institutionalist theory do so because their political project to enhance the competitiveness of firms or territorial economies; authors using old institutionalism and new regulationism are concerned with creating 'good', equitable capitalisms; old regulationist authors wish to promote capitalisms which can for a period suppress capitalist crisis tendencies. In contrast, for most non-regulationist Marxists the key question is how workers and the oppressed can struggle against capital and eventually supersede it. This explains the centrality of contradiction to Marxism, in showing not only the inevitability of social conflicts but also how capitalism disrupts itself, and the consequent possibilities for revolt.

The next three sections discuss moments in the construction of local capitalisms. Each section discusses the 'vertical difference' between the local scale and the national, and 'horizontal

differences' between localities. Section 3 considers local economy and society, section 4 the local state, while section 5 considers power and conflict in class, gender and racism. Section 6 considers stability versus change in local capitalisms. Section 7 has conclusions for theory and politics.

3. Local economy, social life and culture

The specificity of local socio-economy vis a vis the national is that most people's repeated daily journeys for their self-reproduction - going to work or school, accessing consumer and welfare services, seeing friends – take place within the locality. The corollary is that workplaces draw most of their labour power from their locality. This produces strong mutual determination between the area's economy, its labour force, its residents, and its locally-supplied consumer goods and services (Figure 1). The local economy creates a stock of jobs of particular qualities - skill, labour process, security, weekly hours, times of day, wages and conditions; these then define the incomes and the culture of workers and local retirees and, in mediated ways, their households. These are usually the largest group among residents; local residents may also include people who draw their income from outside the area, particularly retirees and the non-working rich. The incomes and cultures of residents then largely determine the housing stock (cumulatively over decades) and consumer and welfare services and local transport facilities (in the medium term). Reciprocally, the qualities of housing, transport and welfare services affect the qualities of local labour power. The diverse stock of labour power, reproduced over time within the locality but also through in- and out-migration, then influences the type, quality and profitability of production. In the medium term this affects capitalist investment in and disinvestment from the locality. Within a locality, then, employment, labour force, built environment and services for people are mutually determining and tendentially coherent with other. Harvey (1989 Ch.5) has termed this ensemble the 'structured coherence' of the locality; Cox (1998) refers to it as 'local dependencies', while Gough (2001) has termed it the 'local socio-economic nexus'. This type of coherence is specific to the local scale.

[Figure 1 in here]

We can extend this nexus to include 'local culture', in Raymond Williams's senses of a way of life and a structure of feeling. 'Way of life' is a totality of social and economic life; and its social relations construct and rest on consciousness, 'structures of feeling'. Human geographers have analysed 'local cultures'; while these are obviously internally differentiated, in particular by class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age, they can also be locally specific (Jackson 1989; Hetherington and Robinson 1988).

We can therefore already conclude that scale makes a difference to the form of socio-economic-cultural coherence within a territory. There are, then, local capitalisms.

Switching our focus from 'vertical' to 'horizontal' difference, how may local socio-economic nexuses differ from each other? Difference in the local economy is the starting point, because

change is fundamental and intrinsic to capitalist production but not to the sphere of reproduction (section 2), and because production varies more sharply over space (section 6). However, locally-supplied services and goods are determined by the consumption of local residents and businesses, and therefore are not prime movers of difference. Rather, it is sectors which sell their goods and services outside the locality, 'local-export sectors' (manufacturing, some business services, some leisure services sold to outside consumers) which are the drivers of local economic difference.

Now, at this level of abstraction it is possible for all localities to have the same mix of local-export sectors. Differentiation between them arises to the extent that particular sectors of production derive profitability advantages from local agglomeration, so that the local-export part of one or more localities then becomes rich in that sector. These sectoral-agglomeration advantages have been extensively researched, starting with Marshall's account of the industrial district, enthusiastically rediscovered by Piore and Sabel (1984), and then written up in the now-massive 'new regionalism' literature (surveyed in Cumbers and MacKinnon 2006). Local agglomeration advantages can include linkages between workplaces and firms in the sector (goods and services, knowledge), financial capital or merchant capital with local connections and knowledge, sectorally-specific collective facilities and infrastructures for firms (for technologies, marketing, training), sectorally specific technical and business knowledge and habits, appropriate communication infrastructures, and local labour forces with appropriate skills, work habits or job expectations. These links are not based only on short-term prices and contracting, but often involve considerations of quality, rest on non-market relations, and are long term. However, while the new regionalists often imply that these agglomeration economies apply to most local-export sectors in the contemporary world (Storper 1991), there are in fact many sectors and part-processes where they are weak or non-existent; workplaces in the latter sectors are therefore weakly linked in to their local economies and can be easily relocated. Finally, sectoral embedding can derive from local physical geography: mining, agriculture, some tourism and retirement locales. Note, however, that the physical geography is a necessary but (economically) not sufficient tie of such industry to the locality.

On this basis one may specify three ideal-types of local economy: those specialised by product type (the usual use of the term 'industrial sector'); those specialised by production and labour process (for example bulk raw material processing in ports, or software writing); and localities without either of these types of specialisation, which then tend to specialise in routine, deskilled tasks, the use of cheap numerically-flexible labour, and branch plants with weak local linkages. The spatial division of labour between localities, particularly the first two types, is a product of long term historical development. Product and process specialisations draw on qualitatively-differentiated labour power and physical resources which are embedded in the locality; these economies therefore have considerable inertia and durability (Gough 2004a Ch.2). Some local economic specialisms have therefore existed for centuries: banking in London, iron and steel in Sheffield. Nevertheless, the inter-local division of labour is ever-changing, for reasons I consider in section 6.

The consequent specificity of some localities with respect to sector or production process then feeds through to specificity of the social and cultural realms, through mediations discussed earlier in this section.

4. The local state

Local and regional governments are always ultimately subordinate to the national state; their powers are given and can be taken away by national government. This subordination is inherent in the nature of the nation state as sovereign within its territory; if a local government could give itself the powers of a nation state, it would have seceded. Moreover, certain of the powers of nation states are hardly ever devolved to local governments: control of a currency (though local currencies have been formed for limited periods); aggregate fiscal balance; and military forces (though police and paramilitaries may substantially come under local government control). These powers are core to the internal and external coherence of the nation state. However, this leaves many powers potentially to be devolved: industrial policy, regulation of waged labour, provision and governance of welfare services, transport and communications infrastructures, utilities, housing provision and regulation, transfer incomes, and the management of the unemployed.

With whatever powers are for the moment devolved to them, local governments act according to pressures from the contradictions of the local economic-social-cultural nexus (Gough 1996; 2002). Contradictions within local economies – failing competitiveness and consequent devalorisations, over-accumulation and local inflation, disproportionality between privately-controlled sectors, and imbalances between the latter and social and physical infrastructures – may elicit responses from the local state. The latter may also respond to failure of private households, housing and services to meet socially-acceptable norms of reproduction of people or local capital's demands for labour power. Contradictions within the local social-economic nexus are played out through the conscious actions of, and conflicts between, parts of locally-operating capital and sections of local residents, acting through and in the local state.

The actions of the local state are not determined only by these pressures and social conflicts but also by contradictions proper to all capitalist states. States, because they are not capital, have to operate through relations with individual capitals; but at the same time their logic is to attempt to deal with the social and economic contradictions in a holistic way, to act 'for the locality as a whole'. This produces chronic instabilities and failures in local governments. A local state may get effectively high-jacked by particular local capitals; but this produces manifest failures and fiscal disasters. A further fundamental contradiction is that between effective state intervention and over-politicisation (Offe 1984; Meszaros 1995; Jones 1999). Pressures to address economic and social failures may lead the local state to very strong forms of intervention, such as taking sectors, infrastructures or services into public ownership, or regulating them forcefully, or intervening strongly into housing provision, social life or parenting. While such interventions have a holistic logic, they require the state to face down private interests, whether business or social groups; but this can lead to sharp

conflicts. Moreover, strong state intervention tends to strip away market ideology, to reveal the actually social nature of society; it tends to create a snow-balling of demands for further state action. In the face of this politicisation, and the growing fiscal tensions it typically involves, the local state may retreat; but this renders it ineffective in dealing with the original economic and social problems.

National 'systems of local government' – their taxation and spending, regulatory and ownership powers – are highly varied between countries. This is due in part to the hugely varied historical evolutions of national capitalisms. In part, it reflects differences in the extent of spatially uneven development within each country (Duncan and Goodwin 1988). Regional differences in language and culture can also play a role here. Rather less obvious is that the division of powers between national and local states is also constructed by the logics of, and contradictions in, the actions of local government outlined above: over time these tend to respectively increase or diminish the powers of local government.

The powers and autonomy of the local state affect its role in the formation (in the long term) of a local capitalism, and (in the short term) its ability to intervene into local problems. But neither the degree nor the type of intervention by local government is uniform across a country, due to the latter's embedding in local society. Variations in local government action across a country are also constructed by contradictions in particular fields of policy. Local economic and employment strategies, for example, have to negotiate the ubiquitous and chronic tensions in fixity and/versus mobility of capital, cooperative and/versus disciplinary industrial relations, and quality and/versus cost of production (Eisenschitz and Gough 1998; see further sections 5 and 6 below). These tensions lead to a differences of strategy, ranging from a Keynesian pursuit of local networking, cooperative industrial relations, and high use of skill and knowledge, to a neoliberal strategy based on mobility of capital, disciplinary class relations, and cost competition. The extremes of this spectrum resemble respectively the 'coordinated' and the 'liberal market economy' of Hall and Soskice; but note that the underlying contradictions mean that there are many possible hybrids and that local strategies can change rapidly (section 6).

Finally, policies of the nation state which are ostensibly uniform across the country often have effects which vary between localities (Jones, 1999). This is because these policies act in and through locally-specific economic-social nexuses. Thus national welfare-to-work policies in Britain have completely different effects in localities depending on their level of unemployment (Martin, Nativel and Sunley 2003). Locally-differentiated state interventions thus include many national state policies.

5. Local class, gender and racial relations and struggles

The political point of investigating local capitalisms is, in my view, to understand their social relations of power – class, gender and racism in particular – and how to struggle against them. In contrast, these appear in institutional and new-regionalist analyses at best as

'disadvantage'. In this section I first consider systematic difference in these social relations between localities, and then consider the specificity of the local scale for relations of power.

Section 3 suggests that relations of power may be differentiated between localities in the first place by the use of labour power by local employers. Particular capital-labour relations within and across a locality tend to be found where a particular industry or type of production dominates the local-export sector. The labour force so constructed then leads a specific kind of social-residential life, and this often reinforces the class, gender or ethnic relations arising in production (Gough and Eisenschitz 2006: 131-5).

The kind of locally-specific gender relations which can arise in this way have been explored by McDowell and Massey (1984). They examine four localities in England which in the 19C were dominated by a particular sector. They show how the contrasted gendering of the workforce constructed gender relations in the home, and how the latter reinforced and perpetuated the former. The result was dominant local cultures which sharply distinguished the roles, capacities and 'character' of women and men. These localities may then be said to have distinct 'gender regimes', key components of the local capitalism.

Localities may also have specific inter-ethnic relations. These are usually rooted in important local sectors; the inter-ethnic division of labour may be between sectors or within a sector. The ethnic make-up of a sector's labour force may be a function of its specific sectoral dynamics (for example, sharp international cost-competition in the clothing industry), or it may arise from conditions in the local labour market (employment of Afro-Caribbeans in London public transport). The competitiveness of sectors employing minority-ethnic workers is often strongly dependent on their labour market segregation and associated racism amongst workers. Antagonisms between ethnicities, and majority and minority ethnic cultures, are typically reinforced by residential segregations.

A locality may also be distinguished by a particular pattern of industrial relations, arising from a long-term dominant sector or sectors. These relations derive from a combination of workplace labour process (skills, division of labour, worker autonomy); the employment contract (conditions, wages, security); social divisions of labour (gender, ethnicity, age) (Peck 1996); and the sphere of reproduction (households, welfare services) (Gough, 2004: 30-39). Jonas (1996) has characterised these as 'local labour control regimes'. They are expressed in expectations and attitudes of both workers and local managements; they may be embedded in local trade unions, and in political parties of both left and right (Herod 1991; Wills 1998; Castree et al. 2004: 140-150). Capital-labour relations may be cooperative, disciplinary, distant, or a melding of these. Thus Teesside, dominated by chemical production, long had effective company paternalism, extending into the reproduction sphere, which elicited strong worker cooperation (Beynon et al. 1989). South-central England has a certain white-collar work culture: individualised work management and employment contracts, flexible and often long hours, dedication to the work but not to the employer (Allen, Massey and Cochrane 1997). Large localities may contain two or more distinctive cultures of work, corresponding to types of sector and segmentation of the labour force; thus

Gough (2004a: 75-89) found five longstanding class cultures in manufacturing in London. Distinctive capital-labour relations, then, are a key moment in local capitalisms.

The local scale can reinforce these various power relations, but also facilitate resistance to them (Gough and Eisenschitz 2010). The power of capital is reinforced by the very high degree of mobility of money capital, production, and trade between localities, greater than between countries. This helps capital to exert pressure on workers and the local state, and thus to create localist 'partnerships' in which the latter are subordinated (Peet 1983). On the other hand, at the local scale popular collective organisation requires less time, energy and money than organising at higher scales; and it can draw on friendship networks, knowledge of and trust in others. Connections across the 'home - work' divide can be more easily seen and acted on locally. The realisation of these contrasted possibilities, then, depends on how social actors use the local scale.

Because power and resistance use scales, a shift of governance between scales may alter relations of power. Cases in point are the downward scalings of state industrial, employment and welfare policies in many west European states since the 1980s. Gough (2002; 2004b) argues that this rescaling has enabled state policies desired by capital to avoid the politicisation which attended such policies in earlier decades, through appeal to local class solidarity.

6. Stability and disruption of local capitalisms

Sections 3 to 5 focused on the anatomy, social relations and coherence of localities. But local capitalisms and their differences are never static. Change comes from dialectics of 'internal' and 'external' dynamics, not merely from external shocks as in Hall and Soskice's methodology (Gough 2004a: 42-9, 272-80). Within a locality, capital accumulation can be disrupted directly by challenges by the oppressed, so that local capital may then shift elsewhere, and the locality be boycotted by new investment. This challenge may come from organised workers (Massey and Meegan 1978; Peet 1983), by changes in gender relations (McDowell and Massey 1984), or by struggles by oppressed ethnicities (the last fifty years in the US). Moreover, over-accumulation within a locality may lead to steep local inflation, labour power shortages, congestion and pollution, causing investment shifts. Technological change in processes or products in important local-export sectors may cause a realignment of their economic geography.

Externally, the locality may be out-competed by lower cost production or more malleable labour elsewhere (the 'low road'), or by higher quality accumulation in other localities (the 'high road') (Storper and Walker 1989). New investment in strongly growing sectors is sometimes attracted to existing major cities and city-regions, on the basis of good generic inputs, thus reinforcing existing inter-local patterns (Cooke 1995). But new sectors, or parts of them, may locate in places which have previously had declining or little accumulation. Such localities may be attractive for some investments because of abundant supply of labour power, or cheap property. In this way, new waves of trans-local investment in old and,

especially, new sectors change the sectoral mix of each locality and thus its class, gender and ethnic relations. Each 'archaeological layer' of sectors and social relations in a locality is related to the earlier layers, as similarity or as contrast (Massey 1984).

Differences between local capitalisms, then, are constantly being reshaped. The very designation of each locality, its boundaries, may change (on 'London' see Gough 2004a: 98-101). The distinctiveness of localities may in some periods be accentuated, in other periods fade (Dunford 1994). This is so for both qualitative differences (sectors, technologies, social relations, cultures) and quantitative differences (growth in output and employment, investment, prices and costs). Strong accumulation in a locality may reinforce itself or undermine itself through inflation and congestion. A declining locality may suffer a downward spiral, or it may provide good conditions for new investment. Neil Smith (1984) discusses how the quantitative differences lying in value relations result in flows and counter-flows of investment, alternately increasing and diminishing (quantitative) differences between territories. My discussion of the geography of qualitative differences shows that these, too, are subject to contrary motions of increasing difference and sameness.

7. Conclusions

I have shown that local capitalisms have certain specificities which mark them out from national capitalisms: the scale of capitalism affects how it works. One cannot, then, simply read off local capitalism from the national capitalism of which it is a part. The social structures of local capitalism are therefore important both theoretically and politically.

I have also shown that these social structures may differ radically between localities within the same country, and a fortiori in different countries. One can therefore fruitfully compare local capitalisms.

These conclusions depend on the particular theory of 'capitalism' which I have used, based in geographical, dialectical Marxism. This chapter shows that this methodology can enable a robust theorisation of capitalist locality. It can also fruitfully be applied to national capitalisms, mutatis mutandis. The distinctive elements of my approach to CC are:-

(i) Each territorial capitalism needs to be considered geographically, in two dimensions: its relation to lower-scale and higher-scale capitalisms; and its relations to territorial capitalisms of the same scale, including divisions of labour and flows of capital and labour. Thus purely national (or local) analyses are theoretically untenable.

(ii) CC literature has operated largely separately from comparisons of national sociologies and cultures, mirroring the bourgeois separation of academic 'disciplines'. But socialist-feminism shows that social life forms an essential part of 'capitalism'. Economy, social life and culture-as-way-of-life mutually construct each other, within both national and local scales.

(iii) In most of the CC literature, the state is pictured as a distinct, pre-given institution which relates externally to economy and civil society. State policies can then be considered normatively as 'the designer of capitalisms', following the author's politics. In contrast, I have pictured the state as arising out of the economy-social life nexus, and expressing its tensions. One is then able to theorise the powers and actions of the state, their scales, and their limitations.

(iv) Many structures of capitalism are inherently contradictory. An important implication for CC is that the development of difference between territorial capitalisms reflects not only historical-geographical complexity but also dilemmas and tensions arising from contradictions. These show analytically the commonalities underlying difference, and politically the common situation of workers in different territories (Gough 2004a Ch.13).

(v) A further implication of contradiction is that change in territorial capitalisms reflects not only exogenous factors such as technical innovation, nor simply external economic competition, but also disruption by necessary tensions. I explored the contradictions between spatial fixity and mobility, plus various 'non-spatial' contradictions. Such analysis can show how territorial capitalisms change not simply through historical contingency but also through necessary processes.

(vi) Finally, economic, social, cultural and political structures at both national and local scales are also relations of class, gender and 'race'. The contradictions of territorial capitalisms give the possibilities for contesting these forms of power. For those whose politics centres on opposing oppression and struggling for liberation, these relations should be the beginning and end of the study of CC.

Figure 1: The local socio-economic nexus

Housing, consumer services, welfare services, local transport

⇔

Residents

Sub-set: employees, self employed, business owners

⇔

Local economy

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