



Critical Review

The production of capitalist “smooth” space in global port operations

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ABSTRACT

New developments in a post-Fordist economic environment have changed the source of port competitiveness from economies of scale based on basic production factors (capital, land, labour) to economies of scope based on advanced production (service) factors. The institutional setting in which ports are now embedded requires methods of analysis that go beyond those traditionally applied in transport geography, but port geography research has not embraced critical, radical or relational geographies. Thus, questions relating to the new conceptions of space and networks created through the corporatisation of the industry remain unanswered.

This paper examines prevailing conceptualisations of space in port geography and elaborates the case for a smooth space conceptualisation. In doing so, it draws on two theoretical traditions of the spatial impacts of capital accumulation, beginning with Marx and Harvey to demonstrate how ports represent an exemplar of the inherently unstable “spatial fix” of mobile capital, then turning to the concept of “smooth space” introduced by Deleuze and Guattari.

Using these concepts, the paper reflects on the production of capitalist smooth space in the global port operations sector, in which a handful of multinational corporations manage portfolios of major ports across the globe. The result is an inherent contradiction between a port’s embeddedness in its local setting and regional hinterland and the expanding global corporatocracy driving its operational strategy. This paper argues, therefore, that port devolution and development cannot be understood in the absence of a critique of their capitalist context.

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1. Introduction

“One major difficulty lies in the fact that the integration of phenomena which we must study in areas is an integration of a large number of independent, or semi-independent factors. Consequently, we seldom have to do with simple relationships. ... Theoretically we might follow the logic of the systematic sciences by assuming that all other conditions remain the same. ... Even if we knew the theoretical principles governing the relation of each individual factor to the total result. ... the sum total of all relationships. ... would be far too complicated for us to be able to use. This is a general difficulty that applies not only to all the more complicated aspects of the social sciences, but also to many phenomena in the natural sciences.”

[Hartshorne, 1939; p. 203]

Port¹ geography needs a new narrative, one that emphasizes the spatial politics of port development and the capitalist production of space. New developments in a post-Fordist economic environment have changed the source of port competitiveness from economies of scale based on basic production factors (capital, land, labour), to economies of scope based on advanced production (service) factors (Sánchez and Wilmsmeier, 2011). The nature of the required services is changing from standard services with long life cycles to differentiated service requirements which tend to have short life-cycles. These economic factors are reflected in the trend towards port devolution that, first, moved port operations from the public into the private sector and second, transferred responsibilities from central government to more decentralised regional and local entities. This opened up new development opportunities for international

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E-mail addresses: gordon.wilmsmeier@hs-bremen.de (G. Wilmsmeier), j.monios@napier.ac.uk (J. Monios).¹ The focus of this paper is on container ports and terminals. The findings may be transferred partially to other types of ports and terminals, but will require further investigation.

terminal operators and favoured processes of merger and acquisition that resulted in a handful of multinational corporations operating large portfolios of port terminals across the globe.

The institutional setting in which ports are now embedded requires methods of analysis that go beyond those traditionally applied in transport geography, but port geography has not embraced critical, radical or relational geographies. Relational approaches have been widely used in human geography (e.g. Smith, 1995; Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005; Allen and Cochrane, 2007), particularly, as will be discussed in section five, to explore the interplay between territorial and relational approaches in the construction of spatial scales (e.g. Jessop, 1990; Swyngedouw, 1992; Brenner, 1999). Economic geographers have engaged both positively and negatively with the relational “turn” (e.g. Bathelt and Glückler, 2003; Yeung, 2005; Sunley, 2008); according to Bathelt and Glückler (2003) these developments have allowed a more contextual and contingent understanding of the economic influences on the construction of space than was generally the case in traditional regional science. Transport geography has traditionally had less engagement with the social production of space (Hanson, 2000; Keeling, 2007; Shaw and Sidaway, 2010), nowhere more evident than in port geography, which may be characterised as suffering from what Smith (2005) sees as the co-opting of geographers by the dominant neoliberal narrative (see section two).

The general trend of port geography research in recent decades has been away from traditional geographical approaches and towards more applied and operational perspectives (Ng et al., 2014). Perhaps as a consequence of this trend, analysis of the significant concentration of ownership and operations of ports and shipping lines has, besides a few exceptions (e.g. Wilmsmeier and Sánchez, 2011), tended to accept this concentration as a fait accompli and address only the operational impacts. In the absence of a theoretical underpinning, such approaches ignore the evidence of a capitalist trend towards oligopoly and the inevitable accumulation crisis that leads to value destruction in one space and recreation in another.

Thus, questions relating to the new conceptions of space and networks created through the corporatisation of the sector remain unanswered. Transport “is not just about modes and movement but also about politics, money, people and power, and there is a need for transport geography to be a more human geography” (Shaw and Sidaway, 2010; p.515). This is particularly the case for transport nodes such as ports, which can be viewed as exemplars of the inherently unstable spatial fix of mobile capital (Monios and Wilmsmeier, 2012). It is the contention of this paper that ports, therefore, cannot be understood in the absence of a critique of their capitalist context.

The goal of this paper is to outline the key aspects of this critique, as a first step in demarcating the transdisciplinary ideas necessary for understanding and theorizing current developments in port geography. The first part of the argument is centred on the work of David Harvey, whose development of the concept of the spatial fix (Harvey, 1981, 1982) provided the spatial dimension to Marx’s theories of capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 1975). The paper takes the spatial fix forward into the political dimension via Brenner’s (1998) scalar fix, before exploring the nuances at the heart of the social production of space via the smooth space conceptualisation of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Viewing the capitalist context of global port operations as a deterritorialised smooth space allows an appreciation of the relational construction of power and place, thus providing the tools of analysis currently absent from port geography.

The following section discusses the prevailing conceptions of space in port geography and the need for a new approach. Section three introduces ports as temporary fixes of mobile capital based on uneven development, value destruction, migration and

recreation, before expanding this view in relation to the system of nodes and networks characterising port geography. Sections five and six show how the consolidation and concentration of ownership and operation in the port and shipping sectors represent the production of a capitalist smooth space annihilating local and regional characteristics through global strategy replication and a market characterised by oligopolistic behaviour, which is nonetheless precarious and prone to crisis. Section seven concludes by identifying topics for future research.

2. Prevailing conceptualisations of space in port geography

Studies of the geography of port system evolution were traditionally characterised by a spatial analysis of port expansion and the diversification of berthing and handling facilities (Bird, 1963; Taaffe et al., 1963; Rimmer, 1967; Hoyle, 1968; Hayuth, 1981; Barke, 1986; Van Klink, 1998). Indeed, some of the early works of transport geography were contributed by geographers working in the port sector. More recently, the complexity and diversity of modern port operations has been addressed through analyses of port competition through hinterland accessibility (such as the concept of port regionalization – Notteboom and Rodrigue, 2005; Monios and Wilmsmeier, 2013) and the competition in the maritime foreland, focusing on intermediate transshipment hubs and the structure of maritime services (Sánchez and Wilmsmeier, 2006; Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2010). In particular, the influence of liner service concentration on port systems has been an important topic (e.g. Frémont and Soppé, 2007; Lee et al., 2008; Wilmsmeier and Sánchez, 2011; Wang and Ducruet, 2012).

Port system concentration eventually reaches its limits (Barke, 1986; Hayuth, 1981), leading to a process of deconcentration (Slack and Wang, 2002; Notteboom, 2005; Frémont and Soppé, 2007; Ducruet et al., 2009). Wilmsmeier and Monios (2013) argued that existing theory falls short of differentiating between deconcentration that emerges upon failure of a system in a reactive manner, deconcentration that materializes from proactive port development strategies, and deconcentration that emerges from new economic and industrial development. Moreover, unlike previously dominant ports, the emergence and location of secondary ports (e.g. Wang and Ng, 2011, in China; Wilmsmeier and Monios, 2013, in the UK; Wilmsmeier et al., 2014, in Latin America) has not been explained satisfactorily by natural location advantages, suggesting that such developments are driven to a large degree by other factors, such as the planning and regulatory regimes in each country. It is recognised that to some extent these factors will be unique to each port system; nevertheless, economic development in a port’s hinterland, port devolution strategies, the introduction of the private sector to port operations, the competitive relation between private operators, the interrelationship between private and public actors and a changing regulatory environment have been hypothesised to be key factors (Wilmsmeier et al., 2014).

Despite a recent growth in the institutional analysis of ports (Ng and Pallis, 2010; Jacobs and Notteboom, 2011; Notteboom et al., 2013; Wilmsmeier and Monios, in press), missing from previous analyses has been a critique of the role of the dominant neo-liberal narrative. This criticism has been directed at geography more widely (Smith, 2005), but can certainly be seen in transport geography and even more so in port geography, being as it is a domain par excellence of globalisation and neoliberalism. This is partly a result of the fact that earlier spatial models that still influence port geography today did not capture the inherent instability and the mismatch between state forms, material mobility and capital flows. Thus Doel’s (1999, 2000) “pointillist” critique of geography as overly focused on cartographic representations, leading to a superficial account that tends to the descriptive and misses key

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