



Geographies of production III: knowledge, cultural economies and work (revisited)

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Abstract: The economic geographical literature continues to display a strong continuity of emergent themes. Assessments of knowledge, learning and innovation as well as cultural industries and the cultural economy have continued to attract significant attention. There also has been ongoing interest in work and employment dynamics, with a particular emphasis on the complex ‘intersectionality’ of subjects positioned by class as well as gender, race and other dimensions of identity. The paper concludes with a brief assessment of future directions which the study of geographies of production might take.

Key words: cultural economy, gender, intersectionality, knowledge, networks.

I Introduction

In surveying the literature for my third and final report on geographies of production, it is striking again to find such a strong continuity of emergent themes, rather than any significant shifts in the substance of debate. One of the topics addressed in my first report – global production networks – continues to attract considerable interest, having been the recent focus of a *Journal of Economic Geography* special issue (Coe *et al.*, 2008a; 2008b; Sturgeon *et al.*, 2008; Nadvi, 2008; Hughes *et al.*, 2008; Cumbers *et al.*, 2008; Bridge, 2008; Hudson, 2008; see also Rutherford and Holmes, 2008; Birch, 2008). Below, I first revisit assessments of knowledge, learning and innovation – whether within clusters or networks – which remain prevalent within the economic geographical literature.

Cultural industries and the cultural economy similarly have continued to attract significant attention, not least, perhaps, because of their characterization as ‘knowledge-intensive’ and ‘innovative’ activities. Finally, there also has been continued interest in work and employment dynamics.

Having identified such recurrent foci, the report also seeks to foreground work that falls within each of these broad categories yet at the same time takes themes in a number of thought-provoking new directions. Discussions of knowledge, innovation and learning in networks are significantly advanced, for example, by attention to an acutely understudied aspect: the gendered geographies of networks, learning and trust. Work on cultural industries and the cultural economy have begun to move beyond

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assessments of clustering and agglomeration to provide more detailed insights into the operation and evolution of creative fields or milieux. Employment and labour market geographies have begun to be invigorated by studies which move beyond the confines of the workplace, 'to contest definitions of work, to repeatedly and insistently connect work to lives beyond work and to see workers as parents, partners, consumers, activists and much more besides' (Stenning, 2008: 11).

Beyond the topics addressed below, it is also perhaps helpful to signpost economic geography's continuing interest in the broader conceptual form and character of the subdiscipline. Boshma and Martin, for example, advocate evolutionary approaches as a constructive means of understanding the ways in which economic landscapes – of production, distribution and consumption – are transformed over time (2007: 539; see also Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008; Sunley, 2008). Lee *et al.* (2008) see 'a post-disciplinary imagination' as a key means of advancing understandings of economic geographical worlds. In making a case for engagement with the 'varieties of capitalism' literature, Peck and Theodore admonish economic geographers for focusing upon 'meso-analytic questions' at the expense of 'macro-institutional and system-centric analysis' (Peck and Theodore, 2007: 733). They suggest that 'making a difference in these debates would mean going considerably beyond the documentation of local economic distinctiveness, adding incrementally to the stock of local case studies, or pointing out occasional exceptions to the "rule" of supposedly national models' and in contrast advocate the development of 'institutional theories of the uneven development of capitalism' (Peck and Theodore, 2007: 764).

II Knowledge, innovation and learning

Among the continued interest in the creation, circulation and transmission of knowledge (see also Hughes, 2007), a number of notable contributions are provided within a

recent *Regional Studies* special issue (Rychen and Zimmermann, 2008; Cole, 2008; Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008; Lazaric *et al.*, 2008; Steiner and Ploder, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Torre, 2008). A particularly pertinent point of departure is provided by accounts which stress that 'temporary proximity' of actors forms an important component of knowledge transfer: Torre (2008), for example, suggests that geographical proximity may be vital only at certain stages in the production or innovation process. Temporary proximity may be achieved through collaboration at 'ordinary' – that is, routine – meetings between people at head or regional offices or, alternatively, at industry-wide conferences or trade fairs (Torre, 2008: 881). Cole (2008; cf. Watson, 2008) similarly emphasizes that social proximity can be achieved through distanced working in his exploration of the vitality of spatially dispersed project ecologies within the European animation industry.

Seeking further to develop arguments concerning the role of 'temporary clusters' in the global economy, Bathelt and Schuldt (2008) provide a detailed investigation of the role of international trade fairs within the lighting and meat products industries. Interestingly, although they position their Frankfurt-sited case study fairs as 'international flagship' events, Bathelt and Schuldt's analysis is restricted to firms located within western industrial economies and explicitly excludes a consideration of Chinese and Taiwanese participants (2008: 857, footnote 5). This omission is explained as an effect of the intention not 'to analyse the effects of low cost competition' and it is mentioned that Chinese firms attending the Frankfurt fairs were engaged in illegal copying through the photography of 'creative, trendy and innovative products' (p. 865). Such a suggestion appears to reproduce a tendency within both academic and popular literatures to construct a dualism between western 'knowledge flows' and 'Asian' 'copying' of ideas. However, it should perhaps be

acknowledged that the global diffusion of innovation and design trends cannot be so straightforwardly categorized. Conceptualizations of global knowledge flows may deserve much more careful attention in the light of cultural constructions of 'imitation' or 'copying'. In the late-twentieth-century Canadian furniture industry, for example, copying of styles was treated as a simple joke: manufacturers were reported to employ 'the designer, Mr. Polaroid' (*Macleans*, 1991: 41, cited in Reimer and Leslie, 2008: 160).

A second set of arguments surrounding knowledge circulation involves the suggestion that key gatekeepers play an important role in driving and potentially even inhibiting processes of knowledge diffusion among co-located firms (Morrison, 2008; Lazaric *et al.*, 2008). Morrison (2008: 818), for example, foregrounds 'the specific mechanisms and actors through which learning and knowledge diffusion occurs', explicitly seeking to provide a more detailed assessment than existing generalizations of knowledge flows. Drawing upon research within the Murge 'sofa district' located across parts of the Italian regions of Puglia and Basilicata, he emphasizes that 'informal contacts are far less pervasive than suggested by conventional approaches to industrial districts' (p. 818). Crucially, knowledge circulation in Murge is significantly shaped and directed by lead firms, or 'gatekeepers of knowledge', who 'carefully and purposefully screen the external environment for information sources and new ideas' (p. 826). Limited informal contact and information-sharing with other firms is in part related to concerns expressed by gatekeepers such as the global sofa manufacturer Natuzzi about 'leakages of firm-specific knowledge' (p. 828).

One substantial absence within writing on networks, innovation and knowledge flows has only just begun to be addressed. Despite decades of feminist geographical work, literature on learning and innovation 'has for the most part failed to offer any engagement with the gendered nature of

the social relations by which firms are linked together' (James, 2008: 178). As Hanson and Blake (2009: 137) have suggested, in considerations of the networks of individuals, 'that individual has been generic'. Thus, although two key aspects of networks – trust and legitimacy – 'are closely intertwined with gender and other dimensions of social identity' (p. 138), the vast majority of discussions fail to register gendered power dynamics in networks. Being aware of the existence of gender divisions has particular implications for the study of geographies of entrepreneurship: 'expectations about what entrepreneurial activities are appropriate or inappropriate for women (or for men) saturate the entrepreneurial networks in a place and help to create very different opportunity structures for women versus men' (p. 144). Ultimately, Hanson and Blake suggest that researchers should carefully consider 'how networks are embedded in larger cultural discourses and structures and at how networks actually work within these structures' (p. 146).

III Cultural industries and cultural economies

In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Economic Geography* on 'Geography and the cultural economy', Lorenzen *et al.* (2008: 589) argue that geographers have been 'very much at the vanguard' of efforts to understand the emergence of the 'cognitive-cultural economy' (Scott, 2007) as a distinctive new form of capitalism. The distinctive roles and dynamics of cultural industries certainly have continued to preoccupy analysts, with new work beginning to probe potential differences between cultural and manufacturing industries (Wenting, 2008), to distinguish between diverse types of creative and cultural industries (Sunley *et al.*, 2008), and to interrogate the role of public policy in attempting to create 'cultural districts' (Mizzau and Montanari, 2008).

Wenting's (2008) consideration of the evolution of the fashion industry over almost 150 years brings cultural industry

debates together with considerations of firm creation, expansion and spin-off. He suggests that cultural industries provide a particularly interesting laboratory in which to test conceptualizations of firm routines, start-ups and spin-offs, precisely because of the sharp contrast between routinized and creative practices in industries with 'rapidly changing markets and short life cycles' (p. 594). An analysis of firm-level data relating to the activities of 565 fashion designers reveals that spin-offs are more successful (they have a longer period of survival) than other types of start-up. Wenting (p. 609) also concludes that while the oft-cited 'local creative "milieu" might be attractive to entrepreneurs' the success of new firms rests ultimately upon the pre-entry experiences of founding designers. While spin-offs might be drawn to existing 'clusters' of fashion activity, clustering 'does not necessarily improve their performance. Spin-offs are more likely to remain in clusters due to specific reasons surrounding their founding, rather than to agglomeration economies' (p. 608).

Assessments of the success of cultural industry firms are also at the forefront of Bathelt and Gräf's (2008) consideration of the Munich film and television industry – albeit that they define the notion of 'success' somewhat differently. While for Wenting (2008) firms' histories of survival are an indication of success, Bathelt and Gräf (2008) are more concerned with the future growth prospects of a larger cluster of film and television firms. Bathelt and Gräf (2008: 1962) argue that although Munich-based firms have historically formed a clearly identifiable 'national hub' future growth prospects for the industry are jeopardized by weak connections to 'external markets and international finance'. Interestingly, the fragility of external linkages is seen to derive in part from disconnections at a more local, or internal level. Thus value chains are highly segmented (by media type, format and broadcasting group) while communication patterns are geographically fragmented within Munich itself (Bathelt and Gräf, 2008).

If it is less than straightforward to define and understand the 'success' of cultural clusters (Vang and Chaminade, 2007; Porter and Barber, 2007), it is perhaps not surprising that evaluations of the effectiveness of public policy measures have remained relatively underdeveloped. Mizzau and Montanari (2008) argue that existing literature has tended to be preoccupied with a consideration of differences between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' policy approaches, without understanding in sufficient detail the exact mechanisms at work in different types of approach. Through an investigation of the music district of the Italian region of Piedmont, Mizzau and Montanari (2008: 656) emphasize that cultural development policies operate most effectively when they seek to connect with local cultural milieux 'that both local and external audiences perceive as authentic.' In particular, authenticity must be cultivated from existing 'germinal elements' within a region, rather than attempting to promote cultural activities 'from scratch' (p. 667). That is, local policy must have strong foundations within 'local geographic, social or cultural context[s]' (p. 668).

IV Work and employment

In the introduction to a recent symposium (*Antipode*, 2008), Stenning calls attention to new work which has begun to extend beyond interests such as 'material and labour market position' to address 'symbolic values and cultural practice' within and beyond employment (p. 10). A particularly creative approach to work cultures, social relations and spaces of production is provided by Sweeney and Holmes' (2008) account of the tree-planting industry in northern Ontario, Canada, which utilizes the notion of communities of practice to understand learning routines and knowledge transfer within a seasonal, spatially dispersed and high-turnover industry.

Conceptually, studies of work and employment increasingly have sought to grapple with the complex 'intersectionality' of subjects positioned by class as well as gender, race

and other dimensions of identity (McDowell, 2008a; see also 2008b). Although, McDowell notes, feminist scholars have long ‘expressed a commitment to studying gender, class and race together, “it was easier to make the pledge than to carry it out in a thorough way”’ (Acker, 2000: 193, cited in McDowell, 2008b: 21). Drawing upon McCall (2005), McDowell (2008a) distinguishes between *anti-*, *inter-* and *intra-*categorical approaches. The first of these wholeheartedly rejects ‘modern analytical categories, assuming identities are constructed solely through discourse and practice’ (McDowell, 2008a: 492). The second approach accepts existing categories but seeks to consider understudied points of intersection; while the third (*intra-*categorical – a ‘middle’ approach) involves a stronger critique of boundaries between categories themselves.

The entwined relationships which shape workers’ lives are pursued in a number of recent studies. Wills (2008) considers the involvement of London cleaners in new trade union and community-based campaigns seeking to achieve a living wage and improved terms and conditions for subcontract workers in the capital. For many workers, class and ethnic identities came together in political action: ‘joining a union and supporting the living wage campaign was a means to resist racism and marginalization as well as challenge the nature of cleaning itself’ (p. 318). Multiple forms of identification – including class, religion, ‘race’ and community – have acted to strengthen political campaigns for social justice, while also emphasizing the conceptual importance of moving beyond ‘any fixity in the social structure (class is not just about employment relations at the point of production or service)’ (p. 320).

Connections between work and family life are explored in Smith *et al.*’s (2008) examination of the impact of the UK Labour government’s programme of workfare and training. As part of a ‘creeping level of compulsion’ in national policy, lone mothers in receipt of welfare benefit are increasingly

directed towards training courses in childcare provision (p. 239). Rather than enhancing opportunities to obtain higher-paid, higher-status employment, such a situation has ‘reproduced and reinforced gendered inequalities in the labour market’ (p. 243), particularly given the low status and low pay associated with caring work. Ironically too, a number of the women interviewed indicated that their ‘choice’ of childcare work following training was limited by the need for paid employment which ‘fit’ with their own childcare responsibilities. Smith *et al.* emphasize that the promotion of childcare training under the UK government’s New Deal for Lone Parents ultimately acts ‘more to service the needs of dual-earner professional couples and the West London economy than to really tackle the social exclusion being suffered by lone mothers and their families’ (p. 243). Class and gender interleave in this example of growing labour market division – which is clearly buttressed by national state policy.

McDowell’s (2008a) careful review of the related methodological issues raised by the study of complex inequalities within labour markets raises a number of crucial questions. How, for example, might researchers grapple with the fact that at precisely the same time that they seek to destabilize analytical categories, ‘employers, managers and workers themselves continue to produce and reproduce categorical inequalities’ (McDowell, 2008a: 501)? Or, as Hanson and Blake (2008) write:

the ways in which [gendered] ideologies and institutions ... conceive of gender is often in stark binary, essentialized terms. Although women’s identities are conceived as multi-faceted and mutable, in their everyday life interactions women often encounter the starkly simplified gender stereotypes held by others, including other women. (Hanson and Blake, 2009: 137–38)

In considering the types of methodological approaches most pertinent to a study of

intersectionality, McDowell (2008a) highlights the importance of comparative approaches in understanding matrices of power – which might include considerations of particular sites, social or occupational groups and/or time periods, for example. While Peck and Theodore might be wary of a focus upon what they characterize as ‘mesoanalytical and microinstitutional questions’ (2007: 761), McDowell emphasizes the need to illuminate the ways in which ‘structural changes in global capitalism *and* of the lives of embodied workers are both part of a mutually reinforcing project of understanding the complex nature of workplace inequality’ (2008a: 505; emphasis added).

V Future directions?

Casting one’s eye to the future can of course often be problematic – not least given publication timelags – but at the time of writing it appears that emergent shifts across the global economy are likely to provide much with which to preoccupy economic geographers in the coming years. Following a relatively stable period in advanced industrialized economies through the late twentieth century, a whole series of structural changes – including increasing oil prices and other inflationary pressures; growing levels of unemployment; housing market uncertainties and changing consumer credit dynamics – are likely to have significant impacts upon global economic geographies. There are suggestions too of a recent slowing of economic growth in other major economies, such as China (Bradsher, 2008). All of this could well make a focus on (often rapidly growing) high-tech, knowledge-intensive and ‘innovative’ industries seem less pertinent than during times of low inflation and low unemployment in core economies.

Within Anglo-American capitalism in particular, states may come to find it more difficult to camouflage inequalities between those in paid employment and those out of work. Peck and Theodore’s (2008) account of the circulation of African-American

ex-offenders through cycles of prison terms and ‘hypersegmented’ and ‘profoundly inhospitable’ low-wage labour markets provides a telling story of contemporary life in impoverished central Chicago neighbourhoods (2008: 277, 263). As Martin and Kitson (2008) have demonstrated in the UK context, economic growth and expanding wealth in the buoyant Southeast – underpinned by the fortunes of the City of London – has had the direct effect of depressing the growth potential of other regions, such that regional disparities are now wider than they have been for 60 years. In some northern British cities, children leaving school are likely to become the fourth generation to face persistent unemployment (Millie *et al.*, 2005). Given such contexts, it may become imperative for future research to take account of those who stand at the sociospatial margins.

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