

INTRODUCTION: DOSSIER ON FREIGHT TRANSPORT AND LOGISTICS

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CONTEXT

Although globalisation has been a dominant paradigm of contemporary geographical research, it is at the regional and urban levels that its dynamism takes its foremost expression. The enduring growth of movements of goods and the freight distribution networks supporting them are however, widely underrepresented in regional science and geographical research. Freight transportation appears to have been dominantly the focus of geographers dealing with maritime and rail transport since traditionally these were the modes expressing most the scale and scope of freight distribution. More recently, developments in intermodal transportation, logistics, international trade and the emergence of e-commerce have transformed the freight transportation sector. It appears that we are facing a significant paradigm shift in the investigation of transport, commercial and retail geography.

The transport industry itself has become more closely integrated, implying that it may be fallacious to investigate freight transport modes separately. For instance, changes in the maritime container industry have significant impacts on the rail and trucking industry. Many large maritime transport companies, such as Maersk Sealand and Evergreen, now have stakes in other modes through vertical and horizontal integration. The same argument applies for the closer integration between transportation and production. Modern manufacturing strives over an efficient and tightly integrated distribution system where it is increasingly difficult to tell each of its components apart.

These changes received renewed attention from economists, social scientists and geographers, placing the issue of freight distribution as a central concern in economic and transport geography. Many questions arise in understanding the manufacturing and retailing process, the generation of freight traffic, and the rising demand for land to host port and airport terminals or distribution facilities. Thus logistics, which is the overarching research paradigm for these questions, has serious implications for urban and regional development.

With these issues in mind, three special sessions titled 'The Geography of Freight Transportation: Global, Regional and Urban Dimensions' were held during the 99th Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in New Orleans, in March 2003. This special issue contains four of the papers presented. Each paper aims to emphasise a particular spatial or geographical dimension of logistics and especially freight transport. They have different research focus and scale of analysis: In his paper, Hall depicts on the institutional dimension of logistics largely at the global scale, by focusing on the geography of automobile import distribution systems in the United States. The paper by Rodrigue analyses the regional implications of logistics developments in the so-called Bostwash-corridor between Boston/ MA and Washington DC in the United States. Regarding the local level, Hesse focuses on emerging real estate markets that are responding to such logistics forces as the increasing role of brokers and developers for the provision of land, infrastructure and political regulation. Bowen and Leinbach address

the issue, in the Southeast Asian context, of the concentration of air freight among a limited number of forwarders able to provide a full range of logistical services.

THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The topics covered by the papers underline that there is an increasing amount of mutual interest in the transportation-economic interface over freight issues, particularly now in this era of globalisation with an emphasis on logistics, supply chains, and distribution networks. A significant challenge resides in integrating economic and transport geography in a more comprehensive research framework. Among the major general issues of such an agenda are:

- *Freight transport and the economy.* Even if in relative terms economic systems tend to be less freight intensive, economic development has been linked with a growing dependency on distribution. What changes in the global economic environment have brought about a reconceptualisation of the role of transportation within economic production, distribution and consumption systems?
- *Global commodity chains.* Considering the growing importance of global commodity chains, could recent developments in the field of distribution and logistics be considered a 'missing link' both between geographies of production and consumption and also between economic and transportation geography?
- *Functional and geographical relationships of supply chains.* The development of supply chains also conveys the development of new relationships between its elements, from the producer to the consumer, with all the intermediaries (warehousing, terminals, etc.). What is the spatial expression of these functional relationships?
- *Regionalisation of distribution.* Transport terminals and distribution centres have faced increased competition with the development of inland distribution systems, namely intermodal transportation. In which way local economies and distribution activities are adapting to global processes in freight transportation?
- *Freight transport companies and logistical service providers.* Freight transport companies of all modes have adapted, more or less successfully, to a wide variety of changes taking place in the logistics industry. What are the strategies pursued by the providers of transportation and logistical services?
- *Technology, standards and e-commerce.* Technology continues to play a pivotal role in supply chains, namely by supporting a higher level of integration and thus improved efficiency. In which ways technology will continue to improve the efficiency of supply chains?
- *Public policy.* Levels of governments and numerous planning agencies have various stakes in the freight and logistics industry, namely in terms of regulations and zoning. Further, the logistics industry is a significant provider of employment and regional economic growth. In which way public policy should be articulated to conciliate its goals with those of the logistics industry?
- *Sustainability.* Even if the term 'sustainability' has been overused and abused, the development of global distribution systems goes on a par with environmental and energy concerns. What are the social, environmental and energy benefits/losses associated with supply chains?