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TGRG page

Transport and regional economic competitiveness in the global economy

The task of making transport geography more visible to the wider professional geographical community has been central to the TGRGs strategy for the last several years. To date, this has been a highly successful venture, with the sub-discipline attracting new people and reaching new audiences in both the academic and practitioner communities. Activity and interest in the transport geography sessions at major international conferences has increased significantly, and the links between the TGRG and its sister organisations, particularly in the US and Germany, have deepened, bringing much more international collaboration and exchange of people and ideas. There has also been increased recognition of the work of the Group itself, not only through the impact of this journal, but also through the success of other publications such as the Group's recent book, *A New Deal for Transport*.

Notwithstanding these efforts, it is undeniable that a large part of the apparent recent renaissance in transport geography is due to the increased attention focused on transport and mobility issues by researchers and policy makers in other, related fields. In particular, the rise of the 'new economic geography', and the consistent, robust theoretical development of research into the factors underlying the varying competitiveness of regional and national economies as globalisation unfolds has played an important role in opening up the traditional concerns of transport geography to other researchers.

Indeed, the role played by transport systems, and the different spatial patterns of mobility and accessibility they create and sustain, is becoming ever more discussed and debated by economists and economic geographers as they seek to understand the circumstances underpinning economic success. The contemporary focus on this concept of competitiveness and competition between regions in large part emerged from a longstanding debate between two leading economists on the future of city- and regional economies. On one side is Paul Krugman, who asserts that places do not compete with one another directly, rather it is only the firms within them that do so. On the other side, Michael Porter argues for a less 'pure' approach to regional economics, claiming that successful companies are attracted to particular cities and regions offering a distinctive set of resources and assets. Some of these resources take the form of the 'traditional' factors, such as land and property, skilled labour and the transport system as a facilitator of general mobility, long regarded as determinants of economic success. But Porter also acknowledges a significant role for the more qualitative factors or 'soft' assets, such as quality of life, environmental conditions and the prospects for information exchange in a cluster of similar businesses. Here, transport is equally important, since the level and quality of mobility and accessibility offered by a region is critical in shaping its overall quality of life, and the external perceptions of its attractiveness as a place to invest.

Much recent research generally supports Porter's position. After economic diversity, high quality internal and external connectivity has been noted by several studies to be the most important explanation of regional economic competitiveness. The most successful regions have class-leading transport and ICT infrastructure to move goods, services, information and people securely, quickly and efficiently. Particularly for knowledge intensive industries, the presence of direct international air links to key global centres of innovation is regarded as critical. Despite the new opportunities presented by ICT, face-to-face communication remains fundamentally important to the sharing of ideas, and to the development of trust on which all business relationships depend. Spinning out from this connectedness was an outward looking approach, with many of the most successful regions investing significant time and effort in developing links with other cities to share knowledge, open new markets, and generally to win friends and influence people. Internal connectivity was also deemed crucial, with congestion becoming an increasingly influential constraint to business investment and quality of life.

The challenge for regions seeking to compete in the modern, globalising economy is therefore commonly framed in terms of improving their 'asset offer' so that they become more attractive places for people to live, work and invest. In other words, the attractiveness of one region compared to another is determined by the quality of its business environment, and the quality of life it offers its citizens. This applies across the economy, from the highly skilled individuals who lead the

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knowledge sectors (and who are most demanding in choosing locations), but also in terms of attracting and retaining people in all sectors so that the city diversifies and builds on its critical mass. Places with the 'right' mix of these assets are seen as competitive cities. Increasingly, high quality transport and, in particular, manageable levels of traffic congestion, is being focused upon as a key determinant of success. Indeed, such a view lies behind the importance attached to the policy of Congestion Charging in London by the city's Mayor and its economic development agency.

Against this background of increased interest from geographers in the concepts of regional economic competitiveness and its spatial patterning, the recent announcement of the theme for the 2005 RGS-IBG conference is particularly timely. To be held in London from 31 August to 2 September, the conference will address the theme of "Flows and spaces in a globalised world". In advance of the formal Call for Papers which the Group will issue in due course, the TGRG Executive would welcome suggestions from colleagues on potential sub-themes for the transport geography sessions at the conference, and how these might relate to other cognisant activities in economic geography and elsewhere. Enquiries, about this or any other aspect of the TGRG's work, should be directed to me at the address below.

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