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Book review

Three books, mostly about seaports: (1) Port-City Interplays in China, James Jixian Wang. Ashgate, Farnham (2014). £60.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-4724-2689-5. (2) Institutional Challenges to Intermodal Transport and Logistics, Jason Monios. Ashgate, Farnham (2014). £65.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-4724-2321-4. (3) Hub Cities in the Knowledge Economy, Sven Conventz, Ben Derudder, Alain Thierstein, Frank Witlox (Eds.). Ashgate, Farnham (2014). £65.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-4094-4591-3

Three new books in Ashgate's Transport and Mobility Series further consolidate this series' pre-eminence in the field of transport geography. Each locates seaports at the nexus of ongoing processes of economic globalization. But, in exploring how corporate and public governance reforms, transformations in the technologies of virtual and physical mobility, and the rise of global value chains have affected ports, each rubs up against the limitations of our existing conceptions of seaports as those places where marine- and land-based transport modes meet. James Wang's *Port-City Interplays in China* is a capstone reflection on almost four decades of state-led transformation in coastal China. Jason Monios' *Institutional Challenges to Intermodal Transport and Logistics* addresses the governance of inland transportation connections of ports, a refreshing counterbalance to the seaward and technological biases (i.e. ships and cranes) of much port scholarship. And, by implicitly and unfavourably comparing seaports to airports, Sven Conventz, Ben Derudder, Alian Thierstein and Frank Witlox's *Hub Cities in the Knowledge Economy* forces us to ask how important is the seaport sector after all?

In this review essay I want to highlight four interrelated themes and questions about seaports and their associated logistics, infrastructural and knowledge systems. We know that the scales of port activity have changed, and that both the (container) terminal and the hinterland have overtaken the formal port jurisdiction in importance; hence the related processes of terminalisation and regionalization. Crudely, bigger ships mean bigger volumes over the wharf which is related to a bigger regional footprint. But in rescaling the port, is any particular scale primary, necessary or inevitable? Scale is intimately tied up with questions of benefit, agency and sustainability. Second, thus, while we know that seaports confer widespread benefits and concentrated costs, what else can we say about their contribution to the uneven geography of contemporary capitalism? Third, who are the key agents in making the investment and operational decisions which create these economic geographies? And fourth, what are the prospects for environmental sustainability in ports and related transportation-logistic systems?

Before considering each book in light of these questions, I need to start with a note of criticism and disclosure. I have co-edited a volume in the Ashgate series and contributed to others, and I will gladly do so again. Yet, I was disappointed with the copy-editing of the two monographs, and I felt there was a depth-breadth mismatch in the edited volume. In Wang, for example, Markus Hesse is cited as Hasse and Hense on successive pages, and the anomalous data reported for 2005 in Table 8.2 is either an error, or begs an explanatory comment. In Monios, a stronger copy-edit might have caught the repeated sentence about "the notion of transport solely as a derived demand has been challenged and reformulated…"; as well as the missing zero in the first amount listed in Table 5.4. Conventz et al. assembled a team of experienced senior scholars (Ed Malecki, Peter Nijkamp, Frank van Oort), doctoral students with the fresh ideas (Michael Bentlage, Elien Van De Vijver, Anne Wiese), and all points inbetween. But I would have preferred fewer, longer chapters, each with a bit more attention to methodological and empirical detail. And, despite the subtitle of the book which placed seaports ahead of airports and brainports, seaports are essentially confined to a single chapter. Okay, enough with my quibbling; these are all significant intellectual contributions.

James Wang adopts a fourfold conceptualization of ports; economic-functional, spatial, external (supply chain) relationships and governance relations. He argues that in each of these domains, traditional models of port-city development and even the more contemporary corporate-centric understandings of ports are inadequate to comprehending port development in China. Wang takes us to less well known places, but clearly Yangshan Port and the Donghai Bridge that connects it to Shanghai is the poster-child for port developments which leap-frog the 'stages' implicit in the Anyport model, and in which the subtleties of supply chain integration are overwhelmed by the brute force of state capital. Contemporary Chinese (container) ports require a different kind of intellectual apparatus than that offered by the linear teleology of the spatial-synthetic tradition.

Wang asks us to focus instead on the formal, shifting (re-scaled) jurisdictions of the state actors investing in and governing port facilities. His key actor is the entrepreneurial local state; often the municipal administration of the city hosting the port itself, but as he convincingly shows, often a rescaled special economic zone, city-district amalgamation, or in at least one case, an alliance of local administrations brought together by the province. Indeed, Wang's great achievement here is to unpack the port governance reform process, showing how it is related to the overall opening up of the Chinese national economy since 1978; but also that it took distinctive twists and turns in localities, especially after the 1994 formal decentralization of port governance and operations to local government. At times, these state machinations make for confusing reading. For example, on page 102: "China is regarded to have an executive-led economy in which all levels of government demonstrate different approaches and abilities in restricting the development of a specific port city in a specific area and flexible methods that allow certain cities to circumvent conventional restrictions for development". Which I decipher as: sub-national state entrepreneurship is not okay except when it is.

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The resulting pattern of port development has particular and rather disturbing consequences for port-city relations. Spatial development concentrates in enclaves of manufacturing and assembly, all scattered within 2–3 hours' drive from the port. Hence the mode share of truck delivery to these ports is staggering, with substantial negative impacts on urban quality of life; emissions, over-investment in highways, the systematic undermining of rail- and water-based alternatives. Wang quite appropriately describes this pattern of development as unbalanced (see Figure 5.8).

To what end is all this port development? Wang suggests that entrepreneurial local states develop ports to secure investment in manufacturing within their remit. This has been a profitable strategy: drawing on evolutionary economic geography, Wang suggests that the winning states are those which established routines that allowed them to get ahead of their competitor local states in successive "waves of circumvention" (see Table 6.4). There is a constant threat of overinvestment in infrastructure here, and it is not clear what will happen when these manufacturing-export complexes go away because coastal wages and industrial lands become too costly. Wang hints at some broader concerns for the Chinese space-economy; there are few incentives for the leading players in these port-state-manufacturing complexes to invest in the development of the western Chinese hinterland. No great concerns with the kind of corridor and inland terminal developments that Monios (see below) writes about, and that port managers in North America or North Western Europe dream/worry about.

Instead, Wang makes a well-reasoned and fascinating prediction that the leading coalitions in Chinese port cities, in their endless search for low-cost production facilities, will increasingly replicate the Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong experiences in which port handling and manufacturing cities increasingly become global port trading and services cities. They will turn to other Southeast Asian nations, the Indian subcontinent and Africa, rather than western China for cheap labour. But can the routines that allowed coastal cities to develop port-manufacturing complexes become the routines required to negotiate the transition from manufacturing to services? Conventz et al., reviewed below, provide some grounds for expecting this in their exploration of the hidden linkages between mobility and knowledge; time will tell.

It is so satisfying that Wang brings his agent of port development to the fore. No more abstract spatial and technological forces as presented in the spatial synthetic tradition, no more embedded assumptions about the causal primacy of market actors and relations. Actually existing patterns of port regionalization and distributions of port benefit are inseparable from the state: "In China... it is the states, particularly local governments that play a critical role in altering the choices of these firms (market players) and eventually reshaping places and spaces and hence port-city relations" (p139).

Is it really all that different in the developed world? Jason Monios' study of ports and inland terminals provides some answers. It is worth noting at the outset that Monios has dared to enter a mine-field of confusing terminology: inland terminals are also known as dry ports, freight villages, extended gates, container freight stations, intermodal terminal, load centres... Table 4.1 helpfully summarizes the conceptual inflation. This is a book why the presumed integration of ports with inland intermodal operations is never as smooth or complete as asserted by the port regionalization hypothesis. Monios, like Wang, is offering his own critique of this kind of stages of development thinking; he repeatedly points out that the neat transition from stage whatever to stage whatever fails to proceed as proposed.

In one sense the critique is unfair; synthesizing, spatially descriptive frameworks never claim to be full and accurate description of actual places. In another sense, his critique does not go far enough; the port regionalization hypothesis has become a normative framework which asserts that a regionalized port will be more efficient. Implicit in Monios' analysis is the prescriptive question "why is port regionalization is not proceeding as predicted?" Not quite the same as the exploratory question, "why is it proceeding as it is?"

Neither concern really matter all that much for two reasons. First, Monios is clear on his normative stance; ports should be encouraged to achieve intermodal integration within their hinterlands for a variety of environmental reasons. Monios, appropriately in my view, defines intermodal transportation as seaports linked by rail to inland centres. The thing that he wants to change is our dependence on port trucking. Second, Monios is systematic and careful in his empirical discussion to provide (mostly) what is needed to answer the exploratory question. The research questions are "deliberately open-ended" (p41), absolutely appropriate given the comparative case study design employed.

In the European cases (inland terminals in Spain, Belgium and France, the Netherlands and Italy), the relationship between the inland terminal and the port terminal operator emerges as a key factor. The Venlo terminal developed by operator ECT is cast as a particularly successful example. The mixed public–private nature of the Venlo investment seems important. In contrast, Monios describes Italian "freight villages" as competing intensely and unproductively for government support. Driven by the landward concerns of their funder, these freight villages tend to do better as logistics hubs than as extensions of (and hence potentially improvers of) port operations. Yet, even in Venlo, private inland terminal developers depended on successfully recruiting support and financial assistance of governments. Such assistance becomes possible when governments understand that inland terminals have wider economic and environmental benefits.

The UK case study is closely tied to the retail sector, allowing Monios to explore the role and power of shippers. The central policy concern here is how to reduce truck traffic along major axes in a context where only one retail operator is large enough to fill trains. Here we have a classic collective action problem potentially solvable through government intervention; and I was surprised to learn that there are ongoing operational subsidies (Table 5.5).

The US example is the Heartland Corridor, connecting the Port of Virginia (Norfolk) through the Appalachian Mountains to Columbus, Ohio. Here too the role of government emerges as vital, although in an under-stated way. It is true that transportation finance and regulation in the United States is a maze of overlapping jurisdictions, with deliberate efforts by some to limit state planning power. But the key agent in Monios' story, the Appalachian Regional Commission, is a government agency. The Commission played a vital networking and brokering role. Given that corridors by definition cross jurisdictions, perhaps having this less powerful special purpose government take the lead was a better way to get intermodal integration done than the top-down, all-or-nothing alternative?

Monios' overall conclusion is wonderfully measured: "(t)he port regionalization concept requires adjustment to highlight the opportunities and barriers to successful port regionalization, and recognize the inherent difficulties due to the nature of inland freight operations" (p186). In other words: we can have ports that deliver economic benefits and improved environmental performance, but there is nothing automatic or inevitable about this. Throughout, Monios makes a strong case for modest state intervention, inter-governmental collaboration and strengthened planning frameworks.

Will seaports get the attention they deserve? Conventz et al's volume leaves one feeling that airports and digital cabling will instead. The central proposition of this edited collection is that

"knowledge hubs" located at the nexus of virtual and physical flows are going to be the economic winners. Innovation is enabled and is perhaps only possible, and value is most likely to be captured, in such privileged locations. The book is thus a call for more attention to the provision and management of high-quality, globally oriented infrastructure to underpin urban economic development.

At one level, this book is all about airports. Face-to-face meetings of people which embody the transactions, exchanges, transfers and sharing are at the heart of the knowledge economy. These interactions are not random; they have multi-scalar geography, and for any interaction at a larger than inter-regional scale, airports are essential. Such encounters might happen inside airport terminal lounges, business centres or conference facilities, or in readily accessible metropolitan spaces. Appropriately, this perspective on hubs in the world city system insists that the physical infrastructures that permit face-to-face interaction are essential.

But back to seaports – you know, the places that handle 90% of the worlds' trade by volume: it is not clear what role these physical movements play in Conventz et al's conception of urban economic development. If I am flying to a business meeting, I might bring samples with me. If I am showing off new products, designs or other high-value items with a short shelf-life, air cargo plays a role. Even regular forms of elite consumption (cut flowers, sushi) are enabled by air transport. I have heard from airport managers that they are soon going to benefit from air-sea cargo intermodality. Really? Just because a cargo flow can in theory exist, just because it does exist in some instances, does not make it necessary, profitable or ecologically sensible.

This is precisely where the problem for seaports – and, for port scholarship, port geographers and port policy-makers – becomes so apparent. In this leading volume which addresses "the complex and multifaceted interaction between infrastructural accessibility of city-regions on the one hand, and the knowledge generation taking place in these city-regions on the other hand" (p1), it is a telling that the only chapter focused on seaports remarks that "increasingly, the spheres of influence, perception and the network extend (sic) fail to coincide" (p100).

The chapter by Ann Wiese and Alain Thierstein, "European Port Cities: Embodiments of Interaction – knowledge and freight flow as catalysts of spatial development" presents some useful exploratory material on the spatial manifestations of innovation collaborations between firms in the maritime economy in northern Germany (with a particular focus on Hamburg and surrounds). They observe that there are high levels of interaction between maritime technology and research organizations, and between port logistics and service providers, but low levels of interaction between shipping companies and port logistics firms. Are these generalizable findings, or should they be interpreted in relation to the particular specializations of the northern German maritime economy?

The chapter provides support for the idea that organizational proximities in supply chains are more important than localized face-to-face transactions per se: "very few real co-operations for the purpose of innovation and education evolve at the local level" (p111). They go on: "(d)espite the technology park of Bremen... no single area accommodates a critical number of actors within a five kilometre radius, which could be considered walking distance and therefor accounted as local". This is not fatal for seaports as knowledge hubs, since as Wiese and Thierstein highlight, the finding does not deny the importance of the regional scale which is highlighted in both port and innovation studies. Yet, the absence of a finding in support of face-to-face contact for knowledge transfers in the maritime sector, in a book which otherwise privileges such interactions, is telling.

Perhaps what is not being considered here is precisely what is the content of the innovations, knowledge spill-overs and localized agglomerations that are important in the urban maritime economy. If the goal is to explain urban economic development in general, then this chapter would lend support to the argument that pre-existing seaports embedded in diversified urban economies can be a source of specialized, differentiated, related sector growth. In other words, from freight-forwarding might come other maritime and advanced services, and from ship-owning might come ship building and marine technology. But the port still hasn't, in this north-west European OECD-type context, shown itself to be a necessary contributor to urban growth. Having the global headquarters of firms such as Hapag-Lloyd or Kuehne & Nagel might be more important to the urban economy than having a deeper Elbe.

So where does all this leave my four opening questions? With great insights and few final answers. We have rescaling ports that defy neat spatial definition; that deliver economic benefits most tangibly to developing places, and much less certainly in the global centres of control, knowledge generation and consumption; that call forth government intervention and investment to secure these benefits; and, which struggle to deliver on their promise of being nodes in the most energy efficient transportation mode. With no easy answers it is no wonder that seaport geography is enjoying a resurgence of interest, exemplified in these thought-provoking volumes.

Peter V. Hall
Simon Fraser University, 515 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 5K3, Canada
E-mail address: pvhall@sfu.ca

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