Progress in the geography of services II: services, the state and the rearticulation of capitalism

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Introduction

For approaching two decades, commentators have been asserting that services are of more than solely residual importance in economic geography. The continuing wealth of research on producer and business services is testament to the extent to which a once novel claim has passed into mainstream geography (see, for example, Beaverstock et al 1999a; Beaverstock et al 1999b; Bristow et al 1999; Bennett & Graham 1998; Li et al 1998; Bryson & Daniels 1998; Bryson 1998; Quinlan 1998; Graham 1998, Graves 1998; Yeung 1999; Scott 1999a; Scott 1999b). It is therefore frustrating that many economists continue to attempt to reinvent the wheel. For example, in grappling to explain the spatial clustering of knowledge-based activities, Audrestsch superficially claims to be 'penetrating the black box of geographic space' (1998, 24). If instead of reading *Fortune Magazine*, Audretsch cast his eyes over some of the papers cited in my last report (such as Coe and Townsend's (1998) exploration of services in southern England) he would find that the inside of the black box had illuminations (see also Fujita et al 1999; Berry 2000).

Yet, as I concluded my last report, the implications of this recognition have remained largely confined within specific national or sectoral studies. Most obviously, for example, research on finance can no longer be criticised for its absence, paucity, or lack of relevance as geographers have made significant contributions to our understanding of an area long dominated by economists and political scientists. Financial services are, of course, the most globalised aspect of the capitalist economy. Money is more mobile than ever, as

deregulation and phenomenal technological change have enabled money to flow almost without hindrance between markets and jurisdictions. It is therefore encouraging that the geography of finance has truly come of age. This is apparent in two ways. First, geographers continue to write sophisticated analyses of the ways in which the financial system is being reconfigured (Hudson 1998a; Hudson 1998b; Pollard 1999; Martin 1999a). Second, academics from other disciplines are taking the spatial problematic seriously. For example, in Martin's (1999b) excellent edited collection, *Money and the space economy*, a third of the chapters are by non-geographers. Similarly, Helleiner (1999) explores the intimate connections between the creation of national currencies and the processes of state and cultural formation, while Cohen (1998) argues that there are no easy solutions to the challenges that the geography of money poses to state sovereignty. However, as Walker, points out, we should be wary of reading off simple messages from the globalisation of finance:

> "three things need to be kept in mind about this phenomenon. The first is that money is by definition the most fluid form of capital and the most abstracted from the grit of production, goods and everyday life; we should expect it to be the most placeless element of the modern economy. The second is that there has been a general shift of capital out of production and into the financial sphere, much of which is unproductive and speculative; money can slosh about the globe often with little connection to trends in real output and trade. The third is that despite the international mobility of money, the biggest financial crises of the last two decades – the US Savings and Loans debacle $250-500 billion in bad debt) and the Japanese banking fiasco ($1 trillion in bad loans – equal to almost one quarter of GNP) – were almost internally generated" (Walker 1999, 266).

In this report, I want to move beyond these specific sectoral studies and examine the changing relationship between services and the state during the long retreat from social democracy. Although it is clear that state-provided services remain critically important generators of wealth and well-being (Lovering (1999) notes that growth in public service employment in Wales created twenty-two times the net contribution of manufacturing to Welsh GDP growth in the 1980s and 1990s), I concentrate here on (1) research into the changing boundaries between the state and the service sector; (2) work on the ways in which

services are being marshalled by the liberal state; and (3) the reduction of the service element in utility services.

The retreat of the state?

The past two decades or so have seen momentous changes in the ways in which the role of (affluent) national-states has been understood, as social and political relations appear to have become disembedded from the Westphalian territorial model (Brenner 1999; Jessop 1997). One of the critical developments has been the emergence of 'offshore' states which allow corporations and individuals to evade regulation and tax. Drawing upon an analysis of the shipping industry, which has been vulnerable to such regulatory evasion, Bennett (1999) argues that state regulation alone is incapable of maintaining high environmental standards because, "Any country which introduces tough environmental standards risks the flight of capital abroad and a loss of national competitiveness". Bennett argues that perhaps the most effective solution to this example of the 'Delaware effect', so-called following the emulation of low regulatory standards in company law there by states elsewhere in the USA (Cary 1974), is found in the pooling of risk on the part of ship-owners in mutually-owned clubs. Bennett's argument here provides a convincing account of how state failure can be countered by the private sector, although we should not inure ourselves to the possibility of the 'California effect' (Vogel 1997), where regulatory standards ratchet up rather than down. While evidence that large jurisdictions have begun to co-operate in international finance (Genschel & Plumper 1997), even 'offshore' financial centres, which have long undermined the potential to introduce a level playing field, are becoming subject to international agreements (compare Hampton 1995, Roberts 1995; Hampton & Christensen 1999; OECD, 1999). Such an outcome reflects the fact that offshore states are, as much as any other physical territory, real places,

> "Offshore undoubtedly represents the creation of a regulatory environment that both contradicts and undermines the very idea of a 'national' economy and a coherent national space. However, ... it exists almost wholly within the physical and juridical boundaries of states and is sanctioned and encouraged by national governments. ... Whilst different from the conventionally understood territorial boundaries of the state, [these] are no more or less real. These boundaries create spaces of differential regulation within and across states that add to the functionality of the border as much as they contradict it" (Cameron & Palan 1999, 280)

Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly something of a blurring of the historic boundaries between the state and the private sector. Institutional investors (pension funds, mutual funds, and so on) occupy an increasingly important role in reproducing neo-liberal state structures (Harmes 1998), are increasingly thought of as providing the solution to under-funded welfare states (Clark 1999a), and dominate private sector investment in urban areas (Clark 1998). The state appears to be returning the favour, loosening some constraints on these investors (Clark 1999b) in the United States and, critically, according the private sector a key role in the delivery of public services in the United Kingdom through the 'Private finance initiative' (PFI). The roots of the PFI extend back into the early 1990s, but it is only recently that both Conservative and Labour governments have adopted the programme in substantive measure. Under the PFI, private firms directly provide services and infrastructure hitherto provided by the government, in return for guaranteed state funding. For example, the government will contract with a private consortium to build and manage a new hospital, which the government will then lease back over a twenty year time-span. The PFI is undoubtedly a novel form which transforms the role of the state away from being the *provider* and towards becoming the *purchaser and regulator* of public services.

Assessing the PFI at this early stage is not a trivial task. The long-term costs of services provided under the initiative is likely to be greater than if the state had provided them in the traditional way, both to allow private sector partners to make profits (and thus invest in it) and because governments' have lower borrowing costs than the private sector. And yet, because PFI spending is shown in public accounts over years or decades, whereas traditional investment appears in a single year, Kerr (1998) shows that the programme *has* contributed to the development of services that would otherwise not have materialised. However, the real significance of the initiative is elsewhere: "The PFI … constitutes a new mode of governance though which the state is attempting to restructure itself and, indirectly, class relations, by transforming the social relations of service and infrastructure provision and subordinating them to the discipline of the market" (Kerr, 1998, 2292). It is not surprising, then, that the model is strongly supported by the International Monetary Fund (Mansfield 1999). While I would, therefore, concur with Clark and Root (1999) that the PFI may have a fundamentally flawed design, it is in the realm of the political rather than the economic that the future of the PFI will be determined and unless we see another radical reorientation of

thinking about the state's role, the initiative looks likely enjoy a long life in Britain and elsewhere.

If the state has retreated from a strong mode of regulatory intervention, it has also begun to marshal services as a mechanism for the promotion of economic development. In the United Kingdom, of course, the British state has long championed the interests of the City of London in recognition of its contribution to the British economy and its raw political power (Burn 1999; Leyshon & Thrift 1998). What *is* relatively novel, however, are the ways in which local states have seized upon urban redevelopment with either retailing or a spectacle at their core in an attempt to reverse decades of economic decline (see, for example, the essays in Oatley 1998; Imrie and Thomas 1999). Much of the literature that has explored this phenomenon has eschewed the critical analysis to be found in Harvey's (Harvey 1987) influential examination of Baltimore in favour of a more proscriptive approach or an impact analysis. The evidence that service-led redevelopment can make a lasting impact remains tenuous. While tourist attractions with a high international profile may be important local income generators (see, for example, Plaza 1999; Gomez 1998 on the Bilbao Guggenheim), more often service-led economic development "generates more publicity than real economic change [whilst its success] has made it very difficult to draw attention to the ongoing structural degradation of the economy and the social crisis associated with escalating poverty and unemployment" (Quilley 1999, 205)

Yet, in a world in which spectacles and symbols have a very real impact upon the ability of cities and regions to secure their economic viability and where social democratic welfare norms have transmogrified into liberal workfare ideologies, these landscapes have had to be underwritten by state services which are reproducing patterns of inequality. It will surprise few readers, but depress more, that as states have attempted to control welfare spending, particularly by targeting poorer and more vulnerable groups, public spending on the criminal justice system has exploded. Indeed, Pack (1998) has shown that in the US the largest poverty-related costs now come from expenditure on police, fire services, the courts and administration, as opposed to services which help to improve the life chances of the poor (such as public welfare and health services).

Another state service, the law, is also playing a crucial role in underscoring inequality. In a chilling series of polemics, Mitchell (1997; 1998a; 1998b) analyses the ways in which US city

and state authorities have attempted to define homelessness out of existence by the appropriation of public space with laws which, for example, proscribe begging, standing around, sleeping or sitting in public. These are not, he points out, akin to laws on "murder or assault ... in which there are (near) total societal bans. Rather we are speaking, in the most fundamental sense, of geography, of a geography in which a local prohibition (against sleeping in public, say) becomes a total prohibition for some people" (1997, 312). And yet such brutalities are not simply a result of the election of a particularly venal set of politicians, Mitchell argues that the genealogy of such legislation lies in the insecurity engendered by globalisation: "In an era in which the "symbolic economy" has risen to replace a seemingly more stable industrial-based economy, the "culture of cities" is all they have ... . This "culture" – this landscape – is itself a tenuous thing, not at all a sure or permanent attraction to footloose capital. ... By creating superficially pleasing landscapes we hope to stave off the inevitable, to steal from history a few more months or years of prosperity (1997, 327).

While powerful, Mitchell's analysis ultimately ascribes a role to the state which allows him to read off the political from the economic (even if it is discursively mediated). Politics *do* matter. In a complex geographical and political analysis, Mohan (1998) explores the ways in which the late 1980s services-led boom in the UK, together with the emergence of greater equity in health allocation, led to the development of a loose, but powerful, spatial coalition in the South East of England whose aim was to ensure that the region retained and increased its share of state health care spending. Mohan shows that although the problems encountered by the state health service were the logical result of the political and economic policies of the Conservative governments of the time, Conservative politicians and voters were unprepared to suffer the consequences at the same time as they were asserting that the government was not responsible for economic decline elsewhere.

Service not included [1]

While social democratic states were in retreat, a parallel process has been underway as a wide range of private sector companies have begun to divest their assets, or consistently under-invested, in the service infrastructure of poor neighbourhoods. This research owes much to the work of Dymski and Veitch (1996) who demonstrated that in their attempts to bolster

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[1] This sub-title is borrowed from Speak and Graham (1999).

profits and reduce their operating costs, financial institutions disproportionately closed branches in poor neighbourhoods and, in the US at least, returned to a crude spatial targeting of products (Leyshon & Thrift 1999; Pollard 1996; Pollard 1999; Aldridge 1997; Pratt 1998).[2] Such processes are of more than academic significance:

> "In the long term, communities abandoned by the financial system are in danger of entering a slow and painful period of decline due to an inability to gain access to funds necessary for the continuous intensive phase of urban development which supports the maintenance of the built environment and provides the possibility for further economic growth" (Leyshon and Thrift 1997, 237)

It is clear that this is not *simply* a geographic problem - income, ethnicity, age and work-status are probably more important - but geography does matter. For example, Kempson & Whyley (1999) demonstrate that people who live in the fifty most deprived local authority districts in England and Wales have twice the propensity to be among the financial excluded than the norm. Research on financial exclusion is one of the few areas in recent years where rigorous, conceptually-strong empirical work by geographers has filtered into the policy arena. Leyshon and Thrift's work informed the government of British Columbia's response to merger proposals on the part of Canada's largest corporations (see Bowles 1998), while Kempson's research has not only been used by the British Bankers' Association, but also has influenced the government's thinking on financial sector reform.

In the face of financial infrastructure withdrawal, there have been a number of attempts to ground financial services in the local economy. The most significant of these was undoubtedly the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) in the United States which aimed to reduce banks' discrimination against poor neighbourhoods. While fierce rearguard action by the banks significantly weakened its powers, during the 1990s some targeting by local activists began to increase enforcement (Schwartz 1998; Shlay 1999). However, although the CRA was one of the most explicitly spatial pieces of legislation passed in the United States, and CRA data have demonstrated fairly convincingly that financial service

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[2] At the same time, however, a new quantitative revolution in retail banking has reduced the reliance upon local tacit knowledges in granting access to credit which has the potentially progressive potential to undermine the biases and prejudices of traditional bank branch managers (Leyshon & Thrift 1999)

institutions discriminate against poor neighbourhoods, it has received little attention from geographers during its lifetime. This is a pity, not only because the CRA failed to realise its ambitious aims - financial infrastructure withdrawal during the intervening period has accentuated, redlining and spatial discrimination is worse and, by the mid-1990s, non-compliance with CRA lending guidelines had been used to block only fifteen expansion or merger applications (Taibi 1994), but also because the lessons have wider currency in understanding spatially targeted measures. In particular, an unexpected consequence of the legislative requirement that banks report on their loan activity within specified distances from a branch, meant that closures in poorer neighbourhoods improved banks' overall standing.

More attention, in recent years at least, has been paid to community-based initiatives such as credit unions (Fuller 1998), employee ownership (Wills & Lincoln 1999) and local currency schemes. The latter initially developed in British Columbia in the early 1980s but have since become popular across the US, Canada, the UK and Australia and aim to ground circuits of economic and social reproduction in a locality by ensuring that the unit of exchange is both generated and spent within a local community (Pacione 1999; Lee 1999). In the small number of successes, the schemes have supported the generation of local employment and appear to be a mechanism with which to embed money, to make finance local once again. In some accounts, local currency schemes are seen as a potential force to undermine the effects of global financial flows and economic integration. Pacione, for example, (1999, 70; see also Williams 1996; Williams and Windebank 2000; Thorne 1996) has argued that although "a local currency cannot insulate the local economy from the negative effects of globalisation ... it can afford a degree of protection against the spatially-insensitive currents of the international financial system". This appears to be somewhat hyperbolic: local currencies are few and the most successful examples have been in small, relatively affluent communities. As such, they can provide little hope for devastated inner city neighbourhoods and their power is more symbolic than real:

> "Local currencies are a means of political resistance, a vehicle for (re)constructing local communities in opposition to the dictates of global capitalism. ... the significance of local money lies primarily in the fact that it is *local* in space and time, rather than in the particular economic and social functions that it performs" (Lee, 1999, 220, 223-4) .

If research on the extent of financial infrastructure withdrawal, and localised responses to it, is well developed, there has been less emphasis on the ways in which paucity of access to other services is also becoming a badge of social and geographic disadvantage. In the UK, the regulatory frameworks introduced alongside the privatisation of public sector services during the 1980s and early 1990s have increasingly emphasised competition and choice. The result, as Speak & Graham (1999) emphasise, is that average utility costs for less affluent consumers are twenty-five percent higher than for more affluent households. Although Speak and Graham's research remains preliminary, importantly it emphasises the interconnected nature of what they refer to as "advanced marginality":

> "rapid restructuring in a range of energy, telecommunications, financial services, and food retailing are, in combination, threatening to undermine severely the degree to which marginalised urban neighbourhoods can hope to achieve any meaningful degree of relational connections to, and social inclusion in, wider metropolitan life. Point-specific services such as banks and food retailers are rapidly being withdrawn from these spaces; network-based services such as telephony and energy are, under new pressures of competition and privatisation, developing their own highly uneven geographies of roll-out, competition and access" (page 1998).

Summary

Research on services has come of age. While research on the producer and business services continues to bear fruit, work on the geography of services continues to develop in novel directions. Here I have concentrated on research at the interface of political economy and the service sector, showing how the changing configuration of the relationship between the state and services illuminates a broader set of processes underway in affluent capitalist societies. While examples such as Britain's Private Finance Initiative may deliver more services, it is not clear that they deliver better or cheaper services. With the exception of the financial services sector, there are notable areas where geographical research remains relatively poorly developed. Take trade in services, for example. Despite the setbacks suffered at the Seattle Talks in November 1999, the World Trade Organisation continues to push for liberalisation of trade in services. However, it is a reflection of the healthy nature of the literature that such gaps are getting smaller. In my final report in this series, I will examine the cultural economic geographies of the service sector.

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