Chapter 8
The Corporation in Geography

1) Introduction

Geographers – or at least more accurately human geographers – have a long history of critical engagement with the firm or corporation in a variety of forms. The discipline itself emerged as a distinct field during the nineteenth century and its origins are intrinsically entwined with European imperialism and the needs of those states in perpetrating economic and political expansion across the planet (Jones 2012). In bringing together scientific interest in both the physical and social sciences, geography's holistic approach to understanding the interaction of the natural and social world quickly encompassed the question of the economy of nations, and the major actors within those European imperialist economies – the capitalist firm. Human geographical work posed questions of how firms came to develop, why they were located in certain places, and what scope there was for them to extend their operations to other regions and countries (see also the chapter by James Faulconbridge in this volume).

In this chapter I outline the major ways in which contemporary human and economic geography has critically engaged with the idea of the firm or corporation. In so doing, I take the term 'critical' in its broadest of senses, perhaps even beyond the immediate frame of critical social science in a Marxian, (or also Foucauldian) tradition that is often used (ibid.). Geography adopted I suggest an inherently interdisciplinary approach, and as well as drawing more explicitly on critical social science, economic geography also poses a theoretically critical cut on understandings of the corporation that have been dominant in some other social science disciplines. Notably, economic geographical work on the corporation has in recent decades been central in challenging some of the relatively simplistic ways in which management or international business scholars have conceptualised and understood corporate globalization (or firm internationalization as it is often also called) (Dicken *et al* 2001). I want to argue therefore that geographers' contributions to critical understandings of the corporation need to be seen across a range of different types of engagement, not just within a political economic tradition which, whilst important, represents only one dimension to the subject's contribution. Furthermore, without caricaturing geographical thinking as being primarily concerned with spatial nature of phenomenon, I will also argue that geographical work on the corporation makes an important contribution to a distinctively spatial understanding of corporate form, activities and the impacts on different communities and regions. Such an approach foregrounds the way in which space makes a difference to how firms exist and operate, and seeks to critically understand firms as always existing in and across specific places in a ways that both facilitates and constrains their actions as well as shaping the impacts those actions have.

Of course, to cover the sheer breadth of different epistemological and theoretical critical engagements in geographical thinking with the nature of the corporation in one chapter is challenging and necessitates an understanding of how geographical engagements with the corporation have developed over time. In that respect, the next section therefore begins by providing the context of origins of thinking about the corporation and firm within geography, examining the nineteenth and early twentieth century work of economic geographers on the role of firms in regional economic development and in seeking to develop early theories of corporate location. A brief account of how these fields of interest in the post second world war European and North American geography of the 1960s is also provided as well as the impact of the critical turn in human geography from the 1970s. The following sections then address critical thinking about firms through three scales of engagement. The third section begins with considering how critical economic geographies have contributed to understandings of corporate restructuring and decline in the deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s in advanced industrial economies. It then moves on to outline the significant contribution of economic geographers to critical understandings of how corporations have shaped globalization of economic activity in recent decades. The fourth section then moves to the regional and urban scales in considering how geographical work has used political economic perspectives to understand how corporations have shaped uneven development outcomes and are central to the local impacts of wider processes of neoliberalization (c.f. Peck 2010) and financialization (c.f. French *et al* 2008). Finally the following section examines geographical work at the scale of the corporation itself, in particular focusing on the nature of labour inequalities and the experience of different types of corporate employees. The chapter ends by drawing together some conclusions about the utility of geographical thinking on the corporation to wider interdisciplinary critical approaches discussed elsewhere in this book.

2) The History of Geographical thought on the Corporation

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, geography emerged as a distinctive discipline that brought together scientific interest in the social and natural worlds (Nayak & Jeffrey 2011). Much of the emerging geographical thinking of that period – and that which dominates historical accounts of the discipline – was a cross-cutting socio-natural science oriented around the concerns of western European imperial states and their interests around the globe. Human geography's contribution in this period was significant in developing political geographical ideas around imperial territories and the geopolitics of the world system in this period. Notable is of course the work of the British geographer Halford Mackinder and his 'heartland' thesis (c.f. Mackinder 1904; Sidaway 2008), used as the basis to understanding inter-imperial conflict over Eurasia, as well as later the continental thinking of Friedrich Ratzel – the father of geopolitics whose thinking about state *'Lebensraum'*, notoriously later was used by the Third Reich to justify German territorial expansion (ibid.). However, the significance of this early geographical work to our current interest in geographical thinking about the firm or corporation is that early economic geography – and ideas about the roles of firms in territorial spaces – also permeated some of this work. Early geography was interested in firms in a socio-economic epistemology that developed in the economic geography of the twentieth century (Jones 2012), only to be replaced by a common epistemological approach with neoclassical economics after the second world war. It is important to understand this in assessing the trajectory of critical thinking about the corporation that has re-emerged in the twenty-first century. I want therefore consider three important historical foundations for critical thinking about firms in geography that run through the history of the discipline.

2.1 Geographical thinking and Marshall's industrial districts

In the earlier formation period of geography as a discipline, as with other social science disciplines, disciplinary boundaries were blurred and one of the key theoretical arguments to shape early economic geographical thinking about firms was developed by the eminent economist, Alfred Marshall. Marshall proposed the concept of the industrial district' in the fourth chapter of his *Principles of Economics* (1890), arguing that economic success was bound into the concentrations of firms in single industries within territorial proximity. Marshall made brief, but important reference to the social and cultural underpinnings of this economic success founded around inter-firm relations captured in his famous proposition that 'there was something in the air' within districts leading to collective firm success within a geographical area (c.f. Phelps 2004). The phrase sought to capture a whole range of local institutional, political and socio-cultural aspects to industrial districts as places that contributed to the success of firms beyond the easily measurable indicators of labour, production, transport or raw material costs. Marshall's theory has been a cornerstone of economic geographers' subsequent approach to developing regional economic theories.

Much has been written on industrial districts and the role of these ideas in later theories of regional economic development (Martin & Sunley 2007), but I want to make two arguments here important to the concern of this chapter. The first is that behind the concept of the industrial district itself, Marshall's approach (and the legacy it has produced in geographical thinking) was heavily concerned with a critical engagement with the role of firms. Marshall's work itself developed its neoclassical framework to theorise the significance of different firms. However, his limited but important points about the social and cultural underpinnings of industrial districts form the basis for a legacy of work that in geography has produced a long history of critical engagement with utility of this neoclassical conception, and led economic geographers to develop and interrogate the significance of different socio-cultural dimensions at the firm level within successful industrial districts. For example, that district success was often closely linked to the trajectories of some (larger, more effective) firms, in recent decades underpins analysis of the differential power relations between firms, the role of inter-firm networks and the informal social practices that underpin innovation and knowledge exchange between firms in industrial clusters (c.f. Phelps 1992; Malmberg & Maskell 2002; Storper & Venables 2004) .

Secondly, the debate about the role of industrial districts / clusters has been a central axis around epistemological debates within economic geography and the renewal of a critical social scientific perspective after a period of emphasis on the need for objective theorisation, neoclassical economic theory and quantitative spatial analysis in the mid twentieth century (e.g. Harrison 1992; Amin & Thrift 1992). Human geography in the post second world war period rejected political economic approaches in favour of quantitative social science and neoclassical theory. I come back to the critical turn in economic geography below but with regard to Marshallian industrial districts, the post world war two emphasis increasingly centred on a neoclassical approach to understanding firms within such districts with the social and cultural dimensions identified by Marshall were excluded from the object of enquiry (Gordon & McCann 2000). Geographical thinking of recent decades has returned a critical and socio-economic or Polanyian (c.f. Yeung 2005) approach to industrial districts / clusters, whilst in the crossover between economic geography and spatial economics (post-) neoclassical approaches have also flourished (c.f. Martin 1999). The debate about industrial clusters / districts is thus at the forefront of the engagement between dominant economic theory and critical heterodox approaches to economic geography, and both focused heavily on the firm as the key unit of analysis.

2.2 Location theory

A second longstanding thread of economic geography thinking that has strongly influenced theories of the firm or corporation which also needs mentioning is the broader field of location analysis. In many respects the significance of this thread of economic geographical work echoes that of industrial districts / clusters in that it has been a battleground for competing epistemological perspectives drawing on neoclassical economic theory and critical heterodox economic or socio-economic theories respectively (c.f. Martin & Sunley 2003). However, it is important to briefly review how location theory has shaped the emergence of critical approaches to firms more generally beyond the scope of the debates about industrial districts.

Location theory in economic geography has again a history going back to the origins of geography as a discipline, and its interdisciplinary entwinement with economics and sociology. Economic geographical thinking in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries sought to develop theories of why certain industries developed in certain regions, and what the most significant factors were in establishing and maintaining those industries. The wider imperative for such questions were often formed by the needs of imperial expansionism, or later inter-state rivalry or the pressures of economic decline that appears in industrial countries in the earlier twentieth century. However, as a strand of economic geography, location theory drew on classical economics for its theoretical approach and in that sense represents a sub-field further away from the more 'critical' nineteenth century political economy influenced by Marx and other thinkers at the cross-over between political and economics. Foremost in this approach insofar as it has most strongly shaped economic geography as a sub-discipline within human geography is the work of Alfred Weber centred around his 1909 book *Location and the Theory of Industries.* Weber's work sought to develop economic models of firm location based around least cost where location choices were based on minimising labour and transport costs (c.f. Dicken & Lloyd 1990).

Location theory represents another moment of enshrining the centrality of firms and firm-based decision making in the historical development of economic geography, and by the mid twentieth century this occupied a central place as geographers attempted to develop the discipline as a model and quantitatively based spatial science. As with Marshall's theories of industrial districts, it is important however in establishing the firm as a primary unit of analysis in economic geographical thinking (albeit within a distinctive epistemological framework) but also for providing the context for a critical engagement with how firm-based theories of economic activity should be developed. It is impossible to understand how contemporary critical engagements with the firm in geographical thinking have developed without understanding both the nature of this earlier location theory, and also the reaction to it in recent decades. It is to this latter issue we now turn.

2.3 The impact of the critical turn in human geography

From the mid-1970s, and in common with some other social science disciplines, human geography underwent a critical turn which impacted significantly on its conceptualization and theoretical deployment of the firm or corporation (c.f. Barnes 2001). This was initiated by Marxian-grounded critical interventions that rejected the objectivity of modelling, neoclassical economics and modernist social theory arguing that human geographers should study the spatial unevenness of capitalism and social inequality at a variety of scales from cities to nation states (e.g. Harvey 1973). By the 1980s, this critical turn had become increasingly cultural in focus and augmented its philosophical and epistemological foundations by drawing on a range of thinkers and schools of thought spanning humanist, postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking (Philo 1992).

In relation to geographical thinking about firms and corporations, I would suggest the critical (and subsequent cultural) turn had at least three main impacts during the 1970s and 1980s (and which have endured since). First of all, it questioned the status and nature of geographical theory and knowledge being produced about firms. The the initial critical shift in human geography represented a strongly oriented critique of the dominant fields of inquiry within economic geography around firm location and geographical concentration because it questioned the claims to scientific objectivity in these model-based and numerically-informed approaches. Marxian economic geography thus undermined the terms of what geographers were seeking to theorise about firms, and what should be their goal in knowledge production. Marxian critiques argued that economic geographers should be concerned with the political economic impacts of firm and industry practices, and in particular how the spatiality of firms' existence related to uneven economic outcomes (c.f. Harvey 2001).

This opened up a second major impact of the critical turn on geographical theories of the firm which was to expand the range of dimensions to the nature and significance of firms that geographers studied. Geographical thinking began to critically engage with the nature of firms in context (whether that was locality, institutional or socio-cultural context) as well as the nature of power relationships between firms and other actors, and within industries between different firms. Conceptions of the nature of firm agency and action were thus augmented, as well as being understood as existing and shaping wider contexts (e.g. regional labour markets, labour relations, trade unionism) (c.f. Massey 1984). Conceptualisation of the firm / corporation in geographical analyses was no longer restricted to understanding firms as rational economic actors engaging in a range of markets (either through selling products or buying labour and or production inputs) (c.f. Maskell 2001). The geographical question of ‘where’ and ‘when’ firm agency was relevant became enormously broadened. This allowed firms to be understood as spatially complex socio-economic actors engaged in specific political and cultural contexts. Thirdly, and lastly, it also created a new conceptual and theoretical set of objects for analysis by destabilising the firm as a black box concept to be treated as a coherent unit of analysis and single agent in the socio-economic world. In contrast to the framing of the firm as an unquestioned and equivalent unit of action in the economic world, geographers began to look at the nature of what was going on *within* firm spaces encompassing, for example, the role of senior management, the nature of different work processes or the nature of industrial relations (c.f. Scott 1986; Yeung 2000; Taylor & Asheim 2001).

3) Critical economic geographies of the corporation

Geographical thinking on the firm or corporation since the critical turn in human and economic geography has taken different directions reflecting the many disciplinary threads of human geography. It is important to realise, however, that epistemological differences have remained and that the categorisation of critical approaches needs to be understood in broader than just a radical Marxian political economy sense within the discipline. The proposition in this chapter is that geographers have engaged with the firm or corporation critically through a range of contrasting epistemological frameworks which are not all overlapping and which have not always been uncritical of each other. This makes the geographical literature on the firm or corporation rich and diverse, but also more difficult to deal with as a whole since the nature of the critical approach differs in its objects of study and politics of knowledge. In this respect, before turning to the kinds of Marxian political economic critical engagement with the firm by geographers, in this section we begin by considering ways in which economic geographical understandings of the firm / corporation have made a critical contribution to the dominant approaches of mainstream economics and management / business studies. Rather than deploying a political economic critique of dominant theoretical approaches in these areas, a significant body of work in economic geography has been critical of the concepts used, and in particular the *aspatial* nature of the epistemological assumptions of dominant theories. These critical economic geographies of the corporation may be less ‘radically’ critical but they represent an important contribution by geographers in critical theorisation that have produced more sophisticated theoretical understandings of corporation in the (globalizing) world economy of the last three or four decades. In this respect, economic geographers have developed a spatially-informed critique of firm evolution, development and operation which continues to present significant and (constructively) critical insight to the approach of other disciplines – notably, economics, management studies and international business.

3.1 Deindustrialization & the crisis of manufacturing firms

Economic geography in the 1970s and 1980s in a north American and European context became very concerned to conceptualise and understand the processes of industrial decline and deindustrialization that dominated many regions in the advanced industrial economies over these decades (Hudson 1986; Herod 1994). The now familiar context of declining manufacturing industries, rising unemployment and the challenges of regional restructuring and fostering new industries were of course natural issues for geographical concern given the longstanding interest of economic geography in the nature of regional economies and industrial location. However, economic geographers in these decades also conducted significant firm-level research into these processes, and it fair to say that the firm (and particularly larger corporations) became a growing object of critical study with respect to their role and their potential agency or otherwise in these processes. Whilst therefore economic geographers in fact framed their analyses through article titles referencing regional decline or industrial change, much of the argument (and the research upon which it was based) related to research into large corporations and their relationship with regional labour markets, regional policy agencies and their locational rationale in globalizing markets.

In this respect, this work on deindustrialization provides an important contribution to critical thinking at the national and regional scales in geographical thought. It is possible to identify at least three major themes in this work on deindustrialization that relate to the development of geographical critical thinking about firms. The first of these is the capacity or otherwise of firms in old industries to respond to the economic forces driving decline. Whilst economists framed these debates as simpler accounts of inefficiency and competition from cheaper labour locations (Maskell 2001), economic geographers examined both the internal and external firm-level factors shaping economic decline. Of particular significance are the ways in which economic geographers have utilised the concepts of lock-in (Martin 2010) and path-dependency (c.f. Sternberg & Arndt 2001) in relation to the spatial existence of firms. Where mainstream economic thinking framed lock- in in terms of firm inefficiency and being locked into to certain technological capacities that ultimately lead to decline, economic geographers sought to theorise the nature of path dependency in relation to the specific local and regional contexts in which declining firms were operating including the role that institutional structures, policy at a variety of scales, labour market factors played in shaping the nature and pace of manufacturing decline (Hassink 2003). This work provided a more sophisticated account of what constituted lock-in and why it could not easily be mitigated in policy terms within specific regional economies. It also developed a basis for a critical engagement with why government intervention and policy failed to maintain long established manufacturing firm activity in old industrial regions by revealing the limitation of the dominant economic theories that had informed underpinning policies. An example, would be the analysis in the UK of the 1980s Thatcher governments' limited success in addressing industrial decline through a policy framework that was over reliant on market forces to initiate technological change and upskilling of the workforce in the midlands and north-east of the UK (Hudson 2005).

Second, and related, economic geography sought to develop a critical approach to the way in which policy environments might mitigate industrial decline through specific frameworks that incentivised corporations to remain or evolve within regional economic contexts. In considering the north American rust-belt with the decline of heavy industry and manufacturing, geographers contributed to understandings of how specific policy interventions within regional economies were relatively unsuccessful in mitigating the problems faced by key large corporations (Scott 1992). An often used example would be the way in which car manufacturers like Ford and General Motors in cities like Detroit were caught not just in the tide of global market forces (competition from new Japanese and Asian firms), but also how state or government policy intervention did little to address underlying problems of profitability. They also revealed the inconsistency of these policy positions with the home country environments that had nurtured and supported corporations that were moving into advanced industrial economies in industries such as automobiles, consumer electronics and white goods. Geographical work examined, for example, how Japanese or Korean corporate organization and governance provided competitive advantage and essentially an uneven 'playing field' in terms of home country policy support that enabled corporations to succeed in moving into northern American and European regional economies where domestic firms were struggling (e.g. Mair *et al* 1988)

Economic geographers thus provided considerable insight in this period as to why policy environments exacerbated the problems of industrial decline in some advanced industrial regions. Free market ideological positions (Thatcherism / Reaganism) exposed corporations that were experiencing higher production costs and technological and productive process lock-in to geographical trading environments that were especially brutal in lacking any support for corporate repositioning by host states (Martin & Rowthorn 1986; Peck & Tickell 2002). Geographical accounts in that sense provided critical insight both into the policy but also to market-oriented theories of corporate failure and the processes of off-shoring that began to occur as manufacturing firms relocated production to new Asian locations. Such accounts provided a more sophisticated framing of corporate relocation decisions that revealed how labour costs were just one amongst a range of factors shaping the process of industrial decline in old industrial regions, in contrast to the dominant account of free market ideology of the period.

Third, and related, a sizeable geographical literature since the 1980s has also examined the role of foreign corporations in tackling regional manufacturing industry decline in Europe and north America in leading to technology transfer and labour market upskilling within declining old industrial regions (for example, the northern regions of the UK, northern France and Germany, and the 'rustbelt in the USA) and also in deprived regions seeking to attract 'branch plant' investment whereby firms locate routine manufacturing assembly plants in regions of low cost relatively unskilled labour which had traditionally not been engaged in manufacturing activity (Phelps 1993). Regional economies benefit from the creation of jobs and inward investment although these tend to be lower value-added activities. Economic geographical work adopted a critical analytical approach to assessing whether, for example, foreign corporations in different industries provided a demonstration effect by bringing in both non-local working practices (e.g. Majek & Hayter 2008), cultural values and norms (e.g. Gertler 2001) as well as new material production technologies (e.g. Harrison *et al* 1996) and research and development capacities (e.g. Perkmann 2006).

3.2 Global Shifts: Critical mappings of global production

Since the late 1980s, and related to the debates discussed above, a substantial body of work in economic geography on firms has focused on the emergence of multinational and transnational corporations (MNCs and TNCs), and the role of corporations in the reconfiguration of economic activity across the globe (Dicken 2014). Economic geographers have long argued that the two processes are inextricably linked, rather than seeing firms as relatively passive actors responding to global market forces or economic necessity. In that respect, geographical thinking has made an important contribution to wider social scientific debates about economic globalization and the complex role of corporations in this process. We will move to consider in some depth the way in which geographers have contributed critically to debates about corporate internationalization or globalization at the firm level shortly, but first it is important to assess the wider critical contribution to theories of global economic reconfiguration captured by the idea of a 'global shift' in the geography of production across the world economy in the last forty years.

Economic geography developed the concept of a 'global shift' in the late 1970s to try to capture the geographical restructuring of the global economy that had been in evidence for most of the preceding decade. The corollary of the declining old industrial regions in the then 'first world economies' was the emergence of what economists and development theorists referred to as the newly industrializing economies of Asia. Coined by the geographer Peter Dicken (c.f. Dicken 1988), the concept of a 'global shift' sought to link first world deindustrialization with developing world industrialization through the central role of multinational corporations. The initial contribution of the global shift framework in the 1980s was to develop a critical edge to analysis of flows of trade and investment across the world economy that economists and development studies scholars had grounded many theoretical accounts of the changing geography of global production. Conventional international trade theory paid little attention to the role of firms, or the nature of trade itself in relation to firms (notably whether trade was between or within the same firm) (Dicken 2014: 21). This economic geographical approach placed the firm or corporation as the central object of study in seeking to theorise how and why the geographies of where and what was produced in the world economy were changing. It differentiated between different types of trade (inter-firm and infra-firm), and was concerned with the geographical relationship between trade and production processes (rather than just in the locations between which goods or services were traded between).

The focus in particular was the way large corporations in the global north (north America, Europe and Japan / Australia) were relocating production to newly industrializing economies (NICs) in Asia such as Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia and, to a lesser extent in the 1980s, China, India and parts of Latin America. The global shift concept represented a critical intervention from its inception insofar as developing scope to understand how corporations in different industries were caught up in their own specific rationales and circumstances as well as the historical geographic reasons behind decision to leave certain regions of the world and initiate production in others (Jones 2012).

By the 1990s however, this concept had been broadened in a body of work led by Dicken's 'Manchester School' around the wider theory of global production networks (GPNs) (Henderson *et al* 2002). The GPN became the central organising concept for how this school of economic geography theorised the interconnectivity of global production, and how it understood the key role played by transnational corporations (TNCs). Dicken and his colleagues argued that economic globalization could be better understood by taking the firm (and TNCs in particular) as a unit of analysis because it was increasingly clear that national boundaries no longer contained production (Yeung *et al* 2009). Dicken (2014) argues that that the components of the global economy are increasingly interconnected in qualitatively different ways than in the past (ibid.: 52) and in the contemporary period of globalization in recent decades it increasingly can be understood to consist of 'tangled webs of production units and circuits and networks'. These 'cut through and across all geographical scales and it is through the analysis of these networks, including their participants, their interconnections and their power relationships – that the nature of the world economy can be understood (ibid.). Crucial to this global production network (or GPN) perspective is the centrality of *relational* thinking which focuses on theorising socioeconomic processes as intertwined and mutually constitutive (ibid).

Firms are not the only participants or actors in this GPN conception of (economic) globalization, but in situating the role of firms within this analytical framework of the global economy, geographical thinking has provided a new and sophisticated approach to critically conceptualising the nature of the corporation in today's world economy. Whilst this work has drawn on the theoretical ideas and research of management studies and international business scholars, I want to suggest at least three key contributions that are distinctively geographical to analysis of corporate internationalization elsewhere in the social sciences. First, the GPN approach has looked at not just whether and why firms transnationalise but *how* they do so and how different geographical and historical contexts shape the evolutions and outcomes of that transnationalization process. Secondly, the GPN approach has provided critical scope to destabilise the concept of the transnational corporation as a black box producing unit, rather seeking to understand the blurred boundaries of corporate form through the production network as firms develop complex geographical relationships with a multitude of suppliers, subsidiaries and subcontractors. The GPN approach therefore sees firms not just as actors within networks, but actors positioned in networks with specific geographies that shape both how the production network has developed, how it reproduces itself and its likely future trajectories. Thirdly, the GPN approach contrasts with much of the management studies literature on transnational corporations by scrutinising the nature of corporations' embeddedness in regional contexts, socio-cultural and political-institutional relationships (Hess 2004). The transnational corporation within the GPN approach is thus far from an abstract entity operating in an abstracted global market for inputs, labour or product sales. Rather, the approach provides scope for critical insight into the specifics of how corporations in specific industries and between different industries have sought to transnationalise, and how they are caught up in wider globalization processes.

3.3 Critiquing the nature of corporate internationalization

Whilst the GPN school within economic geography has provided a macro-level critical contribution to how we might better understand the role of TNCs in economic globalization, geographical work has also made a significant critical contribution to theories of firm internationalization or transnationalization with firms which is worth exploring further. Again the issue of corporate internationalization or transnationalization is one that has been of considerable concern to management studies, and is a central issue for international business scholars, but I want to suggest economic geography has made several important areas of critical insight to understanding these firm-level processes of transformation. It is useful again to highlight the distinctive geographical perspective developed which has several aspects concerned with the ways in which the spatiality or spatial existence of (transnational) corporations are conceptualised. I point to three distinct threads to this work here.

A first key contribution made by much economic geographical work has been to develop more conceptually sophisticated and theoretically critical bases for understanding transnational corporate form. Geographical work has in particular consider the different dimensions to the spatiality of transnational corporations, and contributed to debates about the emergence or otherwise of 'truly global corporations' (c.f. Jones 2003; 2005; Faulconbridge 2008). Where other social science disciplines have disagreed around the categories of multinational as opposed to transnational or global firms (e.g. Rugman 2002), geographers have provided a range of criteria for moving beyond relatively simplistic categories based on the idea that firms globalise in an uneven manner across territorial jurisdictions. The GPN approach already discussed is itself based on a more sophisticated conception of globalized firms as 'networks within networks' with different production functions spread but geographical work has moved the concept of the TNC beyond measurement of the 'globalness' or geographical extent of corporate activity. Geographical work has also been important in developing an empirical understanding of how many TNCs have internationalised through greater regional orientation and thus tempered the hyperglobalist vision of a world populated by ever growing numbers of firms in a truly 'flat world' (Iammarino & McCann 2013; Dicken 2014), whilst simultaneously developing sensitivity to the specific elements or aspects of corporate operations that are becoming more geographical globalized (Faulconbridge 2006; 2007). Geographers in that sense have framed a theoretical approach that enables an assessment of the degree and breadth of *corporate globality* across different dimensions of TNCs activities (c.f. Schlunze *et al* 2011), and which interrogates the multidimensional (organizational, social, cultural and operational) complexity of what corporate globality might be understood to mean (Jones 2007; Faulconbridge *et al* 2009).

However, economic geographical work has also contributed to critical understandings of the corporation through a second strand of more sociologically-informed thinking and research concerned with the socio-cultural dimensions of corporate transnationalisation in terms of the nature of work processes, employees and the labour market needs of transnational firms. Much of this work has clear overlap in its objects of study with management and business studies, but geographical work has a distinct epistemological difference of approach in foregrounding the spatiality of the social relations in which corporate actors are embedded, the key significance of individual or groups of employees and in seeking to theorise how these complex socio-spatialities impact on the performance and behaviour of corporations. For example, Schoenberger'(1997) draws together a body of geographical and non-geographical work in providing an interdisciplinary theoretical cut at better conceptualising (global) corporate culture. Schoenberger's approach injects a sensitivity to spatialities of corporate discourses, management practices, interpersonal and power relationships in seeking to offer a more holistic conceptualisation of corporate culture that moves beyond the dominate view of home economy cultural hegemony in transnational forms (e.g. the American firm, the Japanese firm) . More recently, contributions within what has been termed the new management geography (Schlunze *et al* 2011) focus on the role of managers and global working practices within transnational corporations, and in particular the way in which firms increasingly need 'hybrid or intercultural managers' who are willing and able to move between a range of different production locations within firms in order for firms to operate effectively across multiple national economic spaces (c.f. Beaverstock 2005). Geographical work has sought to interrogate and theorise the relationship between employee mobility ranging from the role of short term business travel in corporate management practices (Beaverstock 2007) to long term employee circulation secondment and the significance of face-to-face interaction (Storper & Venables 2004; Jones 2007). It also however seeks to understand the distanciated relationship networks that global managers are embedded within, examining how the strategies of transnational corporations are often the product of both the specific historical geographies of senior managers, their experiences and particular career path dependencies (Millar & Salt 2008).

Finally, a related but further differentiated thread of work within economic geography critically addresses understanding of knowledge processes, innovation and learning as key facets of transnational corporate development. In terms of the needs of transnational corporations for 'global managers' and 'global knowledge workers', economic geographers have explored the socio-cultural dimensions to business education (Hall 2008; Faulconbridge & Hall 2014) and the significance of for example, US business school MBA in developing the corporate capacities of returning highly skilled manager to firms in China, India or Latin America (c.f. Hall 2009). Economic geographical work has thus provided a basis to critically engage with the complexity of corporate need for both globally-mobile workers and 'local' employees with knowledge and understanding of specific localities that the localized operations of transnational corporations need to succeed (c.f. Gertler 2004). Such work also provides a critical perspective on how new technologies and corporate practices are disseminated by transnational corporations, and the complex way in which distanciated relationships influence corporate evolution and learning in the global space economy (Bathelt & Gluckler 2011). Economic geographers for example have researched the critical role that returning foreign-educated graduates have played in building domestic industry capacities in

BRICs economies (Saxenian 2007), and how hydridized corporate management practices are important in developing the competitiveness of regionally-oriented domestic corporations in the Chinese, Indian or Brazilian economies (Strom & Mattsson 2006; Jones & Strom 2012).

4) Geographical Political Economies and the Corporation

Whilst a significant body of work exists within the sub-discipline of economic geography that can be viewed as offering a critical social science perspective towards the corporation, human geographers work more generally from both a political economy and postmodern epistemological perspective. This work extends across a range of sub-disciplinary fields in human geography but in particular can be found within political, urban and social geography. In this section, we consider two major bodies of work spanning these areas which each provide a distinctive geographical cut at understanding the firm or corporation.

4.1 The Role of Corporations in Uneven Geographical development

Since the early 1980s, political economic thinking within human geography has contributed a substantial body of working seeking to theorise and empirically investigate the spatial unevenness of world capitalist economic development. This political economic strand of human geography has only sometimes taken the corporation as its primary unit of analysis, but it provides an important spatial theorisation of the place of large firms in shaping the geography of capitalist development. In relation to the goals of this chapter, three major theoretical arguments are worth considering.

The first is that capitalist development is intrinsically uneven across space, and that corporations have a distinctive role and agency in shaping that uneven development. Within political economic geography, the most significant thinker here is David Harvey whose work across more than three decades has provided both theoretical and empirically-informed analysis of global capitalist development. Harvey's earlier work uses Marxian theory to develop a spatalised understanding of the capitalist system, in particular the argument that capitalism seeks new 'spatial fixes' to avert inherent crisis (defined in Marxian terms) (Harvey 1982; 1985). In short, Harvey's geographical political economy argued that one way the capitalist system averted the crises of profitability and wealth imbalance (overaccummulation) identified in Marxist analysis was by shifting investment and productions to new regions and places from those in crisis. A spatial fix represents a solution to crisis in the capitalist economy in one region by moving to another. The rise of the newly-industrializing economies of the 1970s and 1980s thus represented one such spatial fix to address falling profitability in the advanced industrial economies of the global North (ibid.). However by the 1990s these theoretical approaches have increasingly incorporated the role of key agents and actors in the global capitalist economy, with Harvey and other political economic geographers seeking to conceptualise the specific agency of certain actors including states, political institutions, social movements, and of course (transnational) corporations (c.f. Smith 1997; Castree 2000). Such work shows the complex role that corporations play in shaping the nature of economic outcomes and economic development in specific regional and urban contexts, conceptualising the significance of corporate power in shaping specific development outcomes (c.f. Harvey 1989). Harvey (1996) extends this analysis to the political economy of the environment, examining how the nexus of state-corporate-financial capital power intersects to shape social inequality and environmental degradation. A similar analysis of the way in which (US and western) oil and energy corporations were part of a nexus of actors enrolled in the geopolitics of the second Iraq war of 2002 (Harvey 2003). A significant body of work adopted a similar approach within geography has sought to understand the relationship of corporate power in different industries to uneven development outcomes, as well as environmental degradation and transformation (Castree 2004; 2008)

Relatedly, political economic geographers have developed a critical account of the role of energy corporations in the global configuration of the energy economy. For example, Bridge & le Billon (2013) map the complex interrelationships between oil companies, nation states and other actors in seeking to understanding the uneven political economy of oil production, consumption and its relationship or otherwise to the transition towards a low carbon economy. Similarly, Bradshaw (2009; Shadrina & Bradshaw 2013) analyses the way in transnational energy corporation from different home economies are embedded in different institutional and geopolitical sets of associations and operational contexts that shape how these firms behave and the degree to which their activities produce different outcomes in different countries and regions.

A second set of broad theoretical arguments political economic geographers have developed concerns the meso-scale significance of firms to the politics of labour conditions and relations across an uneven global space economy. In this respect, geographical thinking and research has produced a critical mapping of the geographies of labour inequality and the role played by corporations in shaping these inequalities. Economic geographical work has for example sought to map and conceptualise the way in which workers are differentially positioned in global production networks, and trace the way in which transnational firms lead to exploitative or disadvantageous set of local labour market conditions (Coe & Hess 2013). Whilst work sociologists and development theorists obviously have shared this concern with, for example, sweatshop work conditions in the garment and apparel industry in less developed economies, geographical theories are of particular distinctiveness in mapping and theorising the distanciated nature of inter-firm and firm-state relationships that lie behind these global labour inequalities (e.g. Hughes *et al* 2008). These theoretical arguments have their antecedents in significant theoretical arguments made about the relationship between regional economies and their labour markets, notable in Doreen Massey's widely-cited arguments around 'spatial divisions of labour' within national economies (c.f. Massey 1984; Allen *et al* 1998). However, in the context of both a growing focus on firms as a unit of analysis within economic geography, and the globalization of recent decades, geographical work has applied this theoretical approach to questions of nature of global scale economic development and the increasingly complex relationships between labour markets in given territorial regions and corporations as transnational dispersed actors.

For example, Peck (1996) applied developed a geographical socio-political analysis of regional labour markets informed by a Marxian regulation school approach to argue that local or regional labour markets exist as local processes that develop their own distinctive configurations of institutions. This produces distinctive local power distributions that mobile labour in different ways in different places, and which are translocally connected at the nationally and international scales (ibid). In this respect, corporations are important but translocal actors embedded in a distinctive regulatory context. Such an approach has ramified across political economic geography over the last couple of decades, albeit with an ever-growing emphasis on the significance of translocal as well as local connections shaping the nature of labour market outcomes. More recent work has built on this Marxian approach with, for example, Glassman's (2002; 2004) work examining the intersection of state, corporate and labour market politics in south east Asian economies such as Thailand, seeking to theorise the agency of transnational corporations in the contested terrain of economic policy with this economy. Glassman provides a spatially-sensitive account of the nature of transnational corporate power (or weakness) in the contested politics that have surrounded so-called neoliberal globalization in developing economies, providing a sophisticated and spatially-sensitive framework through which to understand critically the capacities and behaviour of transnational corporations as part of these economic development trajectories. Such work also makes a nuanced contribution to debates about the nature of neoliberal economic power and local resistance, moving beyond polarized conceptions of corporate agency and local political resistance movements. This leads us to a second and related thread of geographical political economic thinking concerned with the relationship of corporations to neoliberalization and financialization more generally.

4.2 Neoliberalism, Financialization and the Corporation

Political and economic geographers have developed a diverse body of critical work that engages with the role of the corporation in relation to the widely-used processes of neoliberalization and financialization but again it can be argued that a distinctive critical geographical cut is discernible which differentiates such work from that in other social science disciplines.

Turning to the process of neoliberalization first, several key contribution to understanding both the ideological development and ongoing impact of this process in global economic development have emerged from geography. Perhaps most evident are in conceptual terms are the contributions of David Harvey (2005) and Jamie Peck (2010) - overlapping in part with the work discussed above - in charting the historical emergence and macropolitical impact of this political discourse. These geographical contributions chart the historical origins and socio-political configurations that produced neoliberal ideas, analysing the way in which neoliberalist ideas have unevenly shaped the international political and institutional context in which economic globalization has occurred in recent decades (and now it has impacted in specific places), as well the historical-geographical constellations of specific individuals, places, events and connections that led to the growing power of neoliberalist policies (c.f. Peck 2010). The role of large corporations are woven into these analyses, and they situate well the relative significance of corporate agency to other actors in the development of neoliberalist ideas and policies.

Related, and similarly, geographers have become increasingly interested in developing theories using the concept of financialization (c.f. Epstein 2007) to understand how financial logics have become increasingly embedded in global economy and society. However, these wider theoretical accounts have - for our purposes in this chapter - also provided geographers with a spatially-oriented approach to understanding the way in which corporations are agents within specific dimensions to specific manifestations of both of these processes. Again several strands to this contribution to the wider financialization debate are evident. Firstly, economic and political geographical work has sought to map and theorises the agency of transnational corporations in advancing neoliberalist approaches to industrial development within specific industrial sector in the context of wider economic globalization. This work ranges across a range of different industries, and different national economies but provides a distinctive geographical approach (in contrast to international political economy) by drawing on explicitly spatial theories of global economic development (such as the GPN approach) as well as political economic theories. For example, Hughes (2000) examines the sets of uneven relationships in transnational retailing exploring the cut flower and fresh produce industry in east Africa supplying fresh good to transnational retailors operating across European economies. The analysis reveals the differential power relationships between large corporations and their suppliers, and examines how firms are able to wield power in the supply chain which impacts negatively on domestic industries in developing countries such as Kenya, Tanzania or South Africa. These uneven power relationships and the capacities for large transnational firms to wield market advantage are framed by a range of policy and trade institutional norms and rules informed by neoliberal discourses. Similar work has also sought to understand this corporate dimension to neoliberalization in the energy (e.g. Ahmed (2007) and agricultural sectors (e.g. Potter & Tilzey 2007) .

A second strand has in particular been concerned to seek to theorise how neoliberalisation is an outcome of corporate- institutional nexus in specific industries or realms of economic activity. A good example of this the growing economic geographical literature that has sought understand the role of transnational financial firms in the global reconfiguration of infrastructure ownership and investment (Haughton & McManus 2006). Neoliberalization has produced a move away in recent decades from state ownerships of transport, energy and other public utilities in many countries around the world with states in many countries both privatising existing public infrastructure and seeking private finance and investment in the case of new projects (O'Neill 2010). This work significantly contributes to understanding how (transnational) corporations further this process by both advocating the perceived advantages of private utility ownership, garnering financial investment required and developing the capabilities for states to transfer ownership in both political and practical terms (O'Neill 2013). In particular this geographical perspective provides insight into the importance of different types of translocal connections centred around transnational corporations in disseminating these kinds of neoliberal practices and transformations between different national contexts. A good example is O'Neill's work on Australiasian public infrastructure investment activity, and its linkages to European and North American corporate financing networks.

Thirdly, and following on from this, financial geographers have provided critical analyses of the role that firms play in finanicalization processes more generally. Geographical work has examined how firms act as agents within economic systems that exhibit the growing and systematic power of finance and financial engineering (Blackburn 2009: 39). Such a logic is derived from corporate governance models that seek to maximise shareholder value and increase competition in all areas of the economy, although the logic of financialization as a process extends beyond the scope of corporate activity as it becomes applied by other actors such as states to different organizational or institutional contexts (French *et al* 2008). Using this approach, geographical work - as with other debates within political economic thinking - has of course been most concerned with the spatial dimensions to firms' role in financialization process.

Examples include research that has sought to understand how this process has shaped geographically uneven patterns of retail banking activity in the UK, leading to locally based pockets of exclusion as retails banks withdraw branches and access to financial services from low income and deprived communities (Leyshon et al 2008) and research seeking to understand how logics of financialization are shaped by the significance of different actors within firms (senior managers, consultant advisors) who form part of local elites in the labour market within specific global financial centres such as London or New York (Hall 2009). Economic geographers have also used this theoretical approach to develop a distinctive geographical understanding of how specific types of corporate actors shape the nature of international financial markets. In this respect, Pollard and Samers (2009) examine the rise of Islamic banks as transnational corporate actors, leading to new forms of investment activity with distinctive outcome in specific regions and locales. This work challenges both generalised theoretical accounts of financialization processes that seek corporate agency as a uniform application of only one finanicalization logic, and also creates a space within theoretical understandings of finanicialization to better capture why diverse outcomes emerge in different parts of the global space economy as a result of specific types of corporate rationales.

A further substantial body of work has also similarly applied this kind of approach to understanding the nature and development of the global financial system, and most recently the global financial crisis (GFC) that occurred from 2009 (Dixon 2014). In particular, by deconstructing transnational banks and other financial corporate actors as entities embedded across specific places with distinctive institutional and regulatory contexts, geographical thinking provides scope for a more nuanced theoretical understanding of how different manifestations of financialization come about in the global economy. Geographical work on finance has thus looked at the interactions between financial firms involved, for example, in the nature of pension (Clark 2000) and sovereign wealth funds (Dixon *et al* 2012), adopting a critical analysis of how corporate actors are enrolled in investment decisions making and behaviour and the relationship that has to market outcomes, volatility and the recent global financial crisis. Economic geographers again in this work deploy a distinctly geographical sensibility in thinking how the differential institutional, corporate and jurisdictional geographies in the global financial system interact to produce certain economic outcomes and corporate behaviours. Such an approach represents a powerful addition to work in other social science disciplines (management studies or international political economy) by bringing together a multi-actor and multi-scalar analysis of the role of financial corporations which reveals, for example, the degree to which banks and investment funds individually and collectively are impacting on financial market volatility in the context of the actions of other actors and a globally-extensive financial system.

5) Critical engagements within corporate spaces

The final dimension to critical geographical thinking about the firm we need to consider moves to work that has specifically engaged with the nature of social spaces within corporations. This body of geographical work is socio-economic in its emphasis and in different ways examines the nature and experience of work as a social practice within corporate spaces.

5.1 Unequal spaces of work inside the corporation

Drawing on the wider social science literature spanning development studies international politics and anthropology, geographers have examined the role of both transnational and nationally-oriented corporations in relation to the nature of work, working conditions and trade union organization. Clearly this geographical contributions sits within a substantial social science literature on topics such as low pay and poor conditions for manufacturing workers and questions of worker rights and exploitation, but I want to argue that geographers have again provided a useful and distinctive addition to such debates by providing a more spatially sensitive analysis of the global-scale organizational, collective and individual relationships that lie behind work inequalities within firms, and also by applying a strongly comparative empirical approach across different firms, global regions and industries.

Several good examples can be offered here to illustrate this argument. Firstly, geographers have sought to theorize the nature of worker and trade union organization in the context of the ‘global shift’ conceptual framework discussed earlier. Such work focuses on how the globalization of trade union activity and worker organization has emerged and / or disseminated through production networks, and the factors that shape the nature of these developments through the levels of industry, market and firms (Castree 2004; Coe & Hess 2013). Comparative work has thus examined how trade union organisation varies within and across the different country operations of transnational firms. For example, James & Vira (2010) examine the information and communications technology (ICT) industry operating in Europe and India, seeking to understand how labour organization ideas disseminate within transnational corporations and how firms respond to these processes of internal globalization of worker identity, organization and practices. In their Indian case, James and Vira show how the working conditions of IT workers in India are entwined with global-scale relationships with key transnational IT firms, and also how these conditions evolve locally in context also shaped by the role of new local firms both behaving as competitors and suppliers in this industry. Worker conditions and experience are thus theorised as a complex and dynamic outcome of multi-scalar processes and relationships within and between firms operating in this industry within that country context.

A second contrasting example is research into *maquiladorization* processes in the Mexican economy and the specific institutional, political and social contexts in which leading transnational firms have become embedded in manufacturing branch plant production. Berndt (2003) analyses a history of worker exploitation, exclusion and the proximity of corporate operations to a regional reality of background violence and dispossession. He examines how local political and economic elites are caught up in these outcomes, and the degree to which the corporate spaces of transnational firms overlap and are permeated by discourses and institutional relationships framing worker experience. This kind of approach allows a more sophisticated understanding of the dependency of Mexican maquiladora production in consumer electronics to the politics and economics of the US economy upon which it depends, and how transnational corporations are mediators and enactors of wider institutional realities or political discourses. A illustrative aspect of this that Berndt points to is how the masculinization of maquiladora work in the local Mexican labour market facilitates a narrative - reflected in corporate behaviour - that leads to female not male workers being treated as the flexible segment of the labour market and the group who suffer both workplace disadvantage and loss of employment in the event of economic downturn (Berndt 2003; 2013).

5.2 Gendered corporate workspaces

This latter example leads us to another dimension to geographical work on corporate spaces of work concerned with gender inequalities more generally. Again this overlaps a literature in sociology and human resource management amongst other disciplines, but the geographical contribution adds a distinctive concern for the significant of spatiality to these complementary analyses.

Two examples illustrate this for our purposes here. The first is research into the way in which the gendered nature of working environments within firms is constituted through a range of social, cultural and organization factors that reflect both the history to the firm, the institutional and labour market context in which it operates and the external market environment that frames that nature of work itself within a firm. McDowell (McDowell & Court 1994; McDowell 2011) in her now classic study of the gendered nature of work within banking and finance firms in the City of London seeks to explain why women employees occupy very few senior positions, and also why this appears to be reproduced in a corporate policy context seeking to address this and regulated by anti-gender discriminatory mechanisms. In contrast to existing conceptions of the ‘glass ceiling’ within firms, the argument developed draws on a range of social and geographical theories is that the corporate workplace and a range of organizational discourses and contextually-specific working practices combine to lead to the reproduction of gender inequality and contribute to the absence of women in senior positions. These factors include amongst a long list working practice norms, workplace culture within the firm, embodied worker behaviour, wider societal expectations about job roles and attributes such as leadership and the broader social and educational context of senior employees beyond the firm across the financial industry (c.f. Jones 1998). The key insight McDowell’s geographical analysis develops is, however, that seeking to narrow theories of gender inequalities in the these corporate contexts to the specific of a given firm or organization provides only a very partial understanding of why such inequalities arise, and integrating a multi-faceted and multi-scalar theorisation of the gendered nature of corporate workspace provides a richer and more powerful account.

More recent work in socio-economic geography has built on this kind of work from the 1990s to critically examine the significance of gender to corporate operation in a range of different industries and regional economies. In particular, geographical work has integrated theories of gender as one of a range of context specific factors into theoretical accounts of why certain corporations and regional clusters have succeeded in the global economy. A good example here is Molloy & Larner's (2013) work on the creative economy and specifically the New Zealand fashion industry. Larner examines how a fashion industry has developed and transnationalised through the interaction of key (female) entrepreneurs using global-scale linkages and relationships to establish and grow fashion design firms that market their products globally from a distinctive regional position in New Zealand. A key insight is that the success and growth of these firms in this industry cannot be explained without an account that understands the particular significance of gender, regional culture, institutional context and global scale worker mobilities and linkages. In this respect, this kind of geographical work develops a broader theoretical framework to seek to understand how gender shapes corporate development than occurs in some of the management literature that, for example, more narrowly focuses and prioritised on the leadership qualities of female managers or entrepreneurs (c.f. Linehan 2002).

6 Conclusion: spatializing critiques of the corporation

In seeking to provide an overview of the way in which geographers and geographical thinking has critically engaged with the firm or corporation, this chapter has inevitably painted a broad picture and explored only a limited number of examples of the many ways in which human geographers have undertaken this task. As should be clear, for human geography as a critical social science, engagement with the corporation is both implicit and explicit across an enormous body of work, not all of which would label itself as primarily concerned with the firm or corporation. The rationale of this discussion has been to try to provide some insight to the non-geographical reader to the diversity and scope of the contribution by the discipline to critical thinking on the firm.

In concluding, however, I want to reiterate and draw together two key arguments that emerge which are relevant to the wider objectives of this book. The first, and most important, is that a clear case is made by geographical thinking for deploying a spatially-aware critical analysis of the corporation. In particular, I would argue that other social science disciplines are likely to be able to find a very fertile and productive thread of inter-disciplinary engagement with the body of (economic) geographical work that has researched and theorised the ongoing development of transnational corporations in the global economy, and how they impact on specific regional economies and societies. Within this literature an increasingly sophisticated set of theoretical arguments around the organization of global production, the nature of power and control in these global-scale organization and the complex embeddedness of corporate activity in social, cultural and political contexts that also themselves are multi-scalar. There is already a very fruitful cross-disciplinary debate in existence with management and business studies in this area, but there is clearly much greater scope for engagement with the range of disciplinary approaches discussed in this book.

Following, on a second key argument worth reiterating is that critical approaches to the corporation within geography extend beyond the potentially narrower understanding of 'critical', representing work informed purely by a Marxian or political economy perspective. Whilst much that has been discussed in this chapter within geographer does fall into this categorization (albeit not always neatly), the critical engagement with the firm or corporation within geography falls across a much broader and diverse critical social science set of epistemological approaches. In this respect, geographical work on the corporation contributes to a broader debate about what a critical approach to the corporation might look like and how it might be developed in future.

7 References

7) References

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