

Key Thinkers on Space and Place

19 Peter Dicken

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Peter Dicken has been one of the most influential economic geographers in the discipline over the last 30 years or more. From the foundations of his key text *Location in Space: A Theoretical Approach to Economic Geography*, with Peter Lloyd (1972), Dicken has consistently published very high quality journal articles, book chapters and texts which have investigated: global economic geographies of industrial change; the role of transnational corporations in the world economy; economic development in East Asia (with particular focus on business networks and production chains); and global production networks. Collectively, and crucially, these works chart the effects of global economic change on different geographical scales – from the global to the local. Yet perhaps Dicken's most significant impact in the academy for both research, and teaching and learning, has been his seminal text *Global Shift* (reprinted in its fifth edition, 2007) which has provided a bedrock for scholars studying the uneven geographies of globalisation since the publication of its first edition in 1986. Though written to demonstrate the complex global articulation of *economic* production chains, *Global Shift* has proved influential beyond

the subdiscipline of economic geography, standing as a key reference in debates concerning the declining sovereignty of the nation-state and the formation of a global society.

Dicken is a 'Manchester man' through and through. He joined the Department of Geography at the University of Manchester in 1966 following the successful completion of his MA from the same University, and ultimately obtained a personal Chair in 1988. In between, he was awarded his PhD from the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Over almost four decades in academia, he has held distinguished research and teaching positions at universities in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Mexico, Singapore and the United States, and in 1999 became a Fellow of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences. The quality and policy relevance of his work has resulted in appointments as the Co-Director of European Science Foundation Scientific Programme on Regional and Urban Restructuring in Europe (1989–1994), and as a consultant advisor to the UNCTAD Commission on Transnational Corporations (1993–4). He has held several editorial positions on international journal boards (including *Competition and Change*, *Journal of Economic Geography*, *Global Networks*, *Review of International Political Economy*), including the Managing Editor of *Progress in Human Geography*. As his work on the strategic behaviour

of firms and international patterns of trade and investment criss-crosses with both management studies and international economics, he has forged successful research links outside geography. For example, a recent and notable research project has been with colleagues from Manchester Business School (Jeffrey Henderson) and the National University of Singapore (Henry Yeung) investigating global production networks in Britain, East Asia and Eastern Europe. Apart from driving global research agendas in economic geography, Dicken has also been committed to supervising graduate students (including many who have gone on to highly successful academic careers) and entertaining audiences on the international conference circuit.

A year before **David Harvey** published *Social Justice and the City* (1973), Peter Dicken and Peter Lloyd (of the University of Liverpool) published *Location in Space: A Theoretical Approach to Economic Geography*. For economic geography, it became a benchmark for the period. No stone was left unturned in the search for explaining the organisation of economy, locational analysis, regional economic development in space and the differential (rather than uneven) economic growth rates experienced in North America and Europe. In essence, this text was devoted to explicating the 'economic' in economic geography. Here, Dicken and his co-author were heavily influenced by the classical and neo-classical modelling gurus of locational theorists (e.g., Christaller, 1966; Isard, 1956; Losch, 1954) and, of course, the path-breaking work of **Peter Haggett** (for example, *Locational Analysis in Human Geography*, 1965, as well as Haggett's co-writing with Richard Chorley 1967; 1969). But, if we wind the clock on a full 18 years and read the third edition of *Location in*

Space (Dicken and Lloyd, 1990), we begin to unravel other influences on Dicken's view of the (economic) world. The neo-classical spirit of *Location in Space* is prevalent, but Dicken and Lloyd re-work the interpretation of the 'economic' in space by considering the *political economy* of location and its uneven distribution through time and space. For example, they discuss the key strategic role of transnational corporations in restructuring the world economy (as espoused by Taylor and Thrift, 1983), introduce the notion of 'chains' of business organisation and location (as discussed by Porter, 1985), examine geographies of corporate organisation and control (following **Pred**, 1974), investigate geographical 'linkages' in location (see Scott, 1984) and provide a thumbnail sketch of Marx's theories on capital and labour (which are drawn from original sources and informed by Harvey (1973; 1982) and others (e.g., **Masse**, 1984; Scott and **Storper**, 1986).

In 1986, Dicken published *Global Shift: Industrial Change in a Turbulent World*. In many ways, this text stands as Dicken's definitive statement on geographies of production: it is certainly his best-known and most widely cited work. In this text, Dicken looked afresh at explaining locational change in the world and to assist him in fulfilling this project, he looked beyond the geographical community for inspiration and ideas, especially to those who studied international economics and the strategic behaviour of organisations and transnational corporations. Of significance here is Dicken's appreciation of writers like Hymer (1972) on multinational corporations, Dunning (1980) on why firms engage in international production and Michalet (1980) on international subcontracting, and the use of an array of in-depth case studies (e.g., textiles and clothing) and empirics derived from

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the United Nations Centre for Transnational Corporations (UNCTC), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to tease out the political economy of industrial location at global–local scales.



Peter Dicken has always been fascinated by economic restructuring at the global–local scale (Dicken, 2003) and in particular, investigating the role of the transnational corporation in producing uneven development as transactionally linked chains of production stretch international and global space (e.g. Dicken, 1976; 1986; Dicken and Malmberg, 2001). The contributions Dicken's work has made to advancing our understanding of the geographies of restructuring within firms, and the ways in which firms impact upon different places around the globe, are considerable. These contributions can be summarised around four main themes.

First, Dicken has provided one of the most incisive and detailed geographical analyses of transnational corporations in the world economy (e.g., Dicken, 1971; 1980; 1994). From the analysis of the foreign direct investment patterns of Japanese firms in Britain (e.g., Dicken, 1990; Dicken and Lloyd, 1980; Dicken and Tickell, 1997), to in-depth studies of different sectors (e.g., automobiles – Dicken, 1987; 1992b) or, latterly, investigations into firms' production chains and networks (e.g. business networks in the Indonesian clothing industry – Dicken

and Hassler, 2000), Dicken has been at the forefront of unpacking the organisational role and geographies of the firm in (re)producing uneven development in economy and society. Of significant interest here is Dicken's reading of how firms impinge/impact upon and restructure local economies (and the state) through their organisational strategies and 'foot-loose' tendencies (i.e. being able to switch capital from one location to another with little friction – see Allen, 1995).

Second, Dicken has brought us a greater understanding of the role, locational behaviour and organisation of Japanese capital (and firms) in the West. He has published very detailed analysis of Japanese foreign direct investment in Britain (see above), case study material on Nissan in Washington (Dicken, 1984) and, more importantly, introduced in great depth the organisation of Japanese trading companies (*soga shosha*) to the Anglo-American academy (Dicken and Miyamachi, 1998). Dicken's research interests in Japanese firms and their management and labour practices outside of Japan reflects a much wider interest in economic restructuring in East and Pacific Asia especially (Dicken, 1987; Dicken et al., 1999).

Third, following on from the above, Dicken's work on economic restructuring within East Asia and the Pacific Rim has provided pickings for those seeking to understand the significance of chains and network structures within not only transnational corporations, but, more importantly, within the world economy (Dicken et al., 2001). Dicken's earlier work on business networks in organisations (Dicken and Thrift, 1992) provided the foundations for us to think about the organisation of economy (and places) in terms of functionally integrated linkages, connections and flows from both traditional Western and Asian business systems (Dicken, 2000). Moreover, Dicken

has conceptualised the importance of chains and networks in the global economy through ideas of territorialisation, bringing scale back onto the agenda in studies of both the firm and industrial sectors (Dicken et al., 2002).

Fourth, with colleagues from the 'Manchester School' – Neil Coe, Martin Hess, Jeffery Henderson and Henry Yeung – Dicken has been instrumental in developing the Global Production Networks (GPN) perspective for critically evaluating the relationalities and network geographies of contemporary forms of economic globalisation in the world economy (Coe et al., 2004; Dicken et al., 2002). Importantly, the GPN perspective takes forward the plethora of ideas about global commodity and value chains in a *relational* rather than linear way, which embellishes theoretical understandings of the spatial dynamism of global production in a context of transnational circulation, relationships and interactions (Coe et al., 2008).

KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

Dicken's key advances in the discipline have already been discussed at length, and include his innovative analysis of transnational corporations as a barometer for studying global economic change, unpacking the importance of production chains and networks in understanding contemporary patterns in economy; and examining global economic change in relation to a global-local dialectic. The reaction to this work in the discipline has been, on the whole, both positive and relatively uncontroversial. Many view

Dicken's work as at the vanguard of illustrating the manifestations of economic globalisation in contemporary society by providing neatly-crafted case studies and explanations for such patterns. Dicken has summarised his key arguments about geography, location and space as follows:

The basis of my argument is that firms, just like all other forms of social organization, are fundamentally and intrinsically *spatial* and *territorial*. They are spatial in the sense that they are responsive to geographical distance and to spatial variations in the availability of necessary resources and of business opportunities. Such spatiality may have – indeed most often has – a territorial manifestation. Hence, firms are territorial as well as spatial in the sense that the 'surface' from which firms originate and on which they operate is most commonly made up of a tessellated structure of territorial entities arrayed along a continuum of variable and overlapping scales, including those of political governance ... For some functions of the firm the territory may be intensely local, for others it may approach the global.

(Dicken, 2002: 12, our emphasis)

Dicken elucidates this global-local perspective in *Global Shift*, from first to fifth editions (with a sixth due in 2011). *Global Shift* is Dicken's major contribution to Geography and encapsulates his advocacy of a spatialised reading of economic activity. The 2007 edition, *Global Shift: Mapping the Changing Contours of the World Economy*, has excelled itself in this regard. Not only does Dicken interpret the significant ideas offered by the likes of John Allen, Ash Amin, Gordon Clark, Meric Gertler, Ron Martin, Anders Malmberg, Jamie Peck, Erica Schoenberger, **Michael Storper**, **Nigel Thrift** and Henry Yeung, but he has once again weaved into the text theoretical contributions from a wide spectrum of business and management sources (e.g., Gereffi,

Krugman, Porter, Sklair, and Whitley) to provide a richness which could not have otherwise been achieved through a geographical lens. For example, Dicken's *geographical* explanation of the organisational capabilities and competences of transnational corporations has been greatly influenced by Bartlett and Ghosal's (1998) notions of 'managing across borders', where they distinguish between

transnational, multinational, global and international organisational forms of the firm. Herein lies the contribution of Dicken to the discipline and beyond, in that his ideas and approach have not only been a benchmark for other geographers, but have also been accepted in international economics and organisational studies which focus on FDI and the strategic behaviour of firms in the world economy.

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