

Commentaries

Interdisciplinary (retail) research: the business of geography and the geography of business

At the 2005 British Academy of Management conference several well-known economic geographers, including Neil Wrigley, Gordon Clark, and Susan Christopherson, called for management researchers to engage with economic geographers on interrelated geographical and managerial issues in the study of (retail) firms. In this commentary we reflect upon the present geography–management interface. We begin by considering the term ‘interdisciplinary research’ and its relationship to any management–geography interface. This is followed by a context-specific discussion of international retailing and the role of research on the retail transnational corporation (TNC) in developing an interdisciplinary agenda. This commentary represents an initial more *business and management focused* response to the call from geography academics for more/better interdisciplinary research at the geography–management interface.

Definition and characteristics of research concepts

There are many claims that there is a need for research to become interdisciplinary: “hardly a research initiative, call for papers, management textbook or departmental prospectus appears... that does not support or offer an interdisciplinary approach” (Knights and Willmott 1997, page 9). This implies that interdisciplinary research is a ‘good thing’ for researchers. Several researchers have drawn attention to the need for interdisciplinary research in (aspects of) management and geography enquiry: “There are ways of proceeding that allow for a *rapprochement* between geography and economics that do justice to both perspectives in economic geography” (Clark and Wrigley, 1997, page 302, emphasis added). Alexander and Myers (2000, page 338) suggest that the debate over the absorption process between approaches has “become not only pervasive but intrusive” in the field.

Countless references to interdisciplinary research have been made. But what does it mean to do interdisciplinary research? What is the ‘idea’ of the interdisciplinary research? What are the assumptions or suppositions of interdisciplinary research? What conclusions can be reached from conducting interdisciplinary research? Everyone calls for it, but much confusion still exists regarding what interdisciplinary research actually means, entails, and could achieve.

In advocating research cooperation across the geography–management interface a range of terms have been used: integrated, integrative, interfusion, intermeshing, interdisciplinary, collaborative, crossbreeding, multidisciplinary, participative, and transdisciplinary. Yet few clarify the roles of monodisciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research approaches, as they see them. The underlying characteristics of these concepts can be illustrated, however (see table 1, over).

As defined by Lattanzi (1998) interdisciplinary means interaction between two or more disciplines. Multidisciplinary, according to Nicolescu (2001), refers to the work that remains grounded in the framework of one discipline, whereas interdisciplinary concerns both the coordination of expertise and the transfer of methods from one discipline to another either for (a) new applications (b) new analyses, or (c) the generation of entire new disciplines. For Nilles interdisciplinary research is:

Table 1. Research concepts [source: adapted from Lattanzi (1998) and Adger et al (2003)].

Concept	Definition	Characteristics
Monodisciplinary	Restricted to one research discipline and to one branch or specialisation within a research field.	Within one academic discipline; disciplinary goal setting; no cooperation between other disciplines; development of new disciplinary knowledge and theory.
Multidisciplinary	A variety of disciplines collaborate on research programme without integration of concepts, epistemologies, or methodologies. The degree of integration is restricted to the linking of research results.	Multiple disciplines; multiple discipline goal setting under one thematic umbrella; loose cooperation of disciplines for exchange of knowledge and disciplinary theory development.
Interdisciplinary	Is also the collaboration of several disciplines, but in this case concepts, methodologies, or epistemologies are explicitly exchanged and integrated, resulting in a mutual environment.	Crosses disciplinary boundaries; common goal setting; integration of disciplines and development of integrated knowledge and theory.
Transdisciplinary	A specific form of interdisciplinary in which boundaries between and beyond disciplines are transcended and knowledge and perspectives from different scientific sources are integrated.	Crosses disciplinary and scientific or academic boundaries; common goal setting; integration of disciplines and nonacademic participants and development of integrated knowledge and theory among science and society.

“The joint, co-ordinated and continuously integrated research done by experts with different disciplinary backgrounds, working together and producing reports, papers, recommendations and/or plans which are so tightly and thoroughly interwoven that the specific contribution of each research tends to be obscured by a joint product” (Nilles, 1976; cited in Roper and Brookes, 1999, page 176).

Some even suggest that in order to achieve an interdisciplinary status, both disciplines must create a unified research perspective, which is sustained to create an entirely new discipline, along with a new metalanguage (Collins, 2002). Considering this, are the calls from economic geography actually pleas for more multidisciplinary research (Coe, 2004)? To what extent is it the desired goal to create a new discipline from an interdisciplinary approach (Wrigley et al, 2005)? How might the retail management literature progress from a monodisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach towards the remit of an interdisciplinary research approach? Are international retail researchers, from whatever background, ready to embrace interdisciplinary research?

Many good reasons exist for conducting interdisciplinary research, not least the question of whether one discipline alone could provide the full spectrum of knowledge needed to understand fully the multifaceted nature of the (retail) TNC. According to Roper and Brooks (1999, page 176), it is “in fact rare that researchers are faced with problems, concerns or opportunities that have their origin or solution in a singular intellectual discipline.” Moreover, interdisciplinary research problems and issues may lead to new approaches for studying phenomena, and the relevance and impact of these studies might be higher than in each discipline in isolation.

Implications for retail research

The rise of the retail TNC has been one of the most significant trends emerging in recent years (Burt and Sparks, 2001; Wrigley, 2000; 2002). The intensifying rate of international retail expansion has brought with it dual interest from geography and management researchers. One reason for the considerable developments in the field of retail internationalisation research may be the fact that researchers have envisaged new uses for, or ways of exploiting, ideas from both disciplines, in understanding the complexity of the retail TNC. A number of observations may be discerned from this activity.

First, it is important to consider *what approach* is currently being adopted by researchers at the geography–management interface. Based on the preceding definitional discussion the geography–management interface territory at this point, we argue, is presently characterised as a multidisciplinary approach. This would seem to us to be irrefutable given the selective practices and the comparatively few research attempts which integrate, synthesise, or challenge the assumptions and boundaries of the root discipline. Moreover, the intent of both ‘sides’ appears primarily to serve their respective root discipline, with researchers returning ‘back home’ once the research work is done. But how does this academic ‘tourism’ contribute to a fuller appreciation and understanding of the contours of other disciplines? Interdisciplinary research probably demands researchers on both sides of the interface to move beyond their root disciplines in a sustainable way to address research issues. An intrinsic aspect of interdisciplinary practice, moreover, is the ‘spirit’ in which research is pursued, propagated, and presented. Logocentric or metalanguage claims and counterclaims, coupled with coded messages directed at other disciplines or subdisciplines, we argue, are not in the ‘spirit’ of interdisciplinary research and are in this sense retrogressive.

Second, it is also pertinent to question the *degree* to which management and geography researchers have engaged in multidisciplinary research. In other words, what is the *depth* of this multidisciplinary geography–management interface discussion? And how might this vary across research in (aspects of) management and geography? For some geographers, even the multidisciplinary nature of the subject is questionable:

“a retail internationalization literature, which in its frustration with the productivist treatments of globalization turns its back on the insights now flowing from relational network approaches, debates on knowledge and learning in the social regulation of firms, and from regarding firms as transnational communities, guarantees intellectual isolation” (Wrigley et al, 2005, page 17).

Contrary to Wrigley et al’s (2005) mono-assessment of the international retail literature, a review of the international retail literature suggests that a range of views already exist on this issue (consider, for example, Alexander and Myers (2000, pages 337–338). One problem is the loss of conceptual refinement when frameworks from different theoretical disciplines are brought unthinkingly together (Dawson, 1994; 2001), whereas others point to the likely ‘trade imbalance’ inherent in the vacuous wholesale importation of theories from other disciplines (Alexander and Myers, 2000). More importantly though, almost all management researchers *do not* eschew the usefulness of this activity. Reflecting on the state of the research in this area, Alexander and Doherty (2000, page 325) conclude: “... progress will be made if... the study of international retailing come[s] to terms with its place within the wider academic arena of international business studies while at the same time recognising the idiosyncrasies of the commercial sector under consideration.”

There is a danger that theories are simply *ripped* from their historical disciplinary roots and context without recognising or challenging the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between territorially embedded retail firms and production-based multinationals. Not only is it quite natural for new areas to adopt a cautionary position, but there is much consensus in both disciplines regarding this pluralistic thinking. At the same time, it is worthwhile understanding how such positions are often reflected upon and potentially changed to reflect, reify and recolonise rationales for research in order to mollify (different?) disciplinary audiences. The interplay of the disciplinary audiences is etched in the following quotation:

“Unlike many treatments of the process in the retail marketing literature, we take a far less negative position on the value of linking studies of retail internationalization to these broader conceptualizations of the distinctive nature and management of the multinational firm, despite those conceptualizations being productivist in orientation and application to this point” (Wrigley et al, 2005, page 17).

Inasmuch as the economic geography research agenda on globalising retail capital has performed a valuable role in advancing this field with many important insights (see Coe and Hess, 2005; Coe and Yong-Sook, 2006; Currah and Wrigley, 2004; Shackleton, 1998; Wrigley and Currah, 2003), unfortunately points of commonality have seemingly been overshadowed lately by the way in which, it has been claimed in a historical sketch of the field, international retail theory as seen by management researchers is perceived as rather *narrow* by economic geographers:

“the international retailing literature is too *self-contained* and *inward looking*, and relatively *detached* from large portions of the literature on economic globalization and processes of transnational production that emerged across the social sciences in the 1990s” (Coe, 2004, page 1572, emphasis added).

Perhaps we ought to consider the converse? Why is the literature on economic globalisation and processes of transnational production disconnected from the retail internationalisation and international business literatures, which appear more intimately aware of the sector specificities? We would argue that the international retail and management literatures suggest that not only do geographers’ perceptions lag reality, but that the viewpoint is itself somewhat overblown. The international retailing literature has drawn upon some of the broader theories of internationalisation including the global marketing adaptation versus standardisation as well as the marketing orientation debate (Rogers et al, 2005; Salmon and Tordjman, 1989); the Nordic models of internationalisation from which incremental retail development is considered by the stages concept and psychic distance (Evans and Mavondo, 2002; Evans et al, 2000; Vida and Fairhurst, 1998); and the eclectic paradigm founded on ownership-specific advantages (Dawson, 1994; Sternquist, 1998). Furthermore, core business literatures are evident in relation to processes of strategic decisionmaking (Clarke and Rimmer, 1997; Dawson, 2001; Gielens and Dekimpe, 2001); divestment (Alexander and Quinn, 2002; Burt et al, 2004; Palmer, 2004); organisational learning (Palmer, 2002; Palmer and Quinn, 2005a); corporate governance and stakeholder theory (Palmer and Quinn, 2003; 2005b); corporate performance (Dragun and Howard, 2003), institutionalism (Bianchi and Arnold, 2004); human resource management (Gamble, 2003); and organisational failure (Burt et al, 2002; 2003; Mellahi et al, 2002). As this body of literature testifies, the disciplinary boundaries in research on international retailing are increasingly permeable. Of course theoretical and empirical gaps exist, but hopefully gaps exist in all disciplines?

Third, both disciplines potentially have “much to gain from a closer fusion of approaches, frameworks and techniques since ... [geography] provides an understanding

of the critical importance of space and how it is structured, and...[management] of how decisions that have spatial imprints are reached” (Clarke et al, 1997, page 60). Taking a different argument, however, why should collaboration be seen in this division of labour or monopoly-of-force way? Why should *only* economic geographers discuss the spatial dimension? Why should *only* international business researchers discuss strategy? Might geographical (re)interpretations of international strategy be more useful or insightful than the existing international business frameworks? Might managerial (re)interpretations of space be more useful or insightful than the existing geographical frameworks? We can gain, in other words, from redefining what the problem or issue is by interrogating it through new ways of thinking. Of course much remains to be done to dispel the widespread prejudice amongst management theorists that economic geographers address questions only of location. But if economic geographers and management researchers are to liberate themselves and stop speaking past each other, then the role of management in capturing the geography (and vice versa) of the firm must be incorporated—not ignored. The ‘who went where, when’ phase of the international retail literature is a case in point. Hollander’s (1970) work is rich in spatial data; Burt (1993) charts moves in European grocery and UK retailing in general; Treadgold and Davis (1988) provide an overview of the spatial border-hopping behaviour between European markets; and Hamill and Crosbie (1990) examine the spatial UK/US acquisition patterns. More recently, Burt et al (2004) and Alexander et al (2005) provide an overview of spatial aspects of European international retail divestment activity. Often the spatial dimension is buried alongside other theoretical perspectives, is descriptive, or is not ‘grounded’ in ideas about retail ‘capital’, but the spatial cloth is there, though the terminology and emphasis may be different. Indeed, perhaps the colonisation of concepts, methods, and language is a visible sign of the multidisciplinary nature of the research practice within the field of international retailing.

Practicalities of opening and maintaining interdisciplinary dialogue

Although there is considerable merit in an interdisciplinary approach, the practicalities and realities of pursuing this are often overlooked. The institutional environment in which academics work is not always conducive to interdisciplinary practice. Disciplines in academia at the institutional and national levels often have strong traditions and rivalries that preclude collaboration amongst them. Almost inevitably scarce financial resources promote intradepartmental rivalry, and these rivalries may act as a barrier to collaborative practices. Likewise, the political demands of interdisciplinary research can be ominous, acting as an eye-opening deterrent for even the most zealous followers:

“cooperating, let alone cohabiting with members of a different tribe can be, and frequently is, regarded as a kind of defection. Either the defector is seen to be ‘unfaithful’ to the primary discipline or to be involved in an affair that is destined for disaster—which may well be self-fulfilling because of the ostracism that such moves tend to provoke” (Knights and Willmott, 1997, page 11).

Perhaps this explains some of the absence of cooperation *thus far* between researchers from geography and management departments in published research? Additionally, the higher education system in which academics operate within the United Kingdom, and the role of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in particular, may partially explain why there is comparatively less interdisciplinary research. Somewhat alarmingly, thus far the RAE does not encourage or really reward interdisciplinary research through its practices, though current rhetoric would have us believe otherwise (Dawson et al, 2004).

For those who endeavour to travel along the interdisciplinary path, leaving the disciplinary silo almost always implies a degree of initial uncertainty, disorientation, discomfort, and even literary myopia in the adjacent field. Depending on where in the conceptual landscape an observer stands, variations are likely to exist in defining even basic terms regarding the same objects. For example, Coe and Yong-Sook's (2006) and Wrigley et al's (2005) strategic localisation discussion of the activities of retail TNCs might equally be seen in terms of the adaptation and standardisation debates in the marketing literature (Salmon and Tordjman, 1989). Not only are definitional struggles likely to curtail the development of the object of study and interdisciplinary research, but also conceptual, epistemological, and methodological assumptions or foundations are likely to vary considerably, possibly restricting the development and/or comparison of research findings.

Entry barriers of practising interdisciplinary research are ostensibly higher than the capacity to switch to business and management faculties for employment or career enhancing reasons. What we have seen, as Clarke et al (1997) observed, is an increasing number of geographers 'drifting over' to business and management faculties in the United Kingdom. Might this (uncontrolled?) human resource migration facilitate or inhibit interdisciplinary research? Reading more widely in adjacent fields is also no easy task. So sizeable is the literature today, the sheer difficulty of 'keeping on top' of research in the international retailing field, along the broader retail and (services) marketing literatures, not to mention the business and management literatures, as well as the ever-expanding number of new journals, makes it a more time consuming process to scale the silo walls of subject areas:

"Literary myopia, admittedly, is an occupational hazard...[for academia]. It is virtually impossible to keep up with what is being written in our own field, or even subfield, much less master the compendious contents of adjacent fields... the seemingly impassable soon becomes the impossible" (Brown, 2005, page 183).

Even when the institutional and individual obstacles are circumvented, there is always the issue of identifying an appropriate publication outlet. Within the broader management discipline, Knights and Willmott (1997, page 20) concluded that "there is a limited number of journals which actively encourage the publication of interdisciplinary research." Therefore embarking upon interdisciplinary research may inadvertently expose the researcher to fewer channels through which to publish their research, particularly if the institutional pressure around "an RAE-driven strategy" interferes (Dawson et al, 2004).

Concluding remarks

This commentary attempts to add to a debate on the practice and spirit of interdisciplinary research between economic geography and management. As disciplines, geography and management approach the practice of the retail TNC in very different ways. These views are not necessarily contradictory. Indeed, the relationship between place-bound geography and management is expanding in response to the growing recognition of the *reciprocity* of geography in the firm and vice versa (that is, 'placing firms' and 'firming places'), and the very visible ways in which both recursively connect, interact, and manifest over time. Arguably it is this complicated or 'messy' switching behaviour which has been, and will continue to be, at the centre of the geography–management interface. In this regard, what is especially important is how equal attention can be given to both the geographic and managerial aspects of the retail TNC in order to appreciate fully the ways in which these interact and evolve.

Of course it is encouraging to see various calls in the geographical literature for management research to embrace broader literatures (Coe, 2004; Wrigley et al, 2005), but it equally clear that both disciplines do not yet fully appreciate the unified practice and spirit taken in interdisciplinary research. Although several geographical studies have documented and evaluated the rise of globalising retail capital (Currah and Wrigley, 2004; Wrigley, 2000; 2002; Wrigley and Currah, 2003), there still exist disparities in many of the assumptions made by economic geographers about the status of the broad international retail literature. With this view, there is a danger that a position emerges that distorts the important contributions of retail management research in this area over the last thirty years. A greater awareness and a willingness to accept a unified approach between the two broad management and geography domains must be established to guard against this. When the practicalities of 'doing' interdisciplinary approaches are examined, however, a process is exposed that is fraught with difficulties.

On the surface the repeated calls in the literature, workshop initiatives, and activities, as well as the success of journals such as the *Journal of Economic Geography* all might point towards valuable 'progress' in pushing the interdisciplinary agenda forward. When taken together, such activities would suggest a *real* shift in multi-disciplinary attitudes. However, in our view, academic practice in relation to the study of the retail TNC fails to withstand closer scrutiny. It reveals, furthermore, that interdisciplinary research remains an ideal, and only indicates that we are 'mingling' a little more than before. Almost ten years after Clarke et al's observation that the retail management and geography disciplines were like ships sailing almost parallel courses to the same destination each unaware of each other (Clarke et al, 1997, page 60), it is perhaps apt to reconsider the intermittent form of 'cross talk' between the 'passing ships' of the management and the new geography traditions. But this requires both parties to change course, rather than the academic equivalent of a boarding party.

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Business as usual? A response to Palmer, Owens, and Sparks

Balkanize or **-ise**, *vt.*, to reduce to the condition of the Balkan peninsular, which was divided in the late 19th and early 20th centuries into a number of mutually hostile territories.

Chambers Dictionary (1998 edition)

Over the past six years we have published a series of papers—individually, together, and with collaborators—seeking to develop an economic geography perspective on the globalisation of retailing (for example, Coe, 2004; Coe and Hess, 2005; Coe and Lee, 2006; Currah and Wrigley, 2004; Wrigley, 2000; Wrigley and Currah, 2006; Wrigley et al, 2005). In so doing, we have had three audiences in mind. Firstly, we have been addressing the economic geography research community in an effort to stimulate interest in a drastically underresearched aspect of economic globalisation. While globalisation has been all the rage in economic geography for a decade now, the literature still remains somewhat productionist in nature, with the distribution industries in particular continuing to suffer a neglect that is clearly at odds with their scale and contemporary importance (Wrigley, 2000). Secondly, we have been attempting (Coe and Hess, 2005; Wrigley, 2005) to open a dialogue with scholars in development studies and agricultural economists who have been at the forefront of attempts to understand the profound developmental implications of the deluge of retail foreign direct investment (FDI) and retailer-driven local, regional, and global supply network transformation in developing countries (see, for example, Dolan and Humphrey, 2004; Reardon et al, 2003). Finally, we have sought to engage with researchers in the marketing/business/management studies tradition, urging them to consider the potential of theoretical frameworks being developed beyond their discipline. Our approach in this regard has been to offer a careful and sympathetic critique of the long tradition of work in the business studies area that has provided a rich and powerful range of insights into the processes of retail internationalisation. This critique has not sought simply to pull apart a straw-man version of retail studies, but rather stems from a comprehensive and detailed reading of this literature: one of us has been researching this area for twenty years, while the other read the retail literature for some eighteen months before even putting finger to keyboard. Underlying our set of papers, both implicitly and explicitly, has been the sentiment that moves towards a more interdisciplinary approach to the globalisation of retailing can only be good for all parties.

From this perspective, the commentary by Palmer et al (2006) is somewhat perplexing, and seems to move us little further forward (indeed backwards perhaps?) It offers a perspective we suspect, or at least hope, is not held by all retail internationalisation scholars. In a conference version of their *Environment and Planning A* commentary, presented at the 2006 UK Academy of Marketing Conference, Palmer et al accuse us, in our recent body of work, of ‘balkanising’ the literature (how this fits with the ‘boarding party’ metaphor that closes their piece in this journal is open to question!) As the dictionary definition of that term makes clear, it alludes to a process of division and the promulgation of mutual hostility. This is a strong claim, and one which bears little relation to our attempts to open a dialogue between economic geography and the many disciplines now engaged with understanding transnational retail and its impacts on the global economy. We have been critical of some attitudes held in retail studies, for sure, but we have also given credit where it is due, and read and cited the retail internationalisation literature widely. And where else is an interdisciplinary dialogue to start if it is not from constructive critique allied to presentation of what we feel might be our own discipline’s unique attributes and potential contributions?

Let us start by suggesting some points on which we think (or at least hope) we are in agreement with Palmer and colleagues. First, the rapid rise of transnational retail

and the profound impacts of the deluge of retail FDI are extremely important topics much in need of further research. Second, the more disciplines that contribute to the debate, bringing with them their different epistemologies, theories, and methodologies, the better. Third, work on retail globalisation is perhaps best currently described as *multidisciplinary* rather than *interdisciplinary*, using the helpful typology offered in their commentary. Fourth, movements towards a genuinely *interdisciplinary* approach will be slow and difficult, both on the level of researchers coming to terms with different traditions and perspectives, and more pragmatically, due to the constraints and imperatives imposed, in the UK at least, by the Research Assessment Exercise. And, as we have stressed above, retail globalisation and its effects are not only issues being explored in economic geography and management, but also in agricultural economics, sociology, development studies, and cultural studies. We are not, as one might think reading Palmer et al, simply talking about one disciplinary boundary, but the nexus of several, which only serves to amplify the potential challenges of interaction.

Palmer et al seem very pessimistic about potential economic geography–management studies exchanges and our methods of seeking to initiate them. Underpinning their arguments is the perception, long advocated in the retail studies literature, that retailing is ‘different’, and hence requires its own body of theory and field of research. And therein, it appears, lies the justification for rejecting broader conceptualisations of economic globalisation that are seen to be productivist in origin and nature. We would agree with this up to a point. Retail transnational corporations (TNCs) are a very particular form of TNC, and are characterised by an extremely high level of territorial embeddedness in the property markets, supply systems, and consumer cultures of host economies. Indeed, one of the key contributions of the retail studies literature has been to argue and elaborate this point (for example, Dawson, 1994; Dawson and Mukoyama, 2006). But retail TNCs are still TNCs. Looking at them in isolation may obscure important commonalities with other service sector activities, such as, for example, the also highly territorially embedded temporary staffing TNCs that one of us is currently researching (see <http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/geography/research/tempingindustry/>). Equally, theories operate on different levels of abstraction. Relational, network-based perspectives on the TNC, and indeed the global economy more broadly (for example, Dicken et al, 2001; Yeung, 1994; 2005), have plenty to offer our understanding of the globalisation of retailing. This does not involve violently ‘ripping’ theory from one context (geography) and throwing it down recklessly in another self-contained area (retail studies) as Palmer et al forcibly suggest. Rather it involves being open to different epistemological and theoretical perspectives, something that geography as a discipline has always been keen to do. If those theories are found lacking in the retail context, that is another matter, and such a response needs to be fed back into the community generating those perspectives.

The way that Palmer et al seek to demonstrate our misrepresentation of the retail studies literature as being relatively self-contained is curious indeed. We are treated to a long list of (usually recent) studies showing the interaction of the international retailing literature with a wide range of other concepts and theories. There is indeed much interesting and thought-provoking work in these papers, many of which we cite in our work (something which Palmer et al overlook). Yet, all the influences listed remain within the broad domain of management and business studies, which rather misses the point of our critique. Indeed, the lack of citation of the theories that apparently cannot be uprooted and transported to planet retail is itself rather troubling! There are burgeoning literatures on globalisation in every social science discipline you care to mention, and we are urging an opening up to ideas drawn from that broader terrain.

Overall, the impression one gets from Palmer et al is of a ‘territory-defending’ reluctance to engage in dialogue. Nowhere is this clearer than at the end of the section entitled “Practicalities...” where we are told, to paraphrase, that keeping up with the reading across different disciplines is hard work, and that there are few publishing outlets to which we might send our nascent interdisciplinary offerings. In a world of searchable electronic databases and remotely accessible pdf files, and an ever wider range of broadly based publishing outlets—of which *Environment and Planning A* is of course an exemplary case—these seem to be rather lame points to end on! We have made great efforts in our work to incorporate and include insights from the retail studies literature. Reading Palmer et al makes us feel that we are on something of a one-way track in that regard.

Now let us move on to reiterate what we see as some of the issues that are currently underplayed in management approaches to retailing. None of these are mentioned, let alone tackled, in Palmer et al’s piece. But before we do so, let us be very clear here: we make these points in the spirit of initiating a constructive dialogue, and to suggest new research directions we can collectively move along, not in an attempt to gainsay the achievements of retail studies work. Many of the key issues we feel stem from the inherent firm-centrism—by which we mean a central focus on firm strategy and competitiveness—which characterises the management approach.

(1) The perspective we are seeking to develop focuses explicitly on the inseparable, and mutually constitutive, interface between retail TNCs and the political–economic/regulatory and sociocultural contexts in which they operate. This, then, is what the ‘placing firms’ and ‘firming places’ perspective we have advocated (Wrigley et al, 2005) is driving at [and please excuse the nit-picking here, but those terms derive from the work of Dicken (2000), not cited by Palmer et al].

(2) We would draw attention to the geographical variability and interconnectedness of retail TNC strategy and operations. Palmer et al are clearly right to assert that not only geographers should study the role of space in international business. However, the studies which they cite to make this point are largely concerned with the *mapping* of retail activity. This is undoubtedly important, but not the same thing as exploring the spatial variability and interconnectedness of the various strategies and operations of the retail TNC, for example.

(3) We would advocate greater focus on the developmental impacts of retail TNCs in host economies in their myriad forms (Coe, 2004; Coe and Wrigley, 2007; Dawson, 2003).

(4) We seek to place more emphasis on the sourcing networks in addition to the store operations of retail TNCs, and the functional connections between the international expansion of those two spheres of activity (and hence we welcome the recent contribution of Dawson and Mukoyama, 2006).

(5) We would applaud contributions that adopt a more avowedly *critical* stance on the activities of retail TNCs, where appropriate.

Taking these points together, it seems to us that the influences upon, and impacts of, the globalisation of retailers ripple way beyond the firms themselves, and our research agendas need to recognise that fact. In that sense, and with respect to the issues we raise, the response ‘that is not what we do’ may be an entirely valid one from the perspective of retail internationalisation studies, but surely it is not the only one.

We write this piece having just returned from an extremely stimulating British-Academy-sponsored workshop held at the University of Surrey’s School of Management entitled “Globalizing Retail: Transnational Retail, Supply Chains and the Global Economy”. Over a day and a half of presentation and discussion—in which economic geographers and management scholars were both healthily represented, in combination

with agricultural economists, development studies scholars, and representatives of the business analyst and development practitioner communities—we started to see the potential of an interdisciplinary approach to this sprawling, yet profoundly important, topic area [selected papers from that conference will be available in the *Journal of Economic Geography* 2007 7(4) and earlier via the journal's online Advance Access section]. Also, it has to be said, the pessimistic outlook conveyed by Palmer et al about such interdisciplinarity certainly did not appear to be a dominant concern. We have now all returned to our home departments, and are once again immersed in the peculiarities of our own disciplines. And yet, we at least are now thinking about a range of new ideas and approaches thrown up at the Surrey meeting, and the e-mail list of people we can activate to discuss those ideas with has grown longer. And that is the 'spirit'—a word highlighted by Palmer et al—of interdisciplinarity that we would like to emphasise at the end of this exchange. We need to get on with researching the many facets of retail globalisation in which our knowledge is patchy or in some cases, almost nonexistent. And we need to start talking in an open, rather than defensive, manner. The conceptual and real-world challenges thrown up by the recent step-change in the intensity of retail FDI are too important to do otherwise. Getting bogged down in the semantics of disciplinary interaction is no substitute for action.

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