

Logistical gazes:

introduction to a special issue of *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces this special issue of *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* on logistics. First of all, it furnishes a brief genealogy of logistics in the modern era. Then, it frames some of the main issues in current critical debates on logistics. Finally, it presents the contents of the special issue in detail, connecting them with more general attempts to develop a 'logistical gaze' as a methodological perspective on the different and multiple transformations of contemporary capitalism.

KEY WORDS

logistics, mobility, labour, counter-logistics, spatialities

Logistics is currently emerging, with increasing intensity, as a key disruptive paradigm for interpreting the changes that distinguish contemporary capitalism. Despite its apparent modernity, logistics has a long-term historical trajectory, deeply interwoven with the affirmation of the 'Modern Era'. From the genealogical point of view, logistics was initially framed as a combination of knowledges and techniques related to the development of the armies of the state and the creation of global markets (both to

sustain military operations on a European and colonial scale and to support the new intercontinental trade routes – not least the Atlantic slave trade). Over time, it progressed from being the art, technique and science of moving people, commodities and military mobility to become a broad and interconnected system that imposed itself as an overall logic of governmentality (Cowen, 2014).

Within this long history, we focus on two specific breaking points for recent developments. The first is usually labelled the ‘logistics revolution’ of the 1950s and 1960s when – thanks to the large-scale introduction of shipping containers – it became a benchmark of capitalist production and reproduction (Allen, 1997). From this point on, the logistical perspective progressively established itself as the fundamental tool for the re-organisation of productive forms and political spaces, contributing to the development of the overall infrastructure of multiple interconnections that characterises contemporary world society. Put differently, globalisation could be read as a world vision where the spatial dimension is simultaneously both expanded and constricted (Harvey, 2001). This revolution – that can be conceived as integrating circulation into the time of production – presented logistics as unexplored territory for businesses and management: ‘the last dark continent’, as the management guru Peter Drucker imaginatively said: ‘We know little more about distribution today than Napoleon’s contemporaries know about the interior of Africa. We know it is there, and we know it is big; and that’s about all’ (quoted in Cowen, 2014:50). Moreover, we could consider this not simply as a technical and efficiency-driven revolution for a better productive capitalist organisation, but a capitalist transformation that produces new subjectivities and power relations in response to labour resistances and struggles in the Fordist factory.

The second key breaking point we highlight here relates to the progressive application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in production, which has led over time to a massive use of digital applications and devices for organising and controlling labour in diffused and connected spaces (Scholz, 2012; Srnicek, 2017). This tendency assumes different patterns and narratives according to how and where it is adopted, leading to varied geographies of impact. For example, the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution particularly affects manufacture and the movement of goods from Germany, whereas the ‘Platform Revolution’ has a particularly strong impact on the investment in and provision of services emanating from Silicon Valley in the USA. This turning point can be conceptualised as a shift from the direct discipline of labour in enclosed spaces to algorithmic management across multiple spaces.

Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, logistics is acting as a leading vector for the decomposition and restructuring of transnational value chains, allowing an undefined expansion of global production networks and configuring a giant wall-less global factory articulated on different scales, from transnational supply chains to urban platforms. A real ‘logistics-driven capitalist mode of production’ can be identified, bound to deep political transformations. Logistics is no longer an unexplored continent for management but has become instead an obscure and dark logic hidden among the flows, largely invisible both to those who work within these flows and for analysts of capitalism who still try to make sense of its dynamics using

only traditional categories such as states, regions and borders. As Deborah Cowen (2014:51) notes, 'the work of logistics is concerned precisely with the production of space beyond territory'. In other words, logistics is now not only a matter of the circulation of commodities but also produces its own spatiality, contributing to the transformation of geographies and influencing a wide range of different fields: from the planning of urban spaces to the mobility regimes governing migration, passing through multiple transnational assemblages of workers.

Until recently, engineering and management were the only disciplines entitled to study logistics. One of the emblems of such technical approaches is the 'black box' that safeguards from indiscreet eyes the rationality of labour organisation and commodity flows. Such black boxes surround us everywhere: from state governance to digital devices, from platforms to urban planning. This supposed technicality of logistics – as a mere matter of the organisation of flows, distribution of spaces and cost-effectiveness – leads to non-neutral consequences, for example by reducing the roles and conditions of the labour force to algorithmic variables and the efficiency of tasks.

However, in the last decade, a flourishing and varied field of new innovative and critical approaches to this issue (Toscano, 2011) has emerged, stimulated by disruptive events, including radical strikes and warehouse blockades by logistics workers. Since the 2000s, the research interest in logistics has spread beyond its traditional home in technical and managerial fields into a range of bordering disciplines, from geography to anthropology, from history to political philosophy. Step by step, the study of logistics has surged to become a centrally important perspective in critical studies across a range of disciplines.

Critical geographers – as well as scholars of political geography and spatial concepts – represent the core of references in this emerging field. In it, we can include authors who did not address logistics directly as an object of investigation but have nevertheless posed some problems and adopted approaches that could be useful for logistics studies. For instance, the way in which Henri Lefebvre (1974) analysed the production of space remains interesting for the study of logistics as well as the role and the relevance of the metropolis in the global world. Lefebvre is also interesting for his use of spatiality in the analysis of such modern political concepts as that of state, conceiving the role of logistics in the construction of state space as connected with the development of industrial regions outside urban spaces (with the effect of dismantling city borders through flows). Another 'traditional' author whose work can be readapted and used to grasp some related contemporary phenomena is Manuel Castells (1996), who was among the first to study the impact of ICT on society and urban spaces – proposing a distinction between the spaces of places and the spaces of flows. Finally, we can mention the work of Sergio Bologna (1972; 2010) who, as early as the 1970s, shifted his attention from factory workers to dockers and the role of circulation in capitalist organisation.

A few of the scholars who have more recently crossed their researches with an interest in logistics include Neil Brenner (2004; 2014) who has studied the implosion and explosion of spaces, Saskia Sassen (2001) in relation to her analysis of global cities and overflowing territories, and Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) who examine its role in the context of their political critique of borders.

To conclude this brief and fragmentary review of scholars who have contributed to the creation of a logistical gaze on capitalism's contemporary operations, we can also include some authors who have focused on logistics, such as Keller Easterling (2014) with her focus on the governance of extra-state infrastructures, Deborah Cowen (2014) in her analysis of the production of space in the context of security and resistance, and Anna Tsing's (2009) conceptualisation of the human condition in supply chains.

This special issue of *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* aims to contribute to the further development of critical studies on logistics. It has not been edited by a group of researchers or a research group but as part of a wider path of collective and multidisciplinary research on the issues of spaces, logistics and labour, in an initiative named *Into the Black Box*.¹

The essays that make up the special issue have been thought of as different perspectives feeding into a dialogue with this collective research project. Each contribution furnishes tangible case studies of what we have labelled a 'logistical gaze' (*Into the Black Box*, 2018), that is, a particular methodological and theoretical approach to understanding the global and variegated dimensions of contemporary transnational value chains, migration flows, platforms and digital spaces – to name just a few.

What do we mean by a logistical gaze? In brief, it can be summarised as a picture of logistics as *ars combinatoria*, that is, first of all, a capacity for articulation and governance. A logistical gaze thus looks to flows, mobility regimes, points of condensation and different distributions of power and roles to analyse phenomena. At the same time, it focuses on knots, bottlenecks, resistances and the production of a counter-logistics. To achieve this, it has to integrate and modify the 'traditional' categories of critical theory with new concepts such as assemblages, hubs, corridors, connections, infrastructures, interruptions, resilience and strategies that could be useful for breaking the opacity of black boxes and penetrating their logic. In other words, a logistical gaze considers logistics not only as a mere matter of circulation, a neutral technique of management or a simple device to organise mobility in the most efficient way but rather as a more all-encompassing bio-political apparatus that produces spaces as well as subjectivities, norms and relations (Cuppini, Frapporti & Pirone, 2015).

This makes it necessary to look at logistics as 'a site of power and struggle' (Neilson, 2012) among constantly changing ways to adapt life forms to different environmental and productive conditions. In other words, logistics flattens out spaces, models bodies and produces subjectivities and norms as flexible as the adaptation to the conditions of circulation requires. Labour force struggles and organisation reveal themselves as central view points for the understanding of this logistics-driven capitalist mode of production and distribution, based on new global infrastructures, regional systems and new rationalities of production. Or, to put it differently, subjectivities are erupting from algorithmic management and logistics networks as irreducible elements (Dyer-Witthford, 2015).

1 See www.intotheblackbox.com.

Five intriguing fields of research can be identified for a logistical gaze on contemporary capitalism: first, the politics of logistics and new global geographies (such as China's 'New Silk Road' or the many pipelines currently being constructed worldwide); second, work and conflicts in logistics sites (particularly, in harbours and warehouses, for example, in Germany and Italy); third, the logistical mode of urban production (e.g. in the development of smart city policies); fourth, the logistical logic of platform capitalism (e.g. Amazon or Uber) and the counter-logistics of protests (e.g. strikes of food delivery riders); and finally, the processes and outcomes of the emergent systems of labour measurement and performance management regimes (KPIs). These five fields formed the starting point for assembling the investigations that make up this special issue.

The essays that have been brought together in this shared agenda furnish a variety of multidisciplinary logistical gazes on the current global situation, in a mutually enriching range of into-the-black-box perspectives. The issue is divided into three sections: the logistical production of spaces; logistics and labour; and struggles and counter-logistics.

The first section, *the logistics production of spaces*, brings together a group of essays that analyse the continuous articulation of territorialisation and de-territorialisation processes produced by logistics. Brett Neilson and Tanya Notley look at the data centre industry in Singapore and its impact on labour relations and processes. The contribution by Clément Barbier, Cécile Cuny and Nicolas Raimbault focuses on the production of logistics spaces at a metropolitan and a local scale in relation to local authorities and global firms, comparing the Greater Paris Region in France and the regions of Frankfurt Rhein-Main and Kassel in Germany. Alessandro Peregalli investigates the strong articulation of finance, extraction and logistics in Latin America by studying the creation of new infrastructural corridors. Moha Ennaji and Filippo Bignami explore the role of digital devices in producing new migration routes and spatialities for migrants.

The second section, *logistics and labour*, groups essays reflecting on the production of new labour regimes resulting from managerial strategies including competition, the exploitation of racial differences and the use of digital technologies. Kim Moody presents logistics as a field of contradiction between multi-dimensional cross-currents of competition and workers' organisation. Jake Alimahomed-Wilson focuses on the role of racialisation in amplifying the erosion of labour conditions for logistics. Moritz Altenried investigates the forms of digital technology that enable the management and surveillance of labour in the last mile.

The third and final section, *struggles and counter-logistics*, showcases essays that explore the role of the, often unexpected, subjectivities that configure logistics as a site of struggles and a conflictual field. Andrea Bottalico presents a literature review on the dynamics of dock labour in European ports, with a particular focus on the labour issues that have emerged in recent years. Daniela Leonardi, Annalisa Murgia, Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano turn their attention to a specific group of logistics workers, food delivery riders, and their attempts to organise and struggle against digital platforms. Sabrina Apicella and Helmut Hildebrandt compare the workers' attitudes to strike action at Amazon warehouses in two contrasting locations in

Germany. Evelina Gambino reflects on the development of the New Silk Road project in Georgia, proposing to reposition workers into a visible central position in narratives around the expansion of logistics.

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