



Globalisation, information technology and the emergence of niche transnational cities: the growth of the call centre sector in Dublin

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Abstract

The development of information and communications technologies (ICT) has facilitated the emergence of a complex global urban system in which many formerly lower-order cities have been carving out “niche” specialist functions serving urban fields of transnational dimension. This is illustrated in the case of Dublin, which in recent years has been transcending its traditional role as Ireland’s national metropolis through the development of a range of functions servicing mainly European markets. One such function comprises pan-European telephone call centre operations. The development and characteristics of this newly-emerging sector are described. It is argued that the growth of the sector confirms Dublin’s – and Ireland’s – dependent position in the international division of labour, and that its long-term sustainability is open to question. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction: The uneven impact of globalisation

The concept of globalisation has secured remarkable currency in the academic discourse of the late 20th century, despite ongoing questions regarding both its meaning and extent (Clark and Lund, 2000). The development of internationally integrated production and distribution systems, seen by many as the key feature of globalisation, has been a spatially uneven process. A key factor in this respect has been the differential ability of regions to engage in the informational economy, based on new information and communications technology (ICT), which is the main source of wealth creation and economic growth in the modern world (Castells, 1993). The result has been what Friedmann (1995) calls a process of ‘techno-apartheid’ which has divided the globe into ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ worlds (Knox, 1995), distinguished by the connectedness of individuals, groups and regions to the world of telematics. This echoes Ingersoll’s (1993, quoted in Knox, 1995) suggestion that the key division of the workforce is now that between those who have the capacity to operate ICT (the ‘cyberproletariat’) and those who do not (the ‘lumpentrash’).

Golding (1996) makes a similar distinction between the ‘technoliterati’ and the ‘techno-poor’.

While Knox defines the fast and slow worlds spatially, equating the former with the ‘triadic’ core and the latter with the remaining global periphery, Hoogvelt (1997) argues that the divide is, in essence, social rather than spatial, with elements of both worlds to be found in all regions of the globe. Thus, within advanced economies, a process of social polarisation has been widely reported (Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 1994) and has been intimately linked by Graham and Marvin (1996) to the development of ICT use. This is not to suggest that those who work in the fast world are homogeneously well-paid and affluent; rather, they represent a wide range of remuneration levels depending on such factors as economic sector, location, function, ethnic group and gender (Castells, 1996). What they do tend to have in common, however, is relative employment security due to the high demand level for their ICT skills.

That said, it is nonetheless clear that, globally, there are major geographical variations in the relative balance between fast and slow worlds, with the former mainly to be found in the traditional core regions of North America, western Europe and Japan and an additional small group of newly industrialising countries which have had the institutional capacity to invest massively in modern ICT and associated educational infrastructures

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(Freeman, 1994). The slow world – found predominantly in the less developed countries of the global periphery and accounting for the bulk of the world's population – is becoming increasingly marginalised and is moving, as Castells (1993, p. 37) puts it, “from a structural position of exploitation to a structural position of irrelevance”.

2. The transnational urban system

A key element in the globalisation process has been the development of growing links between the world's cities (the nerve centres of the informational economy), in the form of increasing flows of information, services, finance and currency, commodities and people. Thus, urban systems which in the past were largely defined in national terms have become increasingly integrated at the global level. This has led to the emergence of a transnational urban system (Sassen, 1994), comprising cities of varying sizes, locations, and economic functions. This system is dominated by a small number of ‘world’ (Friedmann, 1986) or ‘global’ (Sassen, 1991, 1994) cities, characterised by major concentrations of transnational corporate headquarters, advanced financial and producer services, and communications infrastructures. These are the world's “key command and control centres” (Amin and Graham, 1997, p. 413) whose functional reach is truly worldwide in scope.

Outside this select group of world/global cities, the globalisation process is causing urban centres everywhere to expand the international orientation of their economic bases. As Gottmann (1989, p. 64, quoted in Simon, 1995, p. 146) puts it:

Every substantial city nowadays aspires to a world role, at least in some specialty. This makes them expand linkages abroad, participating in more networks. All these trends contribute, little by little, to building up and intensifying the global weave of urban networks.

Many cities, therefore, have been pursuing selective “strategies for economic promotion and city marketing to establish themselves a profitable market niche” in the global economy (Wegener, 1995, p. 150). Typically, these cities place a premium on the attraction of outside capital which, in Friedmann's (1986) terminology, uses these cities as ‘basing points’ for the articulation of production and markets with respect to specialised sectors or areas. Examples of such cities include Singapore, which acts as a regional headquarters for transnational firms operating in Southeast Asia (Dicken and Kirkpatrick, 1991); Miami, which plays a key role in articulating trade and investment flows between the USA and Latin America (Sassen, 1994); and Luxembourg, which

has carved out a niche for itself as the largest ‘offshore’ financial services centre in Europe (*The Irish Times*, February 9, 1996).

Due to the limited functional base and/or spatial reach of such cities, they are probably best described as ‘transnational’ rather than global. While in some cases, their spatial zones of influence may be relatively clearly defined, the growing role of ICT in their operations is rendering traditional concepts of territorial urban hinterlands increasingly meaningless. It may be preferable, therefore, as Friedmann (1995) suggests, to use the term ‘urban field’ to denote the economic (or, indeed, cyber) space served by such cities.

The proliferation of niche transnational cities with specialised functions is giving rise to what Sassen (1994, p. 52) calls “overlapping geographies of articulation”. As a consequence, attempts to arrange the transnational urban system into neat hierarchical tiers (see Cohen, 1981; Friedmann, 1986) are increasingly futile (Friedmann, 1995). As Knox (1995, p. 9) has put it: “the flexibility of corporations within global networks and the warpage of new telecommunications media [are] constantly revising the role of ‘lower-order’ world cities”.

In this paper, we examine the profound impacts which the globalisation process has been exerting on Dublin, the capital city of the Republic of Ireland. Originally, the economic and administrative hub of a colonial economy, Dublin found its dominant economic role becoming increasingly compromised by the installation of a dispersed branch-plant economy in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, however, Dublin has become increasingly central to the organisational strategies of many American transnational firms operating in Europe. This has resulted in the emergence of a number of niche functions with a predominantly international orientation.

The paper focuses on one such function, the international telephone call centre sector. The development of this sector in Dublin is placed in the context of general locational trends among back-office activities. As one such activity, the call centre sector has particular characteristics which bestow on Dublin a certain position within the corporate international division of labour. The paper concludes by discussing some of the implications of this position for the sustainability of Dublin's role as a leading location for international call centre activities.

3. Dublin and the Irish economy

Historically, Dublin developed as a classic colonial primate city in relation to an economic system which – particularly in the 19th century – was dominated by the export of both agricultural produce and labour to the

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