

Bryson, John R., Peter W Daniels and Barney Warf, *Service Worlds: People, organisations and technologies*, London, Routledge, 2004, vii + 286pp. ISBN 0-415-24786-1 (hbk) 0-415-24786-X (pbk). £80.00 (hbk); £21.99 (pbk)

I must declare an interest. A decade ago, Neill Marshall and I tried to do a similar job to *Service Worlds* in a shorter text, *Services and Space*¹, offering an overview for students of the patterns and consequences of service growth for developed economies, including their geographical significance. We aimed for some coherence of approach to service functions, despite their heterogeneity and the chaotic array of service studies that have accumulated over the years across various disciplines. A similar attempt was made at about the same time by Sven Illeris². Neither of these efforts was wholly successful in demonstrating service 'coherence', but at least we tried. Like *Service Worlds*, we dismissed the 'sector fallacy'; the notion that the only common feature of services is that they do not process materials, and are thus of lesser importance or subsidiary in the generation of wealth. On the contrary, service functions, exploiting the 'intangible' value of human expertise and interaction, are more characteristic of modern economies than materials transformation alone, however important the latter may be. So we sought a more positive approach to understanding service value.

We proposed a 'service-informed' view of economic processes (*Services and Space*, p. 70-6), essentially working back from valued end-products to explore the often complex division of labour (or process '*filière*') required to create them. Within this, the intrinsic nature of any 'service' is to interact with and support the reproduction (including consumption) and production needs of other economic functions. These processes often involve many specialist skills, and the value of any individual function, whether nominally 'manufacturing' or 'service', is thus defined through its interdependence with others, and the expertise it brings to the wider process. Market functions interact with public sector, voluntary, informal and domestic services, as well as with individual and corporate 'self-service', moulding the context within which each is delivered. Services provided by people also interact with those embodied in goods. No particular material or non-material product or process is necessarily more significant than others in determining value. So, manufacturing innovation may be critical to economic success in some circumstances, but never on its own. If service employment trends are now driving regional inequality, these need to be addressed directly, rather than hoping that manufacturing investment can solve the problem. And if service support for other activities is increasingly important, should we not know more about what determines their regional quality?

The ambition of *Service Worlds* seems more limited – accepting the heterogeneity of services but presenting a 'service-centred' account of modern production, to counter the 'manufacturing-centred' bias of much work in economics and economic geography (p.3-4). 'Service worlds' encompass both highly paid and poorly paid workers. They are distinguished by a close ('dialectic') relationship between production and consumption. They include both large and small firms, and all forms of work, from the lone consultant to the care worker. They are also characterised by distinct and increasingly problematical regulatory and legal structures. The book is very firmly about **capitalist** service production. There is nothing on the public sector, except in passing, on transportation, or on voluntary, informal or domestic service provision. Consumer services, such as retailing or tourism are viewed from a corporate production perspective, rather than as wider social or cultural phenomena. The 'cultural' construction of commodities, introduced at various points, is treated primarily as an artefact of commercial production. The global scale dominates, rather than regional or local service production. The latter is regarded as under threat from globalisation, even though all services must still essentially be delivered 'locally'. So, in fact, there is not actually very much about the production-consumption 'dialectic', or the emerging division of labour, for example between global and local expertise in business consultancy. This leads to somewhat cursory consideration of the significance of service trends for regional and urban development.

Events have moved on in the past ten years, not least through the development of information and computer technologies. The value of *Service Worlds* lies more in the detail it offers about specific aspects of global commercial service production today than in any general insight into the significance of a

'service-centred' approach to modern economic or geographical analysis. Many modern trends are illustrated, from the advertising, accountancy and telecommunications sectors, from the City of London, and the experiences of global corporations, including Wal-Mart, Nike, Xerox, Enron, Coopers and Lybrand and BMW. There are also usefully up-to-date (in 2002) summaries of the implications of e-commerce, growing 'b2b' relationships, offshore call-centres and the influence of 'interpretative communities', including arts criticism. The book's loose structure is based around three themes (p.34): 'Perspectives on definitions, concepts and theories' (Chapters 2-4); 'Key changes marking the emergence of service worlds' (5-8); and 'How are service worlds shaped by geographical space?' (9-11). After a review of basic trends and the standard debates about the economic role of services, the nearest approach to a conceptual synthesis comes in a 'Schema' built around the 'service experience' (32-3) which, although promising, is never mentioned again. Chapter 3 reviews Walker, on the division of labour, Castells, on the 'Network Society', and the basic economics of knowledge, leading to a useful summary of the intellectual property issues arising from intangible assets. The next chapter examines the challenge posed to conventional sectoral categories by modern organisational trends. Manufacturing companies are transforming into service or part-service firms. Knowledge-based service organisations, for example in accountancy, advertising or design, are becoming as responsible for commercial success (or, in the case of Enron, for disaster), as their clients.

'Key changes' include, first, the growth of producer services. This is a rather disjointed summary of some published research, with little systematic focus and some unconvincing conclusions about the comparative knowledge-base of large and small firms. This jars somewhat with the book's final clarion call to avoid 'artificial bifurcations' when thinking about essentially interdependent functions (p.245). 'Service Work' includes a section on the economic and cultural 'hybridity' of all services, but is mainly about the growth of poorly paid work. There are summaries of gender and other divisions in the labour force, the growth of teleworking, and UK experience of call centres, all exemplifying pressures towards technological standardisation in services. Chapter 7 deals directly with the influence of information and communication technologies, including the current impacts of telecommunication deregulation, and competition between satellite and fibre optic networks. The final 'Key Change' relates to 'Consuming Services', recounting growing awareness of the interpretative context of service production, and the importance of 'invisible resources' and knowledge circuits, reputation, social networks and conventions. Examples are taken from the City of London, the commercial influence of taste and fashion, and the often locally-embedded performative qualities of many services. An emphasis on the market context of service consumption, however, neglects its interaction with self-service, domestic or welfare arenas within which the value and social impacts of consumer services are ultimately judged. Even within its own market-orientated remit, each chapter also stands alone, and there are few attempts to pursue links, for example between service work and consumption, or producer services and the spread of IT.

The final group of chapters turns to the influence of geographical space on Service Worlds. Chapter 9 describes special locales, including cities in general, the City of London, spaces of consumption such as shopping malls, office working spaces, and urban service clusters. Some prominence is given to the role of property development in promoting such developments. The final emphasis, however, is on the globalisation of services. Chapter 10 contains a summary of the deficiencies of international service transaction measurement and data. Trade theory is reviewed as a prelude to some cases from advertising, retailing (Wal-Mart) and the City of London (again!). Finally, there is a chapter summarizing global service trade data and trends, and international service trade policy.

So, *Service Worlds* is a veritable bran-tub of service-based case studies but, as the concluding chapter concedes, 'a diverse set of issues and perspectives' is discussed, with any themes emerging, serving, 'only as reminders of the bewildering array of topics that confront students of services' (p.241). Perhaps more should not be expected, but I found this apologia disappointing from these authors. Their conclusions are summarised in nine final statements [to which I add some mild dissent below], with a health warning about the dangers of oversimplification.

- 1) Services are heterogeneous. The 'service sector' lacks any coherence and tends to be viewed in many ways [But does it need to be?].
- 2) The service-manufacturing distinction is misleading. Both are different forms of intertwined commodity production under capitalism. The key question is, why has capitalism increased the use of intangibles in production, while automating the production of tangibles? [Agreed, but the answer, of course, is that one trend depends on the other].
- 3) Services are not new. There is no 'New service economy'.
- 4) Service worlds are capitalist worlds and need to be demystified in this way [But they are surely not **only** capitalist?].
- 5) Service worlds have many causes, but the modern growth of services has been led by services to production, not consumption (i.e. not simply by rising incomes). [Another 'artificial bifurcation' that seems to contradict the claim (p.4) that production and consumption are dialectically related].
- 6) Services are central, not peripheral, activities: Trade and tourism show that services can be engines of growth. [There is more to the 'centrality' of services than this, in the influence of non-traded service quality on other functions].
- 7) Services are not synonymous with information handling (as alleged by the 'now discredited' post-industrial school). There is also a 'dark side' to service worlds, associated with growing spatial polarisation. Services also manipulate goods and assist people [But these functions are largely ignored in this book].
- 8) Services have unleashed new technologies and transformed geographies. ICT innovation has been vital to service growth and change in recent decades. This is creating new hierarchies, imposing new patterns of centrality and peripherality. [But the adoption of new technologies also depends on the non-technological adaptiveness of service functions and the emergence of new service forms].
- 9) Services are not just 'economic'. They are 'deeply rooted in social and cultural relations'. [But this is not pursued here beyond recognition of the commodification of culture].

Service Worlds undoubtedly provides plenty of material to dip into for teaching purposes. It offers only a partial view, however, of the economic and geographical significance of the growing dominance of service functions in the modern economy.

1. Neill Marshall and Peter Wood (1995) *Services and Space: Key Aspects of Urban and Regional Development*, London, Longman.

2. Sven Illeris (1996) *The Service Economy: A Geographical Approach*, Chichester, Wiley.

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