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Article

The Stony Path of Management Geography

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Given their central role in economic decision-making at the firm-level, one might be inclined to assume that the role of Managers and of Management, would occupy a central place in the field of Economic Geography. In existing literature from the field, however, the ‘Manager’ remains a ‘lonesome or, more precisely, a fragmented maverick’. Although a number of labels can be assigned to the various research strands that deal with the nexus between ‘the Manager and Space’, *Management Geography* (Abo 2000, 2002, Schlunze 2004, Schlunze / Plattner 2007, Schlunze et al. 2012, Suwala / Oinas 2012), *Managerial Geography* (Laulajainen, 1998) or *Economic Geographies of Management* (Jones 2018) became the prominent ones. There are manifold definitions that tackle the rationale of Management Geography. In what follows, two of these definitions will be introduced to provide a workable description of this emerging sub-discipline.

"Management geography is a subfield of corporate / business / enterprise geography which focuses on the nexus of decision making in the corporate world – the manager and the managerial team – in a geographical perspective. The objective is the analysis of the management of economic, social and cognitive spatial realms in multi-scalar configurations influencing the corporate performance through concentration, interaction and/or perception" (Suwala / Oinas 2012; <http://www.siemrg.org/images/PDF/4-Oinas-Suwala.pdf>).

“Management geography is a new avenue of economic geography which focuses on the nexus of managerial practices in a globalizing world from a geographical perspective. The research objective is the analysis of the socio-economic and cognitive spatial behavior of managerial subjects influencing organizational performance through preferences, interactions and perceptions” (Schlunze 2017, See URL: <http://www.siemrg.org/report-of-16th-meeting.html>). Both definitions encompass similar ideas; however, whereas the latter emphasizes spatial ‘managerial practices’ (Jones / Murphy 2010), spatial managerial ‘decision making’ is the focus of the first.

Regardless of label and definition, there exist a “growing number of contributions [that] have sought to frame themselves (albeit loosely) as part of a ‘new management geography’ developing firmly at the overlap of debates between economic geography and management studies” (Jones 2018, 277). The timeline sketched out in Figure 1 is showing that researchers from different backgrounds and schools have actively contributed to generating knowledge in this loose field. Management Geography has its origins in the traditions of corporate / business/ enterprise or firm geography (Krumme 1969, Taylor 1975, Dicken 1976, Hayter / Watts 1983, Laulajainen/ Stafford 1984, Malecki 1985) and can be traced back to as early as Robert B. McNee’s 1958 account of “Functional Geography of the Firm” (McNee 1958) within the field of Economic Geography. At the same time,



International Business scholars have made their own imprint on the subject: research dealing both with FDI in general (Kojima 1989, Buckley 1991) and with internationalisation or overseas operation of enterprises in particular has been instrumental in laying a foundation for thinking about ‘managers in spaces’ (Hymer 1960 (1976), Kindleberger 1970, Buckley / Casson 1976, Johanson / Vahlne 1977, Dunning 1980). The first systematic account in the subfield of what we call

Management Geography today was probably undertaken by Korean born, Japanese-educated Professor Tetsuo Abo and his ‘Japanese Multinational Enterprises Study Group’ from the mid-1980’s, whose research focused on Japanese hybrid overseas factories and managerial strategies (Abo 1989, 1992, 1994, 2004, 2012, 2015) (see Figure 1).

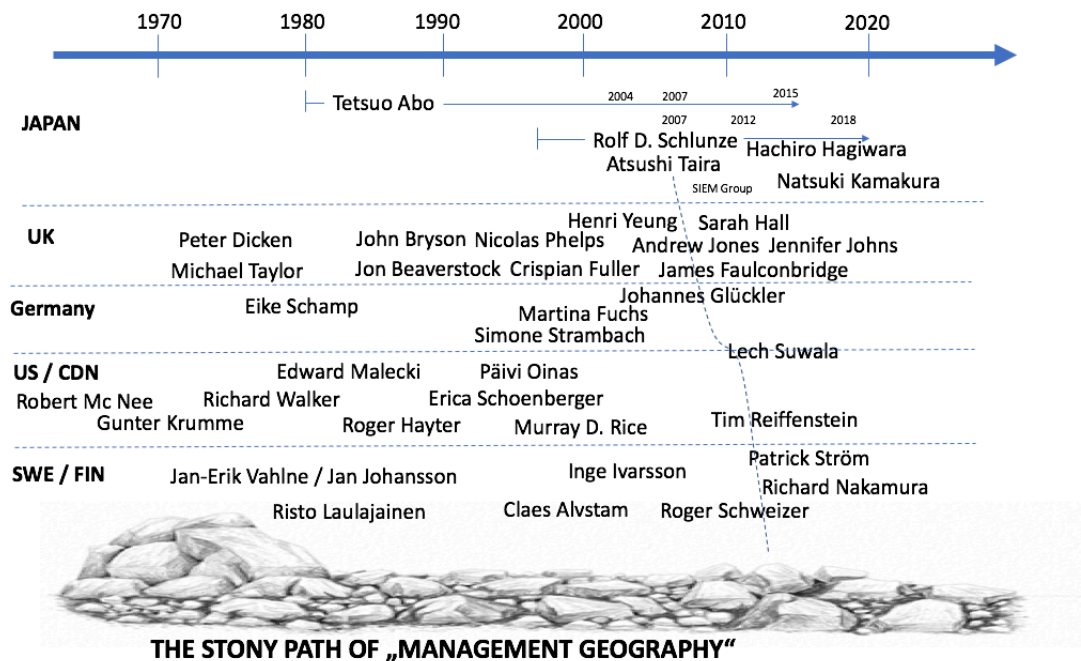


Fig. 1 “The Different Schools of Management Geography” within Economic Geography (own elaboration)

The research of Abo’s group brought about enlightening insights to the subject (for an overview and summary, see Abo 2015) but was naturally limited by the group’s narrow focus on Japanese overseas management, as well as by the exclusiveness of the group within the University of Tokyo. Inspired by Abo’s work, a group of 18 interdisciplinary researchers led by Schlunze and Taira initiated an international and multidisciplinary research

group called SIEM (Spaces of International Economy and Management, in Japanese: 国際経済経営地理学研究グループ, see: siemrg.org) in 2007. One important achievement of Schlunze and Taira’s on behalf of SIEM has been to bring both key thinkers together to discuss relevant topics (e.g. through recurring, multi-year appearances at meetings and conferences: 2011: Yeung; 2013,



2015: Jones; 2011: Laulajainen; and 2011, 2012: Oinas), and to introduce young scholars from different schools of thoughts and disciplines to the field (e.g. 2015: Ström; 2014, 2018: Reiffenstein; 2011, 2012, 2015: Suwala, 2015: Kamakura). Despite their great efforts in the last 12 years, and despite the excellent work published in recent years by scholars working either independently (e.g. Kamakura 2014, Schlunze 2016, Jones 2018, Reiffenstein 2018, Yeung 2018, Suwala 2019, Basco / Suwala 2020, Suwala 2020 among many others) or in independent groups working both within and outside of the research group (Falconbridge / Jones 2012, Nakamura / Ström 2014, Beaverstock/ Falconbridge/ Hall 2015, Phelps / Wood 2018), only few overarching publication initiatives have been realized to-date. A common challenge of this work has been to systematically locate the topic of

‘managers in space’ between the fields of Economic Geography and IB (Schlunze et al. 2012). Figure 1 provides an overview of how we currently place and perceive different scholars and working groups, their origins and native school backgrounds, within the broader field. Again, the presence of different working groups, each with their own native school backgrounds and with different theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical approaches, complicates the formation of a ‘mutual journey’ for the development of a sub-field called ‘Management Geography’. The double session in Cologne provided repeated evidence for this fact (see Tab. 1). Notwithstanding, we believe that their shared interest in managerial issues still might unite these diverse researchers under the label or umbrella of ‘Management Geography’ or ‘(New) Geographies of Management’.

	Content	Background	Method	Relation to Management Geography
Atsushi Taira	Geographical patterns of “global-niche” firms / glocal pipelines	Industrial Geography/ IB	Qualitative: Case study method	Transfer of practices
Tim Reiffenstein	Managerial features of Japanese ramen industry	Economic Geography/ IB	Qualitative plus network analysis	Community of practice: networks of training and mentorship
Kenji Tsutsumi	Regional Management of Depopulated and Aged Community	Social Geography/ Economy	Case study of rural community	Sustainability Management
Hachiro Hagiwara	Enterprises’ Performance in Brazil	Economic Geography / IB	Evolutionary approach	Entrepreneurship; Leadership style
Rolf D. Schlunze	Managers and their network practices	Industrial Geography / IB	Mixed method approach	Transfers managerial knowhow; network practices

Tab. 1 Presenters at the special sessions at the 5th Global Conference on Economic Geography in Cologne with backgrounds, methods and relations to Management Geography (own elaboration)



SIEMs' answers for future development are straightforward but require theoretical, methodological work, and opportunities for framing. "A dedicated academic journal or regular space in a pertinent magazine would raise the profile, and college classes going straight into practical corporate matters" might be one way to bring this 'motley crew' of researchers together, as Risto Laulajaniemi put it 20 years ago (1998, 6). SIEM's road map also proposes other published forms, including "mutual edited collections" and "special issues" in journals. We believe that these will provide platforms from which to further disseminate the concept of Management Geography among economic geographers, international business scholars (IB) and adjacent disciplines.

As a first step, we have created this SIEM Bulletin, offering associated researchers a voice; by disseminating this bulletin to interested researchers and publishing it at the group's homepage, www.siemrg.org, we are attempting to open a forum for interdisciplinary initiatives with an interest in space- or scale-based approaches to management. This brief description of the field and literature is neither exhaustive nor representative but rather represents a current, biased and subjective snapshot – emphasizing presenters at SIEM meetings and their work in the field (for an advanced literature overview on Management Geography, see Suwala 2019).

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