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Proximity and localization at the heart of regional science Interview with André Torre

A regionális tudomány "közelsége" Interjú André Torreval

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On behalf of the journal Tér és Társadalom (Space and Society), I am delighted you could accept our invitation for this interview.

First of all, thank you for inviting me. I guess that it is a big step for your research community that you could start editing your journal also in English. It may provide new opportunities for regional scientists to be better informed about the latest results and findings in Hungarian regional science.

I would like to ask you to let us know how you started your research career.

I started my career at the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis, where I studied economics. I graduated as an economist and passed my PhD in Economics in 1985 at the University of Nice. I wrote my thesis on industrial economics and investigated industrialisation and development in France using input-output models and graph theory.

And how did you meet regional science for the first time?

The first time I approached regional science came a few years later, in the late 1980s. Two issues played an important role. At that time, I was a researcher at the CNRS ("Centre national de la recherche Scientifique") on the technopole of Sophia Antipolis, which has served as a hub for innovation with startups, spin-off firms and local spill-overs. The second issue is that I come from Corsica, and I was passionate about the idea of the development or non-development of Corsica and also the topic of peripheral regions. Thus, I moved step by step towards spatial and regional science.

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After completing your PhD, what was the first milestone in your career?

I would say my first milestone was the book I edited with Alain Rallet in 1995. It is a book in French, but its English title is Spatial Economics and Industrial Economics ("Economie industrielle et économie spatiale"). Several French researchers published in this book, and we also translated and summarised the results of several famous papers and theories of regional science by Paul Krugman, Giacomo Becattini and Roberto Camagni, among others. So, it has been an important milestone in French regional science to integrate the topics of industrial economics and innovation into a single volume.

According to your CV, after this milestone, you started turning to topics related to regional science, is that right?

I became a professor in 1994 and in 1997 I went to Paris to AgroParisTech, a leading school of engineering in agriculture, agribusiness, and environment in France and Europe. There I started to develop my team and own research projects on topics like local development and local cooperation. We also conducted a lot of studies on local conflicts. Several PhD students worked in my team dealing with conflicts in different places, conflicts around land use and proximity in France, as well as in various countries like Pakistan and Brazil. Later, I also moved towards more environmental-related topics. I discovered that many local conflicts were rooted in environment-related questions like installing new settlements, dams, waste sites, polluted areas, big plants and all these things, and that they are related to urban sprawl and the consumption of agricultural lands. In recent years, I started to work on the circular economy at the local level. So, yes, we can say that I have turned my research focus on topics related to local and territorial development, which are related to regional science.

I guess the successful implementation of such complex research projects may require a broad range of experiences. Did you also work with colleagues from other disciplines?

Yes, indeed. Now, I am not involved in mathematics anymore, not at all. And I believe that I am really a multidisciplinary researcher. During these projects, I used to work with people in sociology, geography, planning, law, management science, agronomy and socio-psychology. I love to work in a multidisciplinary environment. So, I can say that I am a very open economist. For example, my team and I defined a way to cope with conflicts, to survey and analyse them: we published our method with 15 other researchers coming from these different fields.

You mentioned that your first career milestone was also an essential step in spreading the results of regional science in France. Can you explain how you became one of the leading persons in French (and later European) regional science?

One major event for me, and probably the most important event in my academic life was that we started working on proximity together with a few

economic scholars in the early 90s. At that time, I was working in the Technopole and was interested in understanding why some firms developed in a particular place while others remained underdeveloped. It was necessary to investigate the various components, possibilities and limits of proximity. Thus, we started to work together and published our first findings around proximity in collective papers, books, edited volumes and special issues of journals at the French level. Later, step by step, we created with other colleagues coming from various research fields what is now called the French School of Proximity. We elaborated together on the theory of the main topics of proximity. Then, we started to promote our results internationally, especially at the ERSA Congresses, organising special sessions and meeting others like Ron Boschma and Koen Frenken, for example. They were really interested in this issue. And they also started to create and promote proximity studies. We could also approach new colleagues, young researchers, and talented PhD students through our presence and special sessions at the congresses. And by the promotion of our studies, I gradually became known in the French and the European community of regional science. Then between 2008 and 2011 I became the vice president and then president of the French-speaking session of the ERSA (ASRDLF).

Can we say that the proximity studies were a booster in your career and your reputation within regional science?

Yes, definitely, because my works started to be cited and discussed. We could also reach researchers who were initially not involved in the Proximity School. Still, they were interested in our results and started applying our tools to solve their research questions. In this way, our studies and results diffused further. Also, my article entitled Proximity and localization published in Regional Studies in 2005 helped increase my reputation. But I also have an excellent relationship with people in the regional science community with whom we do not share the same research topic. I rapidly became friends with people like Jacques Thisse, Jouke Van Dijk, Roberta Capello, and many others. And organising special sessions at the ERSA Congresses (especially the sessions on territorial governance) also supported getting to know new colleagues, making new friendships and attracting new people.

Previously, you mentioned that you like to work in a multidisciplinary environment. Do you think ERSA has become more multidisciplinary in recent decades?

When I started to participate in the ERSA Congresses at the end of the 1980s, the attendees were dominantly traditional economists. At that time, they were dealing with traditional spatial economics theories like the location theory. But I was not a spatial economist. Thus, I felt a bit foreign in this company, even though I rapidly enjoyed the people and the friendly atmosphere. But then, ERSA started to change and became more open to people like me, first in relation

to industrial economics and innovation, and then in a very open and multidisciplinary way. So, I believe that now it has changed a lot. And the number of members also reflects this process. Currently, there are more than 2,000 ERSA members from all over Europe, and we intend to enlarge the organisation by involving new sections. For example, we are in contact with colleagues from Serbia, and we will see the possibilities. Looking at the huge number and the great diversity of sessions or special sessions in the ERSA Congress indicates that it has become very comprehensive. Besides the economists and geographers, it is open to planners, sociologists, psychologists, people from organisation studies and management, and people dealing with financial issues, among others. Furthermore, it also starts being open to other sciences like biology, physics and so on. Thus, in my opinion, it has changed a lot.

As the President of the ERSA, do you try to support this kind of change to include new topics in the events of regional science?

Yes, I try to push this change, but it is also a question of time. We are in different times now because in the 1980s or 1990s, the topic of many regional scientists, especially in Europe, was around the location of places, people, cities, and then firms. Now, the issues have changed, and the tools have also exploded. Suppose you look, for example, at topics like the geography of discontent. It could have been quite impossible 30 years ago because it was considered as a subject out of regional science's scope. Now it is a part of it, and it has been strongly pushed by scientific leaders of the ERSA Community like Andres Rodriguez-Pose, Phil McCann and many others. But I also feel that all the questions dealing with governance, the rules and regulations of the states, the EU, take immense importance nowadays, even at the local level. People want to participate in local democracy and innovate a lot at the local level. This is a massive change because we must deal with this significant evolution of the local populations all over Europe. Of course, it does not appear to have the same basis in all countries and regions. But there's an emergence of the will of the population and an explosion of the new types of organisations, social or economic tools invented at the local level, especially now when climate change and the public health are in the focus of attention. So, we must be present at the local level, and we must be open to all these things, and of course, it means that we need to expand the different types of methods and data. There are a lot of new data sources like social media or geocoded data, for example. Still, in-depth interviews and case studies may also have an essential role in investigating the local-level issues. A lot of improvements are required at this level.

Regarding the local level, do you think the research results of regional science can support experts and practitioners in answering questions regarding local development?

I think that regional science can be very powerful regarding these questions, and nowadays more than before. I believe that we are already doing this at the local level. There are a lot of us who are very good at implementing or discussing those policies. For example, if you look at all the research done regarding the LEADER programs in many European regions, most of them were led by local regional scientists. They apply and improve the methodology and discuss these processes with the local people. This is very important, and you find that these studies are presented at the ERSA Congresses now. They are translated in more scientific terms, I would say, but they exist. Also, many ERSA members are very good at negotiating with local authorities, local municipalities, communities of agglomeration, local governments and so on. But of course, this does not mean we must bring all these people to the congresses. During dedicated events, it's fascinating to have discussions with stakeholders. Every October, there is the EU Regions Week, which provides the opportunity to have several ERSA workshops with the practitioners: we are very committed there. We also have fruitful relations with the EU, especially with the DG Regio and the OECD. They are dealing with policies at the European level and the implementation of those policies in different regions or territories. But they need to discuss these with ERSA because, on the one hand, we have the expertise, some of our colleagues are very good at implementing EU policies at the local level, and on the other hand we are pretty diverse, with many skills.

I guess there are also several projects in which new scientific results, papers, publications and policy suggestions may come up.

Indeed, there are a lot of projects in which ERSA members take part. Some of them are smaller ones on the local or regional level, but there are also large programmes financed by the EU. For example, I led a European project about smart development in rural areas a few years ago. We conducted a lot of studies at the European level to look at the way in which smart development policies and strategies were adapted or not adapted to rural areas. The core idea was that the current smart development policies of the EU are well adapted to the cities and the urban areas but they need to be seriously adapted and modified to the peripheral areas. We worked for five years on that, and many people from the ERSA like the incoming RSAI President Hans Westlund, were involved. At the end of the project, we proposed some solutions for those rural areas. It is an excellent example, and I guess that we are dealing with concrete projects, demonstrating that ERSA is really focusing on the peripheries.

During your ERSA presidency, the COVID pandemic has also brought new insights into the organisation of the ERSA Congresses since it forced you to start the online version of the event. How did you see these changes?

In 2019 we planned to organise our congress for 2020 in Bolzano. So, we started organising the congress, which worked very well. But we were obliged to

cancel this event due to the pandemic. Therefore, we decided to organise our first online event. It was a real challenge since we were not used to doing that before on such a scale. We had to learn many techniques and the ERSA Office colleagues made a huge effort to implement this event. Thus, we were able to organise our first online event. In the following year, we started together to organise the congress in Bolzano in the same way as we originally planned in 2020. But once again, we were faced with the problem of the pandemic, and it was impossible to organise it onsite in Bolzano due to the different restrictions on travelling or organising events. At that point, we decided to have a real online congress. It means that we organised everything as it would be at the real (onsite) congress in 2021, but the whole event was held online. We organised the roundtables, keynote lectures, various events, meetings, and, of course, all the parallel sessions online. And it was a thing where we became pioneers because many other congresses were cancelled at that moment. We found our solution and had around 850 people online at the 2021 ERSA Congress. It was a big success, and it was excellent to learn these new techniques.

Now, we are looking forward to the 2022 congress, which will be organised in Pécs, Hungary. And this congress will bring another novel approach since it will be the first mixed (onsite and online) event in the history of ERSA Congresses. Does it mean that you had a good experience with the online event?

After the congress in 2021, we looked at the statistics of the event, and two things stood out to us. On the one hand, the gender balance of the participants was equal, so there was a 50/50 rate between the male and female attendants. Previously, it was not the case. According to our statistics, there had been more than 60% of men and less than 40% of women in the former congresses. This was an interesting finding because this may also indicate that probably more women were able to participate as the event was organised online. On the other hand, we had more young researchers than in the former events. This latter result seemed quite clear: we could reach more young researchers since the prices were lower and they did not have to cover the travel and subsistence expenses. These two observations led us to think about the future of the ERSA Congresses. And another consideration is that more and more people hesitate to travel to longer distances for environmental reasons, especially by plane. Therefore, ERSA decided that we intend to organise mixed events in the future. But we are also convinced that it is vital for people to come together in person and broaden their networks. It is more than necessary to sustain the community of ERSA researchers. And I am a person of proximity, so I cannot say anything else. Therefore, we must organise most events onsite where people can present their research results in person, have face-to-face discussions, meet at the social events and meet the speakers and panellists to have discussions with them. We are entirely convinced about that. But we also want to open the opportunity for other people who are

not able to attend for personal of financial reasons or who do not wish to travel because they do not feel safe for any reason. For the past two years, there has been pandemic. This year's safety concerns are also related to the conflict in Ukraine.

Do you plan to keep the online event in the frame of future ERSA Congresses?

I am really in favour of mixed events in the future. Online participation at the congress may also allow reaching new people, or those who cannot afford to spend a couple of days at the onsite event. We definitely intend to organise a mixed event in 2023 in Alicante. One of the consequences is that it extends the duration of the congress. It means that you have almost a whole week (five to six days), and you have to offer the possibility for people to attend online or offline. This is the direction in which we are heading.