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An epistemology of territory: a perspective on contexts for social relations*

Resumo

O territory precisa de ser interpretado – e não apenas considerado como uma variável de descrição das diferenças na repartição económica. A interrogação mais forte acerca do territory é a que procura compreender a genealogia dos processos socioeconómicos: por que razão se geram ali, e não noutra sítio, dinâmicas ou défices? Isto implica uma epistemology do territory e pressupõe que se atribua à *proximidade* – e aos comportamentos relacionais e às práticas cognitivas que ela desencadeia – uma natureza ontológica, e não apenas uma utilidade descritiva. Ao contrário do que é mais comum, não se pensa que basta compatibilizar territorialisations e mobilidade para entender as estruturas espaciais contemporâneas. É necessário pressupor que estamos perante tensões estruturais. Por isso se rejeita a visão organicista que vê os territories com derivações, sub-produtos, de ordem imanentes e se entende que se deve olhar para as sociedades de hoje como estruturalmente polimórficas. A análise das ordens relacionais representadas nos territories é também um bom caminho para contrapor às visões em que o poder é reificado, a noção mais útil de morfologia do poder.

Abstract

Territory has to be interpreted. It is not enough to use it as a variable in descriptions of differences in economic structures. The major question regarding territory concerns the attempt to understand the origins of economic processes, namely why they started in one particular place and not elsewhere. The answer implies an epistemology of territory. *Proximity* – and the relational behaviours and cognitive practices that this creates – has an ontological nature. Contrary to other visions, this paper does not claim that the link between fluxes and fixities is sufficient to provide an understanding of spatial structures. Certain structural tensions exist and territories are part of them. Territories are not derivations or by-products of an imminent order. Societies are polymorphic. The relational orders represented by territories are important in capturing the morphology of power in contemporary societies.

Palavras-chave: Território, proximidade, governação, urbanização

Key-words: Territory, proximity, governance, urbanisation

1. Introduction: space and territory in socio-economic thinking

The assumption underlying this text is that any discussion of social relations and the values they incorporate can benefit from a consideration of the meaning of territories and the circumstances under which they are formed and evolve.

From the second half of the 20th century onwards, the development of territorialist perspectives within economics has resulted in a *presupposition* – the importance of the

⁺ Chapter of the book *Territories of Social Responsibility: Opening the Research and Policy Agenda*, Patricia Almeida Ashley and David Crowther (ed.) Gower, 2012, .93-106

* This text aims to offer a contribution to the subject covered in this book, on the basis of previously published reflections on territorialism (see, in particular, Reis, 2009).

space variable within knowledge –, an *objective* – the search for socio-economic equity – and an *interpretative aim* – assessment of the role played by territories in the formation of contemporary structures and social dynamics.

It is acknowledged that the social sciences began by ignoring territory and not including it in the variables necessary for an understanding of socio-economic realities: in economics, for example, in the “analysis of theories of general equilibrium (...), the spatial element was completely disregarded” (Lopes, 1987: 2). It was on the basis of this (explicit or implicit) *presupposition* and an attempt to fill this gap that countless research programmes were drawn up which may be called territorialist: “the spatial determinant of economic development is quite simply as fundamental as time”; “for a long time the existence of ‘spatial’ diversity has been recognised from the way social phenomena manifest themselves” (*ibid.: idem*).

Many of these programmes added a *moral and ethical dimension* to the definition of the field of study, incorporating a proposition for equity which would be achieved by resolving the asymmetries and social inequalities revealed by the simple use, in analysis, of a spatial variable: “the benefits of economic-social development must be for individuals – all individuals” (*ibid.: 4*). This path would lead to *politics*: “it is important for certain activities to be localised more rationally”; “spatial organisation is an objective that must be achieved” (*ibid.: idem*).

However, it was not long before an *interpretative ambition* also began to define territorialist studies: specialists became interested in understanding the ‘reason for the existence’ of what was happening in each individual territory. This could involve the *mobility* of production factors (the movement of people, goods and capital in space) as much as the *genealogy* of processes, given that these take place in specific places or, in other words, originate and develop in concrete, identifiable and distinct circumstances.

For various reasons it became necessary to interpolate territory: why does it attract or repel and why are certain dynamics or deficits generated in one place and not in another? Interrogating genealogy is a more substantial task and requires a more in-depth response than interrogating mobility. The reason is that in the case of the latter it is sufficient to consider territory a support for localisation, as a reception area, whereas the former ascribes an active role to territory itself, as an action which intervenes in the processes that are to be analysed. This latter concern already places us in a radically new area. It demands an epistemology of territory.

No interpolation of territory can be separated from an interpolation of the way in which collective systems and dynamics function, from a socio-economic point of view. It is true – and accepted – that there may be interpretations and views of social processes that dispense with the need to reflect on territory (territorialists would say that this option is impoverishing). However, the reverse is not true. In effect, the radical nature of the task has to do with the fact that the territorialist interpretation is, in itself, a reading of the nature of the structures and dynamics of society and economics, an understanding of how the *coordination of collective processes* is achieved, the role played by the actors involved (their chosen actions and the possibilities of exercising them effectively) and the relations (whether hierarchical or not) between actors and processes on different spatial scales.

This question, which is pertinent in any phase of socio-economic development, has become particularly relevant now that a territorial metaphor has invaded current discourse without offering a great deal towards making it more intelligent and intelligible. I refer here to the metaphor of *globalisation*. It is founded on two basic ideas, namely that within the territorial scales relevant to an understanding of socio-economic functions the relations between spaces and actors are radically *hierarchical* and predictable, and that such relations imply a logic of *derivation* from a lower to a higher level. The local is the other face of the global – the former is of interest as a channel of reproduction for the latter. For these reasons, the range and possibilities for the actual expression of hierarchically inferior (geographical or social) places is essentially that of submission, resistance or exclusion, including alternative exclusion. To use the terms of Albert Hirschman, they are *exit* or *loyalty*, but not *voice*. Globalisation is all-embracing: it includes the full range of interactions. The position I am defending here endows territories – which obviously are not landscapes, but actors, interactions, powers, capacity and initiatives – with their own status and specific place within the social orders (and disorders).

In general terms, the radical nature of the question I wish to identify lies in the following problem: are individuals, as rational and active subjects, and the spaces in which they are situated, as relevant places for collective life, functionally determined by the needs and practices of ‘entities’ which transcend this and are situated on a different level to the one in which individual actions are exercised (for example, the determinants of capitalism, the market, or globalisation, as they are now usually termed)?

Conversely, are there other coordination mechanisms that provide social actors with vocabularies, arguments, powers and practical tools with which to pursue their objectives and realise their intentions? The place of territory can be found in a response that includes the second option. The epistemology of territory consists of a discussion of the basis for each of these aspects of the problem and the construction of an interpretation capable of accommodating a concept of territory that responds – in one way or another – to questions about its role and place within the dynamics of society.

2. A basic question: mobilities vs. territorialisations

The main problem and basic question, namely the one that enables us to approach an epistemology of territory, is the tension between what I will call ‘mobilities’¹ and ‘territorialisations’² and its role in structuring the societies and economies of today (Reis, 2001)³. For those involved in examining the spatialities of development, this proposal, as an initial step, contains nothing new in itself. It is readily accepted that both sides of the formulation represent elements present in the functioning of territories. Yet this may no longer be the case when interpreting the logic of the relationship between

¹ Mobility is a characteristic of productive factors and actors who are not confined to concrete territorial conditions. Their “optimum locations” are not influenced by space but by parameters of quantity.

² I have called “territorialisations” localised socio-economic processes based on dynamics and actors whose actions are made possible by interactions involving proximity, which are also associated with the related developments, even if incorporated into broader contexts. Cities and urban systems, industrial districts, national and regional systems for innovation, and regions are all examples of territorialisations. Territorialisations are not closed, self-sufficient forms of endogenous processes; they are ways of enhancing resources, capacities and actions linked to territory in a variety of spatial contexts. Space (expressed, for example, by the proximity of factors, actors and conditions) incorporates localisation decisions.

³ This is the first of four pillars (Reis, 2001, 2009) on which I have based an institutionalist alternative for the analysis of the organisation of contemporary economies. The second pillar is the recognition of the *limits of rationality and organisation*. It is known that mobilities and “redesignings” of the world are always underpinned by the idea that there are discerning, well-informed social super-actors who act with great deliberation and total rationality. However, the hypothesis of absolute rationality and intentionality of human actions has always had to confront limits, moral restrictions, relations based on dependency and the partial capacity to process information.

Therefore the third pillar – *uncertainty and contingency* has a place in much larger and more central innovative processes than those attributed to it by rationalist models, given that these only recognise the dominant routine practices. It is through the values ascribed to this pillar that the moral and human dimensions of life are recovered and it is this presupposition that enables us to understand that unexpected trajectories are a certainty within the processes of development and innovation.

The final pillar is the one which embraces the diversity of socio-economic processes and understands institutions as the expression of complexity. It is through institutions that uncertainty is reduced and practices contextualised. Institutions are the density of territory.

It is worth emphasising that the text by Cumbers *et al.* (2003), which I will examine later, is based on a critical discussion of institutionalism.

them and, above all, what results from this. It is precisely the dynamic results of this relationship and what it crystallises in the form of structures and stable social processes that defines the ‘way of seeing’ how contemporary economics are structured. The problem is therefore simple: either territorialities are mere forms of reproducing mobilities and the capacity to master elements of mobility, or else there is a *tension* between both that necessitates an assessment of what confers strength and power on both. This latter possibility means that territory must be interpreted from a point of view that includes the power it incorporates, the interrelations and actors which shape it, the initiatives it generates and the transformations it demands.

The significance of mobilities in the construction of modern societies is immense and undeniable: mobility associated with the actual identification of territory as land (the discoveries of the so-called first globalisation in the 16th century, or the conquest of the American ‘frontier’ in the consolidation of the ‘New World’, to give just two examples), mobility of technologies (the spread of the industrial revolution from England in the 17th century), mobility of capital and people (in colonisation and the first internationalisations), mobility of companies (in the internationalisation of production and the subsequent multinational organisation of the production cycle), and financial, information and communications mobility (in the current phase of ‘globalisation’). It is also undeniable that the processes of mobility have accelerated spectacularly and have been qualitatively transformed, making it justifiable to speak nowadays of ‘hyper-mobilities’ (Damette, 1980; Hudson, 2004). The place of these phenomena is, therefore, established and sufficiently well-interpreted. Modern societies, industrial societies and the services, communications and multiform consumer societies of today are based on easy and growing mobilities – nomadisms – and on relational behaviours derived from processes involving a powerful trend towards eliminating distance.

In the same way, it is easily acknowledged that life has “its feet on the ground” and that centuries-old processes do not take place in the stratosphere. Nations, urbanisation, the localisation of resources, the installation of companies, and factors associated with symbolic density all have a place and are all established in space. Therefore, it is easier – and very common – to arrive at a “punctiform” notion (cf. Lopes, 2002: 35) of the relationship between actors and the terrain, rather than a territorial view, with all that

this implies for understanding interactions, genealogy, evolution, uncertainty and the unexpected.

The origins and evolution of the territorialist perspective involve the presupposition that arbitrating between mobilities (or flows) and territorialisations does not constitute a simple search for a formal balance between two sources of influence. If it did, it would be legitimate to enquire about its usefulness and the reason for its existence. It would certainly be a common sense exercise, but also a relatively anodyne one with only formal relevance. It would amount to nothing. It would not represent an epistemological advance and would be little more than a definition of the terrain, since it would principally serve to define the area of study for a group of specialists who would thus establish and defend their 'profession'. In addition, it would add one more term – territory – to the list of discursive and instrumental resources used by the social sciences.

However, territorialist proposals are justified to the extent that they add a new, relevant cognitive tool to the explanation and understanding of contemporary collective processes. It is not enough to consider territory relevant as the matrix for the 'life process' and the cognitive, relational and proactive capacities of social actors. It is necessary for this relevance, once demonstrated, to engage with the actual production of knowledge, i.e. for it to have an epistemological dimension. Moreover, this being the case, the conceptual structure used is substantially altered. In this sense, territory must change from a descriptive tool to a concept that structures and differentiates the interpretative perspective which incorporates it – and is added to a vast range of other discussions within the field of epistemology, methodology and the social sciences. This implies that *proximity* – and the relational behaviours and cognitive practices that it activates – is attributed an ontological role rather than simply being ascribed a descriptive usefulness, a place in determining social processes of the same nature ("same nature" does not necessarily mean of equal importance in all circumstances) as other social determinants. It also implies that global socio-economic dynamics are conceived of as phenomena that are not organically established as a consequence of the aforementioned hierarchy and predictability. On the contrary, territories become elements in the genealogy of processes, conferring on them an uncertain, contingent and

unexpected nature⁴. The functionalist presupposition that precedes many analyses of the evolution of social phenomena must give way, in the name of a genuine initial question concerning its genealogy. Consequently, it must move from an organicist view of social structures to a notion that recognises their polymorphism.

The change of “register” which this option implies must be understood as another view of things rather than as a fusion of perspectives. We are faced with two different constructions of the conceptual universe which we use to assess social dynamics. Ultimately it not dissimilar to what takes place in other troubling debates within economic science which, from within different fields, have also contributed towards finding a solution to this problem. The epistemology of economics, for example, debates the need to combine *imagination* with *reason* to formulate the mechanisms that characterise human beings and equip them for practical action. This, together with the idea that social actors possess a “creative imagination” in which knowledge and experience converge, is the basis of the “situational analysis” applied to situations with multiple possibilities (“multiple-exit’ problem situations”) i.e. those that occur in an open world in which the relatively conscious actions of agents reproduce and transform social structures (Neves, 2004: 922-3). The other side of this discussion is, evidently, the neo-classical version of economic science which makes “choice” its sole objective and establishes individual decisions to allocate resources on the basis of fixed, given notions of usefulness as a ‘universal economic problem” (Hodgson, 1996: 104).

Does situating territory within an epistemological context such as this signify a reification of territory? This would appear to me not to be the case, since what is at stake here is not territory as a physical set of material landscapes, but territory as the expression and product of interactions led by the actors in question. Territory, in these circumstances, is proximity, actors, and interactions. It is also a crucial element in the matrix of relationships that define the morphology of power in contemporary societies.

⁴ There is no shortage of examples of socio-economic processes that illustrate this. Despite their origins, the Marshall industrial districts were not the aspect of the Marshall Plan that best survived for posterity until the subject emerged in the research agenda and this legitimised its reinstatement. What were the origins of the much studied “third Italy” or the appearance of the Japanese economy on the world scene? Who predicted them? With disarming simplicity Norberto Bobbio remembers that everyone thought that Italian post-war reconstruction would be totally different and that, in the end, “something surprising happened that can still be seen today”. This is also valid for the growth cycle during the thirty glorious years of intensive industrialisation in Europe after the Second World War. What kind of functional relations gave rise to this? What of the unfulfilled predictions and proclaimed miracles?

This being the case, propositions that suggest that a correct assessment of social phenomena requires a simple formal balancing of the variables in question do not strike me as being satisfactory. This is how I would interpret Ray Hudson's proposition (2004) for understanding the spatialities that constitute economies and societies. Addressing the same problem I have formulated above through what I call the "tension between mobilities and territorialisations", Hudson speaks of "fixities of spaces" and "fluidities of circuits and flows". Contrary to positions that argue that the key element in understanding contemporary societies lies in one of the two (the other, by necessity, being subsidiary), his proposal is "towards a conceptualization in terms of the relations between circuits, flows and spaces" (Hudson 2004: 99), which are complementary, rather than competing.

I would not dispute the relevance of such a prudent suggestion as this as a general proposition. However, I doubt that it adds understanding to a better definition of territory and its meaning in terms of the structuring of social systems subject to intensive processes of change⁵. I admit that this formulation often derives from the fact that one of the broadest fields of discussion is related to the idea, albeit very narrow, that territories are constructs, namely social constructs (in which the various relational scales intervene and the said relationship between flows and 'fixities' is expressed), discursive constructs and material constructs. Yet this 'constructed nature' of territory – which is a vision of *process* – demands, rather than evades, a consideration of *output*, its result, which is the actual territory that has been constructed, within the context of other, broader interactions (job creation, the setting up of initiatives, governance⁶ of urban systems, innovation, the global organisation of production). Even if it is necessary – and it is – for us to see territory as something which is dynamic, not 'fixed' forever or even for a long time, it is important to know how this material consequence of constructed

⁵ One of the metaphors that appears most irrelevant to me on this level is that of "two sides of the same coin" when referring, for example, to assessing the relationship between the global and the local. The most extreme case of irrelevance is that of popular terms such as *glocal*.

⁶ I use the term governance – which may be considered close to 'regulation' – to mean the way in which collective interests are manifested and organised (how social *actors* are formed), how the actors who intervene in the social sphere reach an understanding (how social *conventions* are consolidated), how society and the economy are regulated through public policies (the role of the *state* and the strategic priority spheres of its intervention), how society equips itself with organisations (the development of its *organisational superstructure*), how patterns, routines and ways of doing things are created (the *habitus*, informal capital and tacit knowledge available to a society) – in short, the prevailing *constitutional order* (the term "constitutional" is not used here in its legal sense, although it includes this, but instead to mean the matrix of material and symbolic relationships that define the public sphere and guide the trajectory of society as a whole).

relations is involved in the new dynamic processes of which it has become a part. Is it a key element or simply a left-over, a by-product, only necessary as localisation, the place where “feet are on the ground”?

Social processes cannot be interpreted within an incessant relational and (re)constructive vertigo. They assume materialities, cognition and relational mechanisms which have substance and duration: there is a *secularisation* of processes and the time to which they correspond. They are not subject to instant and permanent transformations.

Moreover, it has been understood for some time that territory does not just amount to physical space. The territory that economists, sociologists and planners survey is a *relational territory*. The idea that in contemporary societies territories are *matrixes* emphasises this permanent relational condition, given the relational order that shapes them, i.e. the interactions that structure their internal order, and the external relational order, i.e. the interactions that structure the world, which is not the exterior side of territories but a whole of which they are a part, as categories in their own right.

The affirmation of the matrical nature of territory requires, in the first place, an affirmation of its relevance as a material and socio-economic order. Cities and urban systems are not only conceptual constructs but also material realities: the resources and activities in a region, as well as the oscillating mobilities that map out its employment system are identifiable and generate specific local economies.

It is important to emphasise that since non-territories (spaces devoid of resources, activities and interactions, i.e. densities), obviously exist, the nature of a territory does not strictly depend on the external relational matrix to which it belongs.

The answer to the question “what is a territory?” requires us to consider three dimensions of territorial structures and dynamics: (a) *proximity*, (b) *density* and (c) *structural polymorphism*.

- (a) *Proximity* is the context and the relationships this offers: the co-presence of individuals; relational orders and the consolidation of cultural and institutional practices; knowledge and identity shared collectively. It is this set of circumstances that leads to the formation of densities.

- (b) *Densities* are expressed through ongoing interactions, learning and skills (cognitive externalities), and “constitutional orders” (Sabel: 1998⁷) that coordinate the actions of social actors, multiplying or weakening institutional contexts and governance.
- (c) *Structural polymorphism* marks the fact that the tension between mobilities and territorialisation – i.e. the matricial exercise of which territories are a part – produces differentiation within larger orders. In other words, the world cannot be represented by a systemic organicity in which everything-explains-everything-else, as is the case, for example, with a strictly centre-periphery logic⁸ or the globalist visions that stem from this. The world is better represented by the idea of polymorphism, i.e. by a view of things in which there are structural spaces for initiative and autonomy whose development affirms their own relevance and serves as feedback for other spaces. From this comes the notion that uncertainty and unexpected trajectories are also part of the world.

It is for this set of reasons that it also appears to me important that a territorial analysis is not associated simply with capturing a particular scale associated with a problem. The choice of a territorial view does not mean opting for a scale of analysis closest to the reality of the situation, as a kind of descriptive minutiae. In this sense, I believe that arguments that aim to resolve the issues raised by territorialist visions by combining scales of analysis and scrutinising processes and actors who act in differentiated spatial scales have little relevance. An understanding of territory demands that this understanding is present from the outset. The objects of the study of territory can be applied on very diverse scales ranging from infra-national local level to supra-national regional level, but this is not what differentiates them and gives them a specific place in the production of knowledge.

I would therefore argue that there is more than enough justification for understanding territory as containing its own role and meaning, rather than merely supplementing, far

⁷ For Charles Sabel, however, a *constitutional order* is a third “governance structure”, added to the markets and the hierarchies. I subscribe to a broader point of view which also takes the state, associations and networks into consideration.

⁸ One of the consequences of the predominance of globalist visions and the resurgence of narrow centre-periphery perspectives, which had been superseded in the debates of the 1980s and 90s.

less originating from, the determinations with which it establishes a dependent or successive hierarchical relationship.

Two of the three dimensions I have proposed – *proximity* and *density* – shape the internal matrical network of territories: they represent identity, co-presence and dynamic capacity, as well as conflict, absence and regressive tendencies. The third dimension – *structural polymorphism* – essentially represents the power relationships in which territories are involved (which may be positive or negative, empowering or diminishing) and the way in which these territories are inscribed in the structural map of the world (as margins or centres; as ascending places that transform the global matrix or as descending places). For this reason, the next section explores this dimension, within the framework of a discussion of the morphology of power, a notion which I use to counterbalance formal and unilateral visions of power.

3. Territory and power(es): the *morphology* of power relations and the *structural polymorphism* of economics

One major question which challenges territorialist perspectives consists of determining whether they are blind to the macro-social and macro-political contexts that surround territories or, conversely, whether they clearly interpret the relationships that are established between different spatial scales or, in other words, whether the territorialist option contains a strategy for relational analysis on the scale of one territory only or on the scale of all territories.

In current debates, two main criticisms of territorialist perspectives stand out. Firstly it is claimed that *power* and *politics* (unequal power relationships and conflict) have been discarded from the discourse and interpretative framework that produced them in favour of an emphasis on the region as a shared place and relational asset for all the groups and interests it contains. In the same way, but on a scale that includes the “exterior” of each territory, it is claimed that the existence of a process of *unequal development* created by the exterior agents of governance with established power has been ignored in favour of the idea that that trust and localised cooperative action are sufficient to found and structure local (productive, innovative, learning) developments.

Niel Brenner (2003: 304) is forceful in his interpretation of the emergence of the metropolitan scale and metropolitan governance within the agenda of European territorial organisation as an essentially “crisis-induced” process, derived from the

transformation of state spatiality (a process of “state rescaling”) as “a politically mediated outcome of complex, cross-national forms of policy transfer and ideological diffusion”. For this reason, in the territorial transformations we witness, “regions have become major geographical arenas for a wide range of institutional changes, regulatory experiments and political struggles within contemporary capitalism”.

Elsewhere (Reis 2004) I have presented a very different reading of the emergence of major European territorial systems of a metropolitan nature: I have proposed that we should view the major infra-European territories on which European governance tends to be based (territories defined by population, connectivity, competitiveness and dynamics i.e. by their own structures and by political or ideological constructs) as the result of geography (proximity, density, access) on the one hand and the institutional cultures of own governance, on the other hand. These reasons not only illustrate the acknowledged European differentiation (also the result of geography and institutional cultures) but also exemplify the complex (non-linear) nature of the establishment of political-institutional configurations.

It may be said that essentially the critical counter-argument to territorialism and the gaps identified in it is based on three arguments:

- (a) *The research agenda*: the search for evidence for the idea that that territories and regions are active participants, not passive arenas for economic development, has meant that the field is limited to the most significant and dynamic cases and that, in addition, the region and space are “reified”, since these entities remain disconnected from broader contexts, thus making their results easily refutable.
- (b) *Power and asymmetries*: the emphasis on the role of contexts, interactions and locally embedded institutions leads to a disregard for power and politics, on the one hand, and the effects of unequal development processes, on the other hand, all within a level in which the actual potential for inter-regional tensions, which is substantial, is also neglected in territorialist studies.
- (c) *The possibilities and rationality of action*: given that, for territorialists, action and initiative are decisively shaped by the institutional framework that the territory offers (including past decisions, thus generating *path-dependency*), they tend to ignore the rational orientations imposed by the broader context and the inevitability that the trajectories pursued are those of convergence with the

major macro-economic and macro-social balances, rather than those the territory offers (territorialists ignore the trend towards convergence between socio-economic systems⁹).

I do not intend to discuss whether these criticisms are, in general, just, given the work that has been examined and the perspectives already consolidated¹⁰. Essentially it seems to me that a contemporary observation of economies, collective processes and the problems left open reveals the weakness of these criticisms more than their strengths as analytical tools for the future. Conversely, it appears to me that territorialist perspectives are more *practical* on an operational level – since they identify situations rather than simply deducing them –, more *rigorous* in terms of the information on which they are based and give rise to – since they detail complex processes rather than abstract relations – and more *useful* on a prospective level – since they can be assigned to the formulation of policies and related to concrete actors and defined situations. The discussion in question demands, however, that what we retain from the main criticism is the omission of power issues by territorialists.

The point of view which I subscribe to is as follows:

- (a) territorialist perspectives should play an active part in the debate on *power* and unequal development on a global scale;
- (b) the territorialist notion of power should emphasise the *morphology of power*, rather than an abstract, reified notion of power;
- (c) the hierarchical and unequal structuring of macro-economic contexts should not impede observation of the formation and development of unexpected trajectories, given that one characteristic of the world that is as inevitable as its unequal and hierarchical nature is its *polymorphism*.

The first point is based, from the outset, on the need to reposition the debate correctly: it would be unjust for the “original territorialism” to be allowed to forget that it was the

⁹ Berger and Dore, eds. (1996) and Hall and Soskice (2003) offer contributions to this discussion, which is very active at the moment, that do not restrict it to a critique of territorialism, since the limits and counter-arguments for the idea of convergence are plentiful.

¹⁰ My opinion is that they are not, since, rather than offering anything new on the basis of new areas of study or opening up new problems, these critiques are permanent echoes of the epistemological debate within the social sciences in which institutionalist views were, for a long time, countered by those of a structuralist or rationalist nature.

asymmetries, inequalities and unequal development that created the genetic matrix for regional science and the construction of the idea of regional development.

Furthermore, the notion of *reproduction* is essential to understanding the debate. According to this perspective, the problem consists of understanding how “social relations, operating across different geographical scales, interact in the reproduction of the political and economic landscape through time”. In this sense, “regional institutions” are the “key institutional *channels* through which wider regulatory practices ‘are interpreted and ultimately delivered” (Clumbers *et al.*, 2003: 335, my italics).

For those thinking in the way I have just illustrated, the necessary (and perhaps adequate) research programme would concentrate on the connections between the “wider regulatory mechanisms and specific social and political interests within regions” (*ibid.*: *idem*). Territorialists would therefore be simple specialists in the *micro* and *meso* reproduction of the *macroglobal* in territory. Moreover, in the light of this, the materiality of territory – and therefore its ontological significance – would not make sense, since it is amply superseded by another process, that of the “social production of scales”. Regions are not regions as such, but “open spaces”, the necessary tools of liberal visions that see them as useful entities for the promotion of innovation and learning within the global economy which shapes them and defines their potential. The idea that there are relations that precede and annul territorial materiality, the latter characterised by a high level of volatility, within the framework of “open spaces” leaves out any possibility of understanding the morphology, not only of power but also of the socio-economic realities themselves.

The notion of *reproduction* and the view of certain phenomena and entities as *channels* are the coherent consequences of critical realism (cf. Sayer, 1992), the philosophical position underlying the perspectives that I have referred to so far.

“The crux of the realist position is the ontological claim that there is an independent reality, made up of social objects and structures, although, crucially, our knowledge and understanding of this is always partial and provisional, being channelled through discourse and representation” (Clumbers *et al.*, 2003: 334)

Within this framework, territories would not be part of this “independent reality” but would lie outside it and therefore essentially be social representations and discursive

constructs. In other words, the influence of critical realism is superseded by an agenda that attributes ontological dignity to entities such as power, the state, and the rationality of agents endowed with mobility, but not territories.

For the purposes of the debate proposed in this text, the central question that territorialist perspectives must address refers to the relationship between what defines a territory – interactions based on proximity, contexts involving co-presence – and its heteronomous relations. It is here that the question of power and unequal relations essentially lies. As I have argued, it is not enough to postulate these two dimensions or to position them side by side. The challenge is to deduce the results of their interrelations¹¹.

My argument is the following: in order to speak of power it is important to speak of the *morphology* of power. The notion that power is a linear, asymmetrical, unilateral relationship established from the exterior appears inadequate to me. In addition to being inadequate, it also seems dismissive: this notion of power dispenses with any understanding of the morphology of power, but merely postulates it. It also dispenses with understanding material structures, deeming it sufficient to concentrate on an “independent reality” defined in a very limited way and relegating the rest of reality to discourses and the sphere of “reproduction”.

Power is inscribed in processes, structures, codes, languages, objects and relationships. Insertion in power relationships involves submission for some, to the extent that actors are unequal, but the fraction of power available to them also empowers them, especially when its use enables them to create other relational networks and opt for them. This being the case, it is important to acknowledge that the relationships in which actors are involved are not all equal or located within the same scales, far less are they static. They are dynamic, with ascending, descending or lateral vertical trajectories and therefore can change their level and relational logic. The inferior power of an actor in one given context that creates their submission may be converted into a power balance in other relational contexts.

A territory (which is not a given, nor is it static or even guaranteed to be homogeneous) is, without doubt, a place in which power relations are inscribed. Above all, it is a place that defines the morphology of the power relationships that are present which, since

¹¹ In referring to geographical and organisational proximities and to collective learning, G. Benko and B. Pecqueur (2001: 39), state that: “it is not a matter of postulating the local (...) but of deducing it”.

they are not linear or established heteronymically, have to be defined and mapped out for each territory and each relevant process. This opens up three further questions concerning:

- (a) the *relational map*, in which each aspect of territorial co-presence is necessarily an element – expressing asymmetries of different levels and directions – in the power relationships established in the various scales (thus contradicting the idea of the power relationship as a linear, hierarchical relationship);
- (b) the *distribution* of this power, which implies drawing conclusions from the notion of “multi-level governance”, which has no meaning without the assumption of forces and capacities distributed amongst various actors and scales, obviously in an unequal manner;
- (c) the *construction and use* of new relational contexts by actors with positions acquired in previous processes (which obviously assumes that the “possibilities” for action are not narrowly defined in a hierarchical way).

These three questions, taken as a whole, signify the rejection of arguments for *convergence* (there is only “one single best way”), the *functional utilitarian hierarchy* (places only exist in a hierarchy because they are useful to the vertex) and the understanding that collective systems are only “closed” through a single *rationality and regulation principle*. Conversely, they affirm that macro-regulation contains a variety of universes and possibilities, including those which are based on the unexpected. In another context Charles Sabel (2004: 4) has discussed “disruptive technology” indicating that it is “a superior alternative to the currently dominant know-how, whose potential escapes the most masterful producers and users of the dominant method precisely because their experience teaches how to improve on what they already know”; “disruptive technologies therefore begin to realize their potential in secondary or peripheral markets”.

Within this context *territory and economics of proximity*, on the one hand, and *power and asymmetric relations*, on the other hand, are not separate questions (territory is an object that should be interpreted as an arena for power relations). Yet, in the same way and with the same significance, it is important to emphasise that territorial analysis is not compatible with a simplified notion of power. Equally, the condition required to achieve a perspective that assumes these objectives is to restore the notion in economics

that material structures, like power, have a morphology and, in addition, are characterised by polymorphism. In other words, the idea that materiality is diluted in open spaces, and shaped to suit abstract constructivist relations leaves no “space for spaces”, for territories and for relational processes if they are not produced in linear fashion by these heteronymic relationships. The problem does not lie in a territorialist “lack of agenda”, but in the fact that the world thus conceived is devoid of shape and diversity. The polymorphism of the world is inscribed in interactions, learning, institutions, cultural practices, and powers that configure the territories in which relationships are mapped out, distribute powers and endlessly construct possibilities and contexts, without the territories disappearing, only changing.

4. Conclusion

This text is the expression of a desire to intervene in the ongoing debate on the value of territorialisations of processes and social phenomena, the value of territories themselves, their meaning in contemporary practices, and our appreciation of the values contained in social relations. Do they have their own value and are they therefore elements radical (in the most literal of senses) to an understanding of social dynamics and the ways in which societies are structured? I have answered yes to this question and sought to defend three main ideas: that the relationship between mobilities and territorialisations amounts to much more than the juxtaposition of factors that influence economic dynamics – it is a *tension* which results in the processes that form global transformations of systems; that the idea of the *reproduction* of socio-political determinants is not adequate to configure a notion of territory, since this is not the simple expression of the production of scales (or rescaling) for the state, the market, capitalism or globalisation, and that in order to understand power, development (even when it is unequal, as it generally is) and political economic structuring, we must counter linear views of power with the idea of the morphology of power and functionalist development with the notion of the polymorphism of contemporary societies.

This agenda is the result of my original disagreement with globalist visions and with the old functionalism. I continue to think that, rather than a useful analytical notion, ‘globalisation’ is, above all, a “metaphor for perplexity” (Reis, 2001) in the face of our difficulties in dealing with the complexity of the world, a world which, moreover, is far

bigger than the universe of globalisation. I therefore propose, as a counter argument, an institutionalist alternative, the essential elements of which I present here, considered from the point of view of territory, in the conviction that (contrary to the criticisms I cite here) what territorialists have to add to institutionalism is the capacity to map out the morphology of power and of change.

Moreover, for this reason it seems to me that theoretical and epistemological attitudes that emphasise interpreting *relational orders* – based on the materiality of territories and on the morphology of power relations – are necessary, in order to counter simplistic *normative positions*.

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