

## Two ways to look at learning regions in the context of globalization: The homogenizing and particularizing approaches

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### Abstract

Despite the countless publications on the subject, globalization remains a black box. On the descriptive level, there is relative consensus as to the facts, but the meaning is not truly understood. As a result, extremely contradictory hypotheses circulate, ranging from the 'end of geography' the global village and the borderless 'global company' to those who highlight the development of territorialized forms of production and the role of proximity. This article brings out the different ways of viewing this phenomenon and their consequences. The main rift between the different approaches is between 'homogenizing' approaches and 'particularizing' approaches. The former postulate that any phenomenon may be viewed within a 'universal' scheme that is 'a priori' deemed sufficient to explain reality, while the latter are based on the irreducible singularity of each case and propose constantly evolving explanatory schemas.

### Introduction

Today, the theme of globalization is at the heart of concerns and debates. It is a rag-bag of a notion, invoked in turn to justify mass redundancies or to denounce the hold which the biggest industrial and financial multinationals have over society. Despite the countless publications on the subject, globalization remains a black box. On the descriptive level, there is relative consensus (see below) as to the facts, but the meaning is not truly understood. As a result, extremely contradictory hypotheses circulate. Some put forward utopian discourses on the 'end of geography' (O'Brien, 1992) on the global village based on the new communications and transportation technologies and on the borderless 'global company'. At the other end of the spectrum, these are springing up which highlight the present development of territorialized forms of production (Benko, 1995) and the role of proximity (Maillat et al., 1993).

The question posed in this article is therefore the following: how is it possible that totally contradictory scientific discourses on the spatial aspects of globalization can be elaborated starting with the same view of the facts? This article does not aim to add additional arguments on either side of the scale, but rather to bring out the different ways of viewing this phenomenon and their consequences. According to the approach chosen by the researcher, a given aspect will be singled out over the others, thereby producing a given conclusion rather than others. Even though it is still too early to understand exactly what globalization signifies, let us at least try to clarify the different ways of approaching the question.

In my opinion, the main rift between the different approaches is not based on traditional neoclassical/Marxist or neoclassical/Keynesian oppositions; rather, it is between 'homogenizing' approaches and 'particularizing' approaches. The former postulate that any phenomenon may be viewed within a 'universal' scheme that is 'a priori' deemed sufficient to explain reality, while the latter are based on the irreducible singularity of each case and propose constantly evolving explanatory schemas.

The first section gives a brief description of what is generally called 'globalization'. The following sections explain the way in which each of the two approaches mentioned interprets globalization and present-day spatial dynamics. An effort is made to highlight not only the strengths, but also the weaknesses of both approaches. In this context, the learning region approach should avoid to become one more particularizing approach like industrial districts or innovative milieus. It should rather focus on building a new competence to understand economic development starting from its spatial and temporal context.

### Exactly what is globalization?

The term 'globalization'<sup>1</sup> is generally taken to mean the transformation of the economic system over the past twenty years.

A great deal has been written on globalization and its effects (one of the most thorough and easily understandable books remains that of Dicken 1992). The most significant

features of the world trade system may be summed up as follows (Chesnais, 1994, p. 183):

- “a very clear trend towards the formation of denser trading zones around the three poles of the Triad (note: Europe, North America and the Far Eastern developed countries) (a phenomenon called the ‘regionalization’ of trade);
- an equally pronounced trend towards the polarization of world trade as a result of the increased marginalization of all countries excluded from ‘regionalization’ at the three poles of the Triad,
- the fact that a large share of world trade is now directly shaped by direct foreign investment - intra-company trade, exports by subsidiaries, transboundary sub-contracting;
- the increasing irrelevance (at least for the time being) of the distinction between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’, as companies compete just as vigorously on the ‘internal’ markets of each country as on ‘foreign’ markets, due to foreign investments and negotiated trade liberalization;
- lastly – and this is directly linked to the above – the paradigm of comparative advantage, with trade gains for all participants, has been replaced by that of international competition, where the competitiveness of each determines the winners and the losers”.

To sum up, the circulation of capital, goods and services, by inducing competition between actors situated in different countries and different regions, challenges established companies and production systems.

Technological change, the development of markets which are much more segmented and evolutive than in the past, together with international deregulation of activities, have brought about a shift from a period of stability and growth in the industrialized countries as a whole to a period of instability. From a corporate point of view, this has led to a move from somewhat closed, rigid and hierarchized organizations towards more open, more decentralized and more ‘flexible’ organizations. In a context which is becoming increasingly unstable and uncertain, companies are obliged to develop modalities for adaptation and innovation which imply that they open up to the outside, to information which comes from markets, and to new products and new technologies. Consequently, today’s economic globalization has led to the emergence of ‘networks’ of companies (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Harrison, 1994; Maillat et al., 1993; Johansson et al. 1994). In general, regardless of the approach, all agree on these points.

On the other hand, this unanimity disappears as soon as questions are put with regard to the origin and spatial impact of this transformation. Some argue that networks of companies spring from processes which are anchored in a territory. They give birth to ‘local production systems’ (Garofoli, 1983), ‘small firms systems’ (Garofoli, 1992), ‘industrial districts’ (Beccatini, 1990), ‘technology districts’ (Storper, 1991; Courlet and Pecqueur, 1992), etc. Others feel that they are characteristic of ‘strategic alliances’ which the major

companies on the planet form between each other to reduce their R&D costs, master the complexity and intersectoral nature of the new technologies, reduce the time lag between product invention and product launch, gain access to foreign markets, etc. (Harrison, 1994). According to this view, such strategic alliances reduce these firms’ dependency on a given region or country.

This brings us to the central question of this article. *At present, there are two opposing theses concerning globalization and territorialization of economic activities: on the one hand, some authors argue that they push all areas (local, regional, national, etc.) towards a single economic system; other authors maintain that they lead to a break-up of developmental logics and that as a result each area must find its own way. What are the presuppositions that lead both sides to arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions?*

### The different interpretations of globalization

There are different ways of apprehending the reality of globalization. Just like any human science, regional science is driven by several paradigms.

The two approaches described below utilize spatial concepts that differ. Thus, homogenizing approaches speak of areas, transportation costs, and regions as support areas for economic activities, etc., whereas particularizing approaches utilize the notions of territory, anchorage, proximity, etc. Using Astley (1985) and Coomans (1995) as a basis, we shall divide these approaches into two main families: on the one hand ‘homogenizing’ approaches and on the other hand ‘particularizing’ approaches (Figure 1).

Homogenizing approaches stress the need to include every phenomenon in a ‘universal’ schema, a ‘hypothetical and synthetic theory’, which is ‘a priori’ assumed to exist and to be sufficient to explain reality. Consequently, a researcher who adopts this approach will show how universal theories and their laws explain reality as a whole (in Figure 1, from upside down to the reality). It is supposed that the latter is homogeneous and that each of its parts is subject to the same forces of evolution. Researchers in this category tend to prefer maintaining established theoretical frameworks and preserving their internal coherence, even if this means sometimes considering realities which contradict these frameworks as negligible, unimportant or aberrant.

Conversely, particularizing approaches start with the singular, then compare it with other singular cases in order gradually to work out intermediate concepts and explanatory representations (in Figure 1, from below up to the theory). The latter are never meant to be final; rather, they are always open in order to incorporate observations which might contradict the schema that has been developed up until then. As a result, their ‘theories’ consistently suffer from instability and a certain lack of focus. Researchers in this category emphasize the perpetual recreation of diversity on the basis of regional dynamisms. They systematically relativize the restrictive effects of globalization, and on the contrary, show how it provides an opportunity for differentiation.

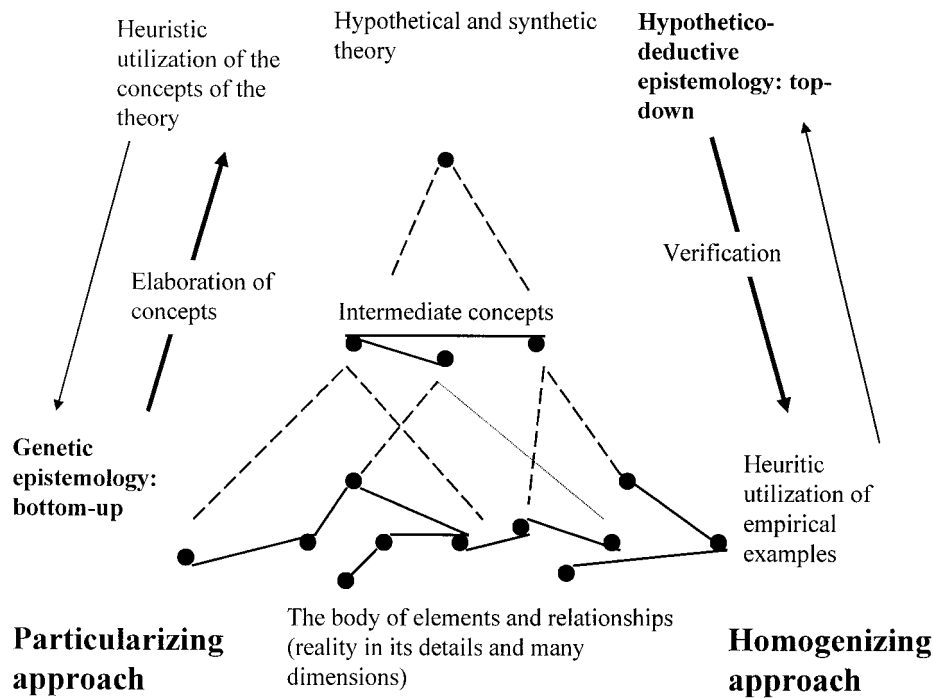


Figure 1. Homogenizing and particularizing approaches and their relationship to theory and reality Source: Own elaboration

Accordingly, this opposition contrasts on the one hand rather speculative minds, enemies of heterogeneity, always seeking to perceive the unity of the case at hand, and on the other hand rather empirical minds, constantly working to divide nature up into a great many varieties. Each of these attitudes helps in its own way to further the knowledge-gathering process (Coomans, 1995).

### Homogenizing approaches

Homogenizing approaches are based on a Darwinian evolutionary model. Pressure from globalization is interpreted as an increase in the pressure of the competitive environment on companies, of which only the strongest and/or the best suited will survive. Globalization is thus perceived as a unidimensional process of 'selection'.

Homogenizing approaches strive for universality. They propose paradigms of thinking which start with logical constructions which are supposed to apply to the entire economic system and are based on the uniqueness of the explanatory principle. Globalization is thus held to be an exogenous force that operates on each of the areas. In other words, the latter are nothing more than the undifferentiated mediums of the process of selection via competition, a process which operates everywhere in the same fashion, even if its effects may be differentiated according to region.

Among these approaches, we shall examine successively 'flexible specialization' (Piore and Sabel, 1984), 'concentration without specialization' (Harrison, 1994) and finally 'economic geography' which combines the neoclassical approach and increasing returns (Krugman, 1991).

### Flexible specialization

Flexible specialization (Piore and Sabel, 1984) is a theory based on the idea that mass production is no longer the dominant model of industrial development, which the authors contrast with a model of development for various production forms all based on networks of companies working together to innovate and adapt rapidly to changing, evolving demand: 'flexible specialization'. Based on this idea, Piore and Sabel foresee convergence between the two production modes. On the one hand, big companies will restructure by adopting 'flexible' technologies, decentralizing decision-making processes and working together with other companies. On the other hand, localized networks of SMEs based on the model of the Italian industrial districts will develop. The two forms of production will come together and these authors have voiced the idea that this type of production system will dominate in the future.

By stressing the present difficulties in changing over from an industrial system geared to mass production to a more flexible system capable of mastering the new technologies and responding to changing and segmented demand, flexible specialization has undeniably furthered thinking in this field. However, the theory of convergence between networks of SMEs and the decentralization of big companies, and hence, above and beyond this, the radical transformation of the capitalist system into a much more open and less hierarchized system, is clearly a bit excessive. Asserting that flexible specialization will impose itself as the sole form of production (Amin and Robins, 1991) clearly constitutes a kind of teleologism. This normative and somewhat hasty generalization is the characteristic of homogenizing approaches, and allows them to be both coherent and ap-

peeling while continuing to simplify somewhat in relation to the reality they seek to explain.

### *The neomarxist approaches*

Neomarxist approaches stress the dominant role of big companies in the recomposition of areas. Due to their capacity to invest in different areas endowed with different labour characteristics, they can stimulate competition between countries over production costs and exploit rare technological resources wherever they exist. The mechanisms of investments and disinvestments worldwide stems from the search for the best profit opportunities. In the field of industrial and service production, big companies seek to structure the organization of production by optimizing their use of the different kinds of labour. This form of spatial division of labour enables big companies to both internalize technological resources and keep wage claims under control.

Neomarxist approaches, by taking the permanence of accumulation mechanisms in the capitalist production mode as a basis, interpret globalization as the search for and consolidation of new opportunities for accumulation.

For example, Harrison's (1994) central thesis is the strengthening of the domination of the economic system as a whole by the big companies. This strengthening comes through a 'concentration' of economic power, without however leading to a 'centralization' from a spatial point of view. At a time when the imperative of flexibility dominates, mechanisms for control by big companies no longer necessarily depend on direct takeovers but rather the ability of a company, situated at the centre of the economic system, to control networks of other companies through contracts and relationships based on trust. This type of relationship is developing both between big companies and with SMEs, governments and local authorities. Thus, big companies, in order to maintain their profit ratios, are tending to become more flexible, leaner and more efficient.

As far as the regional dynamics of SME systems are concerned – for example the Italian industrial districts –, Harrison endeavours to show either that the big companies control them indirectly or that they must be considered as 'special cases'.

Thus, one characteristic of our era is that companies are better able to overcome spatial and temporal barriers, thereby enabling them to co-ordinate activities situated in different areas and different sectors. This network organization supposedly reinforces inequalities and existing stratifications of jobs and income, while this institutionalization of a duality in the labour market is said to reinforce economic and social inequality in and between the different countries and regions (Harrison, 1994).

Thus, the book published by Piore and Sabel (1994), and the one brought out by Harrison (1994) ten years later are perfectly antithetical. The former stresses the revolutionary and decentralized nature of the economic transformations under way, while the latter emphasizes the perennity of structures and the concentration of power.

### *Neoclassical approaches*

Neoclassical approaches, for their part, stress the progression towards equilibrium between regions and between countries. This equilibrium is reached through trade and the mobility of capital and labour combined with transportation costs. In this paradigm, the question of globalization is essentially that of 'convergence' or 'divergence' between the different areas, and agreement on this point is far from unanimous between the proponents of the neoclassical paradigm<sup>2</sup>. For some, and in conformity with Ricardo's theory and the Heckscher–Ohlin theorem, globalization leads to the convergence of the different countries and regions through the liberalization of flows of goods and capital. However, the most recent developments emphasize the processes of divergence which stem from the development of regions which trade with each other and between which population displacements occur. Thus, Krugman (1991), by 'discovering' the relationship between geography and increasing returns, manages to describe the extremely contrasted evolutionary processes between regions. Progressions leading to centre/periphery equilibria are highlighted. Similar ideas had already been broadly developed since Myrdal (1957), highlighting either economies of agglomeration, downstream and upstream industrial relationships, etc. (Rallet and Torre, 1995).

As for understanding why a given region develops to the detriment of another, Krugman (1991, p. 7) evokes 'historical accidents', namely, exogenous events of a microeconomic nature or 'self-fulfilling expectations' whose origin is no more clear. Krugman is thus aware of the fact that his models do not make it possible to explain the genesis of the development of an area. This is why he puts forward these two elements – historical accidents and self-fulfilling expectations – in the form of 'black boxes'. He does not know what makes it possible for the development of a region to begin and continue, but he extracts certain elements therefrom to describe and modelize deterministic sequences. To sum up, and in the same way as neomarxist approaches, Krugman provides no explanation for the development of a given region. Moreover, there is 'spontaneous generation' of the development of an area.

Regardless of whether it argues that globalization favours the convergence or divergence of areas, the neoclassical approach remains the typical example of a homogenizing approach. In these models, the processes of maximization of corporate profits and the utility of individuals apply in identical ways to various spatial entities. All 'regions', regardless of their characteristics, are subject to the same unified determinisms. Accordingly, the theoretical model is always coherent, yet this internal coherence often makes it necessary to take liberties with reality. For example, Krugman systematically uses reality as a source of inspiration in the form of 'stylized facts'. Based on an anecdote or a table of figures, he develops a model while subsequently leaving aside the rest of the anecdote and retaining only those elements which correspond to his model.

The primary value of Krugman's approach in globalization problems is that it makes it possible to go beyond

Ricardo and Heckscher-Ohlin to arrive at the incorporation of cumulative processes in neoclassical economic theory. Thus, we move from the idea that there are only winners in international trade – and in the case at hand interregional trade – to the idea of competitiveness, which presupposes winners and losers. Yet this is not original. Because they presuppose homogeneous and hence overly abstract categories (companies, labour, investments, state, etc.) and because they presuppose mechanisms (functioning of markets) that are rarely present in real situations, neoclassical approaches are not able to deal with the dynamics of a given region, thus making it impossible to provide elements on which concrete regional policies may be based.

#### *Processes and methods of homogenizing approaches*

Homogenizing approaches are based on theoretical corpi constituted to set out theoretical propositions. The latter are then tested by confronting them with reality, via econometric or comparative methods. If the proposition appears true in general, it is retained. However, when the specific facts contradict the theoretical propositions set out, the latter are not called into question. These facts are simply considered as not significant, as ‘special cases’ or deviant values. As for the heart of the theories, its underpinnings are never called into question by empirical elements. Reality and factual or statistical data are used to ‘illustrate’ or ‘verify’ the idea (Figure 1). In these approaches, reality thus plays a ‘heuristic’ role insofar as it supplies elements which substantiate or invalidate a proposal. On other occasions, it provides a source of inspiration through ‘stylized facts’. It puts forwards ideas, and makes it possible to confirm them via econometric or comparative methods.

Today, there is no theory of globalization, strictly speaking. Homogenizing approaches consider certain established facts, such as the growth of international trade and the opening-up of markets, and interpret these elements depending on their own theoretical corpus. Based on their respective theory, these approaches generate hypotheses as to the effects of globalization and seek elements in reality to confirm or invalidate them. The procedure is hypothetico-deductive with empirical verifications, regardless of whether the latter are econometric by nature or simply come from comparison with case studies. Their basic axiomatic aims to be ‘totalizing’. It postulates the ‘uniqueness of the explanatory principle’ of economic dynamics. As a result, globalization is interpreted as a descending phenomenon, the logic of which applies to reality as a whole. Intellectually speaking, there is no room in such approaches for dynamics which might be diverse, contradictory and differentiated depending on the area. The area or the various areas are never anything more than the medium for the activity of the system, which develops everywhere according to the same logics. *Structural differences between areas are deemed nothing more than historical residue or particular cases. The different areas are only considered with regard to the role which they play in a system whose logic has been imposed on them.* Note that this doesn’t mean that all areas behave in the same way. Due to historical residue, trajectories may diverge.

Consequently, homogenizing approaches have two fundamental limits: First, they are not capable of explaining why a given region is experiencing autonomous development rather than another region, or why a given region is experiencing blockages and decline. In other words, it is always possible to give examples of regions in which development processes are radically different from what theory maintains. This poses the problem of the relevancy of this approach when it comes to proposing developmental policies suited to real-life situations.

The second important limit is that homogenizing approaches are incapable of explaining how the diversity of regional technologies and trajectories (re)creates itself. In the final analysis, any difference is but a whiff of the past. The body of actors and regions are subject to a ‘selection process’. Thus, globalization is considered as a selection process, and all economic forms which do not fit the model are eliminated. The future is nothing more than the evolution towards flexible specialization or the absolute domination of the big companies, or the move towards an equilibrium. This closed conception of the future is perhaps the element which most precisely characterizes the homogenizing approaches. In sum, by postulating the homogeneity of agents and processes, they cannot apprehend the way in which a region makes its difference ‘surface’, thereby compromising convergence towards an equilibrium or towards another teleological vision of the future.

Naturally, the value of the homogenizing approaches lies in their internal coherence, which facilitates their circulation and transmission. In addition, the fact that they are tied to constituted theoretical corpi makes it possible to highlight the permanencies of economic processes. The debate centres around the theses of the different parties. However, this debate will never end because it mainly pertains to ‘ways’ of tackling reality, and only deals in part with reality itself.

#### **Particularizing approaches**

Unlike homogenizing approaches, particularizing approaches are based on the idea that globalization does not merely consist of subjecting the various actors and the various spaces to superior competitive pressure, but also represents an opening-up of the competitive environment. New markets open up, new technologies become accessible and, as a result, new combinations and new innovations become foreseeable. This in turn leads to an opening-up and an increase in opportunities for differentiation in terms of companies, production systems and areas. This section aims first of all to describe the emphasis which particularizing approaches place on the singularity of regional trajectories. Next, we shall examine the crucial role attributed to the global environment within this framework, before finishing with the methods used.

#### *The multiplicity of economic dynamics*

Particularizing approaches are based on the axiom that decentralized dynamics in the economic system trigger

changes which are sufficiently major and sufficiently frequent to prevent the system from converging towards any equilibrium whatsoever or guiding itself irremediably towards the final crisis of capitalism. Thus, as far as Schumpeter (1935) is concerned, the new productive combinations always appear 'alongside' the old forms. They develop according to their own logic and can subsequently compete with old forms until they eliminate them. Accordingly, this phenomenon of economic evolution also describes the presence of winners and losers in this game of globalization, just as it does for homogenizing approaches. However, the difference lies in the fact that it is possible to win not only by reproducing existing technologies and products more efficiently, but also by opening up new niches and new 'avenues' which offer an unpredictable potential for development. The key to survival is therefore not necessarily being stronger than one's rivals, but also changing the rules of the game by differentiating oneself, whether it be at the level of individual jobs, companies, regions or nations. When viewed from this perspective, differentiation does not lie solely in products but also in the organization of production and the creation of resources.

From a regional standpoint, the fact that certain regions win while others lose is interpreted as a phenomenon of 'spatial shift' (Aydalot, 1986; Thireau, 1993): some rich regions with high immigration rates become poor; some poor regions which export immigrants become rich and attract inhabitants, while still others remain on the fringe of this process. *The key question is therefore to determine why a given region experiences a given development whereas another behaves differently.* The fundamental hypothesis stated by Aydalot (1986) to solve this question is to say that the capacities (or on the contrary the blockages) which will be decisive lie on the 'regional level'. This leads to the methodological necessity to examine different cases of regions in order to understand what these internal factors are. The countless case studies carried out over the past twenty years should be interpreted along these lines.

The particularizing approach states that it is the territories which generate the new technologies, products, companies, etc. Naturally, this does not involve a will to personify an area, but rather to stress the systemic properties which emerge at the level of the territory and which govern its reproduction, development or decline over time. Thus, with this approach, numerous phenomena are 'endogeneized' in the territories. For example, entrepreneurship is considered not as an exogenous factor, but as the capacity of a territorial production system to generate entrepreneurs, and hence companies (Garofoli, 1993). New technologies and new products are generated by innovative milieux (Maillet and Perrin, 1992; Maillat et al., 1993; Ratti et al. 1997; Crevoisier and Camagni, 2000) or by learning regions (Asheim, this volume; Maillat and Kébir, 1999). *This, it is territories, with their specificities, which end up, at least in part, by shaping economic dynamics, not the contrary.*

These efforts have highlighted the way in which a region, and more precisely a territorial production system, manages to recreate absolute advantages by 'differentiating itself' in

a world environment marked by competition. Consequently, one of the primary oppositions between the homogenizing and particularizing approaches lies in the nature of the relationship between the region and its technological environment and the globalized market.

#### *The relationship between the region and the world environment as a learning process*

By inserting itself in a technological and market context which has become planetwide, a territorial production system manages to sell its products with sufficient added value to enable it to reproduce itself. Consequently, developing specific resources involves 'both' a movement towards reorganizing and developing resources within the region 'and' a repositioning in relation to markets and technologies planetwide. These two movements are two sides of the same coin. This is how we should understand the 'autonomy' (Varela, 1989) of a region as opposed to its 'autarky'. The internal movement is a component of a difference – i.e., a border – between the global environment and the regional milieu and hence the latter's own evolution. For example, the industrial district of Montebelluna, which already has a long history in the field of sports shoes, has in recent years witnessed a process whereby the companies in the region have been merged with or taken over by large outside groups (Camagni and Rabellotti, 1997). Afterwards, the local milieu bounced back by switching over from shoes to snowboards, and is experiencing a new dynamic of company start-ups and expansion. In the watch-making region of the Jura Arc, it was the invention, in the 1980s, of the fashion watch and the rediscovery of the watch as a prestige symbol which have enabled the region to stage a comeback (Crevoisier, 1993a, b). These examples show the capacity of certain regions to recreate outlets worldwide in an autonomous way. This repositioning implies, in the same movement, a reorganization of their resources and a specification of their know-how. This is the essence of the regional learning process.

Innovative milieux and learning regions thus possess this dual characteristic of being 'both' open and closed (Crevoisier, 1990). They are open because they are able to grasp, attract and adapt technologies and information from various, often quite remote areas. Of course, this perception does not operate in all directions. It is the result of the elaboration of representations of the milieu's actors with regard to both the milieu itself and its environment. Moreover, the milieu is closed insofar as the actors who compose it are capable of making the organization and the resources at their disposal evolve autonomously. This dynamic is characterized by the collective ability to represent its resources, match them up – at the cognitive level – with an environment which is undergoing transformation, and ensure that their resources and organization evolve accordingly. Thus, there is no 'autarky' insofar as the milieu is not closed to its world environment; rather, some may speak of the 'autonomy' of this milieu in relation to outside forces – in particular those of technological change and market globalization. These forces do not therefore operate mechanically on the region. They are always mediatized by the representations of the

milieu's actors and their ability – more or less developed – to use these transformations to improve their positioning in relation to other areas.

Colletis and Pecqueur (1995) show that even though certain areas can be led to compete on the basis of quantitative factors, other areas throw off this constraint by proposing an 'offer of territorial specificity'. This offer is based on non-reproducible knowledge, i.e., knowledge which is not likely to exist elsewhere or be duplicated. It rests on the existence of qualified labour, a training and research potential, a specialized or heterogeneous production system, but cannot be summed up as a simple aggregation of different 'specific actors'. Indeed, these factors must be 'linked according to a configuration not likely to be found elsewhere' in order to become the lever for the development of a region. 'Industrial organization and territorial organization thus create a unique situation of dynamic complementarity' (id.). Accordingly, the practical value of these 'specific assets' depends on the conditions in which they are put to use. To take an example, persons specialized in dyeing leather have a skill which not only is not generated anywhere else than in regions specialized in leather-working, but which has no practical value outside the companies and areas which are structured so that they can produce and utilize these skills. Thus, it is a regional system which generates, implements and prolongs its own specific assets.

Like Colletis and Pecqueur, particularizing approaches usually highlight the specificity of the labour factor depending on the area. Economic theories have never managed to integrate the heterogeneous nature of labour in their construction. Marx for example, while recognizing the different types of labour, debated at length before asserting, somewhat unconvincingly, that labour could be reduced to simple, homogeneous work. Accordingly, it is necessary, to understand the role of the specificity and homogeneity of the labour factor, to resolutely shift the centre of gravity of regional studies of companies and production systems towards 'know-how'. Companies do not learn: only the men who run them possess the biological and cultural abilities to learn. Yet very little study has been done in this area. As far as the region of the Jura Arc is concerned, it has been shown that the choices of companies and the evolution of the industrial structure as a whole have been subordinated, at certain historic moments, to the presence or absence of certain skills and to the conditions of their constitution and their implementation (Crevoisier et al., 1996). The heterogeneity of the labour factor is therefore one of the keys to regional development when a particularizing approach stressing differentiation is adopted. Today, skills analysis appears to be one of the key themes of regional problems.

Particularizing approaches challenge the postulate that the economic process is unique (Coomans, 1995) and stress the diverse and sometimes contradictory tendencies of this process. Yet they do not aim to remain confined to individual cases. As with the homogenizing approach, they aspire to supply overall understanding of economic changes. Indeed, *by drawing attention to the capacity of some areas to differ-*

*entiate themselves from each other, the entire transformation of economic areas and industrial dynamics is reinterpreted.*

In this paradigm, the 'territorialization' of economic dynamics does not conflict with globalization. On the contrary, it constitutes the other side of the coin: that which is globalized is an environment which opens up a new latitude for territorial production systems. Unlike the integration of areas in a system which imposes its logic on them, the focus with this approach is on recreating diversity and competition between regions. Territories are no longer merely 'produced' by economic dynamics; rather, they themselves become structuring elements of the economy with their diversity and specificity as fundamental factors to reshape global economic competition.

#### *Methods of particularizing approaches*

From a methodological point of view, particularizing approaches use case studies as basic data. Induction is pre-eminent with this way of proceeding. Over the past twenty years, countless studies describing the recent development of a given region have been carried out. The next phase consists of comparative approaches, the elaboration of typologies and the development of concepts (Figure 1). Naturally, particularizing approaches do not use raw reality as their only starting point. They are significantly influenced by the various economic theories (neoclassical, Marxist, Schumpeterian, etc.). On the basis of the theoretical bodies constituted and previous work done, hypotheses come into being which are then tested in the field. However, field studies do not stop at validating or invalidating a given hypothesis. They enable progress to be made with regard to the very categories in which these hypotheses are drawn up depending on the realities encountered. Thus, particularizing approaches make it possible to pass from a representation of the functioning of the economic system - based on which hypotheses are firmed up - to another based on the categories and relationships actually observed. Accordingly, existing theories have a 'heuristic' value, whereas case studies are considered as intangible truths.

This approach is initially inductive (case study), then comparative (construction of typologies), and finally conceptual (elaboration of a synthetic representation of reality). Based on genetic epistemology (Piaget, 1977), knowledge is constituted by an incessant to-and-fro motion between the observation of reality and the modification of concepts. Accordingly, particularizing approaches contain no stable concepts, accepted by all and held to be universal. Reporting on such work always implies referring both to the areas studied and the concepts developed.

The European Research Group on Innovative Milieux (GREMI) (Maillat et al., 1993; Ratti et al., 1997; Crevoisier and Camagni, 2000) is particularly representative of this approach. By conducting parallel inquiries in the various regional contexts, by juxtaposing them and by identifying what turns out to be common to several regions and what differentiates them, it is possible gradually to arrive at an understanding of regional dynamics.

To sum up, the main weakness of particularizing approaches is the lack of an integrating theoretical framework which claims to be universal. In this respect, they are often excluded from the discussions in which better established theories are compared. Moreover, particularizing approaches are relatively difficult to convey because they imply a strong ('organic') relationship between the researcher and the field. Like the ethnologist – from whom it borrows many tools – the particularizing approach in regional science requires the researcher to maintain prolonged contact with the field.

The strength of these approaches lies in their ability to explain the differentiated evolution of spatial structures, the emergence of new dynamic regions and the blockage of certain regions. *Globalizing approaches are unable, intellectually speaking, to supply convincing explanations from this point of view.* Moreover, particularizing approaches closely embody regional science insofar as they are 'multidisciplinary' by force of circumstance and possess the ability to 'respond to a social demand', two characteristics deemed to form the basis of regional science (Bailly and Coffey, 1994).

Today, local development has become a key policy of structural change (OECD, 1993). This requires that each region understand its vocation, highlight its abilities for cooperation and hence the specification of its resources. Lastly, such studies must be carried out in collaboration with the actors in the field, according to the principles of research combined with action. Homogenizing approaches do not manage to fit into such procedures.

Nevertheless, particularizing approaches have shown their difficulty to reach a satisfying degree of stable concepts.

## Conclusion

Science is about anchoring ideas in reality. Homogenizing approaches generally consider that using a theory within a context in a given place and time means 'applying' that theory. However, the use should not be reduced to examining the distance between the reality of the case and what the theory says since this context 'gives it its form' and perhaps 'transforms' this economic mechanism.

Particularizing approaches postulate that the context, understood as a historically built portion of space, gives its shape to economic processes. The aim of a particularizing approach is to explain how such particularities of the context give its specific form to economic development. However, the danger consists in multiplying unstable concepts.

Economic mechanisms are not difficult to understand on the blackboard. Identifying and understanding them in real life is more tricky. The reason behind the problem here is that the spatial and temporal context lends these mechanisms highly varying forms. The difficulty of providing a scientific explanation of economic dynamics would not appear to come from a failure to identify the 'good' theory, but because *insufficient work has been carried out on the relation between the fundamental theories and their insertion in space and time.* More precisely, *the mechanisms cannot*

*be identified and understood independently of the temporal aspects and of the spatial dynamics in which they take place.* Economic translations and those within space and time explain each other. To take an example, to my knowledge the areas of space and time subjacent to the Keynesian theory or the neo-classical approaches have not been made clear. However, we can adopt the hypothesis that these are only particular cases of some economic mechanisms inserted within contexts of space and time, and which give them their specific form<sup>3</sup>. In the same way, couldn't we imagine that industrial districts, technopoles, innovative milieu, global cities, local production systems, etc. are the concrete expressions of relatively few simple economic processes? 'Learning region' in its most general sense simply means a portion of space changing through time. By giving an account of the subjacent time and space patterns behind these studies, we can make the hypothesis that a relatively restricted number of economic processes takes an infinite variety of forms.

Homogenizing and particularizing approaches are not new. Regional science has always been made of both of them. If the learning region approach wants to bring something new in this context, it should not focus on producing more economic theories or intermediate concepts. They are already too numerous and too contradictory. It should neither focus on producing still more case studies of successful or unsuccessful regions. It *should concentrate on building a general competence to understand specific contexts.* This would imply an innovative research program between on one hand economists and on the other hand geographers and historians. Economists have theories and problematics, but no 'glasses' to see them with, i.e., no epistemology of their own. Geographers and historians do have their own epistemology, but no problematics and consequently have little or no 'theories' in the sense of those by economists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Many authors distinguish between the notions of 'internationalization', 'multinationalization' and 'globalization' (e.g., Chesnais 1994; Dickens 1992, etc.). In this paper, the notions are considered to be synonymous.

<sup>2</sup>By 'neoclassical approach', I mean the body of work which postulates the existence of equilibria and which focuses on the identification of forces pushing economic agents towards the latter. This is thus a very broad definition.

<sup>3</sup>National territories, therefore, with their specific economic circuits, give substance to the Keynesian theory: a punctiform space with instantaneous adjustments determines the mechanisms considered within the neo-classical approach, etc.

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