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GEORGES BENKO (1953–2009)

From Hungarian (and German) ancestry, Georges Benko settled in France. He had to wait for years before becoming a French national. Trained as an architect, he chose geography in order to introduce more justice in the planning of cities and territories. His approach had a social aim, but relied on economic geography (Benko, 1988). For him, progress was possible thanks to the means offered by science – and more particularly, by spatial reflection. For Benko, space was not the neutral support conceived by classical spatial economics:

Human, regional, economic or ecological geography considers [...] space as the material dimension of social relations. They are human activity, human relations of any kind, which constitute the very substance of space (Benko and Lipietz, 2000, p. 13).

Useful as a point of departure, classical spatial economics were built on an outmoded concept of space; it was unable to deal with contemporary challenges and had to be re-invented:

We have (us, intellectuals, scholars, students) the chance to have experienced, and experience today, a spectacular crisis of the economic world and of the spatial reality it contributed to its structure. This crisis produces innumerable sufferings [...]. But nobody can escape the fascination of observing the birth of a new world, differing from that of our childhood [...]. To guess, by its first signs, what will be the future social reality: such is the highest ambition for a scholar, such is the pleasure and the risk for his profession (Benko and Lipietz, 1992, p. 379).

Benko adopted the Kuhnian perspective of Aglietta (1976) who presented economic history as a succession of relatively stable systems (normal phases) and crises when new forms of regulation appeared (new paradigms). Piore and

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Sabel (1984) taught him that big firms were unable to take advantage of the new conditions offered by globalisation because of their rigidity. In order to survive, the economic world passed from an industrial, or fordist, regime, to a flexible one.

Georges Benko was fascinated by the industrial districts of Third Italy as analysed by the Italian specialists or Allan Scott and Michael Storper in Los Angeles. Later, he developed a strong interest in the new cognitive economics:

The true wealth of regions is based on activities [...] linked with innovation, the mastering of technologies and research. These elements create a territorial specificity. They result from a long history, an accumulation of know-how, apprenticeship, a system of education, the exchange of information, a reciprocity of relations, a confidence between contractors, their mutual acknowledgement, a predisposition to cooperate, a functioning of the local labour market and many other similar components. To sum up, all that Alfred Marshall called the 'industrial atmosphere', or, I would say more scientifically, the 'cognitive externalities' (Benko, 2001, p. 98).

In order to survive, cities and regions had to sell themselves. As a result, Benko (1999) oriented a part of his work towards urban marketing.

Benko (1991) illustrated the renewal of economic geography through his publications on *technopôles* and on the regions which win (with Lipietz, 1992). He summed up its main points in a short textbook of economic geography he published in Portuguese (Benko, 1996).

As a well-read historian of the renewal of economic geography, he was conscious of the limitations of the models proposed in the 1980s:

The great creative upsurge of the 80s seems over. After indefinitely remodelling the thesis of 'postfordism' according to the gamut of the economy of organizations of Oliver Williamson, from 'vertical desintegration' to 'vertical quasi-integration', 'localists' had to admit the importance of big globalized firms and the fragility of their near districts [...]. But this abandonment of big economic narratives, sometimes theorized as a new big narrative assimilating postfordism to postmodernism, and the latter to a scotching of modes of consumption, left empty the field of economic determinants of the transformations of economic geography (Benko and Lipietz, 2000, p. 11).

Georges Benko knew that in order to develop research in France, strong links had to be established with British and American scientists. He edited, together with Ulf Strohmayer, a synoptic book on human geography where each chapter resulted from the cooperation of a French-speaking and an English-speaking specialist. The book was published in both French and English (Benko and Strohmayer, 2004). Benko offered those who developed new ideas several possibilities of publication. He launched a journal, *Economie et espace*, and edited three series published by L'Harmattan: *Géographies en liberté*, *Théorie sociale contemporaine* and *Grandes villes du monde d'aujourd'hui*.

The diffusion of new themes in geographic economy was one of his permanent ministrations. He maintained a close liaison with American and British

scholars, such as Allan Scott and Michael Storper; his influence was important in Québec and in the other francophone countries, and in South-America (particularly in Brazil and Argentina); and he was well known in Hungary.

Georges Benko had a great curiosity, he was a tireless worker and a wonderful disseminator. But what characterises him best was his generosity: to build new knowledge, to test it, to circulate it, to offer it to the younger generation and to those who work in difficult circumstances – such was the permanent ambition of this remarkable economic geographer.

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