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Preface

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Innovation and territories : the contradictory effects of marginality

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Innovation and territory make an unlikely couple that never cease to interest our post-modern societies, societies that the various dimensions of Fordism have done so much to deterritorialize.

In its interest and enthusiasm for innovation, geography has a tendency to pursue many paths of study and to multiply its ways of analysing and even defining innovation: social, technological, cultural, institutional and ... territorial in the sense of it being anchored to a particular region or linked to territorial engineering.

At the same time, sociology and economics, for which innovation may be a central concept, are producing a coherent body of literature that does not exclude controversy, as Jean Corneloup demonstrates in his contribution to this special issue. But the contradictions arising from studies on the location and spatial dimension of innovation provide an opportunity to shed light on this problem and to underline the diversity of factors affecting the emergence, development and exploitation, and diffusion of innovation.

This special issue of the *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, focusing on innovation in mountain areas, bears ample witness to the diversity of approaches adopted by geography and regional science in addressing this question. Thus, three geographical approaches to territorial innovation may be distinguished:

- Innovation in centre-periphery relations. This approach has been adopted not only in geography (Reynaud, 1981) but also in regional economics and particularly the new economics of geography (Fujita, Krugman & Venables, 1999; *Espace géographique*, 2007). The latter discipline has recently received overwhelming recognition with the Nobel Prize for economics being awarded to Paul Krugman, while the latest report on world development from the World Bank (World Bank, 2009) sets out a spatial doctrine clearly inspired by this school of thought¹.

- Innovation and types of environment. This approach can be seen in the numerous studies in regional economics that attempt to identify the different forms of innovative environments (Camagni & Maillat, 2006), industrial districts and other local

¹ Doctrine that postulates the inevitability of development stimulated and capitalised by urban areas and metropolitan environments. The only margin for manoeuvre is in the accompaniment and facilitation of the spatial diffusion of the effects of development.

productive systems (Benko & Lipietz, 1992 & 2000; Fauré & Labazée, 2005), and the different methods that territories employ to identify and develop specific and heritage resources (Pecqueur, 2005; Landel & Senil, 2009).

- Innovation with regard to territorial arrangements and organisation. This approach, which relates more to political geography, political science and development studies, focuses on innovative forms of spatial and institutional constructions that go beyond the narrow codes of territorial modernity and its spatial patterns: exclusive sovereignty, continuity, fixed limits, strict interlocking ... (Gerbaux & Giraut, 2000; Antheaume & Giraut, 2005; Vanier, 2008).

Although the first approach (innovation and centre-periphery relations) corresponds more to scientific inquiry into the emergence, diffusion and spatial effects of innovation and its location, the other two approaches propose a definition of the territorial dimension of innovation, respectively: generated by a favourable environment; concerning territorial arrangements.

We thus have three approaches that are very different but complementary and that, above all, have given rise to a few common questions. One question of particular interest to us here concerns margins and peripheries: Are they potential providers of innovations or are they destined to reproduce innovations originating in the centre or even simply to wait for the diffusion of the effects of external innovations, accepting the inevitability of dependence on, and assistance from, the centre?

The answer of course is that anything is possible depending on the context and the different points of view regarding the notions of, firstly, innovation, and secondly, peripheries or margins. The articles in this special issue, however, provide us with valuable insights into this question by illustrating the different approaches and by proposing analyses based on innovative experiences concerning mountain areas and their inhabitants. In other words, they are based on an optimistic vision of centre-periphery relations that does not condemn peripheral areas to dependency but, on the contrary, credits them with the virtue of providing potentially innovative environments. Are the situations evoked, however, related to geographical marginality or socio-spatial peripherality? Is a mountain location sufficient to determine a peripheral situation? We know that a peripheral environment or region on a continental, national or even regional scale can be made up of very different places at the local scale (Scholz, 2005). Some of these places are local centres or, better, function as “associated places”, places that have strong links with external centres. Thus the status of winter sports resorts poses a problem: Are they places where mountain tourism resources are exploited or “offshore” associated places of metropolitan centres? The problem is perhaps a false one since if we use the typology of peripheries proposed by Alain Reynaud (1981) and his extensive and open-ended conception of spatial peripherality, we can identify “lost corners” (angles morts), “dominated peripheries” and “exploited peripheries”, but also “associated places” and “peripheries relying on their own strength”. And with regard to mountain regions belonging to a “spatial marginality”², the attributes linked to altitude, slope and accessibility are more or less valid for all mountain areas and

places. Moreover, it is these criteria that define “mountain” zones both at the national level (France, Switzerland, etc.) and the European level.

The optimistic viewpoint, which is adopted in this special issue, is therefore potentially a plea against the theoretical foundations of the new economics of geography, that is, against the deterministic constraints generated by increasing returns (agglomeration effects) and path dependency (historical sequence that confers an advantage on already “acquired” situations). However, it does not simply relate to a blissful theory of meeting a challenge, so important in the historiography of pioneer regions. It focuses on the margins of manoeuvre provided by peripheral areas for innovation outside standards, not only those that govern the economy of the centre, but also those that the centre imposes within itself but which the peripheral areas can deviate from (the “disengagement from standards” mentioned by Philippe Bourdeau) in order to adapt practices to their own difficulties or problems. Moreover, such derogation does not call into question the coherence of the centre and can therefore be tolerated, a situation that enables peripheral areas to become experimental areas (Antheaume & Giraut, 2002).

An inherent risk of these approaches is of course to confer an exaggerated economic importance on what are really, from a quantitative point of view, secondary processes. This is the case, for example, in local development with its new and alternative forms based on the participative approach and the development of territorialized heritage resources. Is this a stopgap solution for marginal or abandoned regions left with residual niches not exploited by the centre, or is this an experiment with valuable lessons to be learned for possible changes in the dominant models?

Focusing on territorial innovations in marginal areas in any case offers a fantastic opportunity, that of questioning the spatial principles governing modern territoriality. The ecological corridor experiments (Crooks & Sanjavan, 2006; Anderson & Jenkins, 2006), which are becoming increasingly important in the management and networking of protected areas, provide us with a good example. Such areas are often located in peripheral regions and are the subject of the article by Yann Kohler et al. in this issue. Quite apart from their innovative aspects, the ecological corridor experiments underline the extremely topographical dimension of the classical ring-like spatial systems and the possibilities of topological approaches going one step further. Such approaches rely more on connectivity and networks of places and zones. We are thus truly into a theoretical debate on functional spatialities, and this we clearly owe to experimentation in marginal areas.

² For example, according to the criteria selected to define the European territories in difficulty in the Lisbon Treaty on the development strategy for the European area, these are: “the regions that suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.”

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