

The Contribution of Spatialities and Territory to Political Economy: Making Explicit the Spatio-Temporal Assumptions of Economic Theories

This article is part of a now widely discussed proposition in the social sciences: space and time are not the exclusive domains of geography and history, but should be recognized as fundamental dimensions of any socio-economic analysis, whether empirical, conceptual or theoretical. Indeed, every social system occupies a space, forms a specific configuration, and transforms over time. Spatialities and temporalities are therefore not mere descriptive frameworks: they are constitutive of the phenomena themselves and profoundly influence their dynamics. This holds true across disciplines—political economy, political science, sociology—regardless of their analytical traditions.

From a conceptual standpoint, the role of spatialities is more subtle but just as decisive. The social sciences systematically mobilize spatial metaphors—networks, flows, scales, hierarchies such as “high/low,” bases, anchors... —to represent and explain phenomena. Concepts and theories also have their own “form,” though of a peculiar nature.

These metaphors structure how actors perceive the economy and how researchers formulate concepts. For example, the notion of investment refers to a spatialized sequence: an initial localized concentration of means followed by a return flow of income. Yet mainstream economics typically reduces these dynamics to an abstract numerical magnitude, detached from any territorial embeddedness. Likewise, Keynesian theories implicitly assume a national economy managed from an administrative apex, without making this hierarchical and territorial spatiality explicit. In such cases, are we dealing only with metaphorical space, or describing a form that indeed refers to concrete spatial forms?

These examples illustrate a more general methodological problem: economic theories—and, more broadly, the social sciences—rarely make explicit the implicit spatial and temporal forms through which they express their conceptual constructions. Worse, within these constructions, they frequently maintain more or less intentional confusions between, on the one hand, concrete conceptualized space and, on the other, spatial metaphors.

To address this problem, the article draws on the combinatorial and hierarchical language of Q-analysis (Atkin 1974; Johnson 1991; Holtier 1992). This formalism, derived from set theory and graph theory, allows for a systematic description of the spatial forms of economic phenomena. The goal is twofold: to describe the spatial and temporal configurations of concrete economic phenomena, and to make explicit the forms through which economic theories themselves are expressed. In other words, the approach is both analytical and reflexive, focusing on the conditions of production of economic thought.

The first section revisits how equilibrium approaches progressively neutralized space and time. As shown by Corputaux and Crevoisier (2007), neoclassical economic theory developed an “a-spatial,” abstract, homogeneous, instantaneous representation of the economy—“set on the head of a pin.” This conceptual framework has durably shaped the relationship between economics and its spatialities.

The second section analyzes the re-emergence of territorial questions in the 1980s and 1990s, marked by the rise of innovation-related issues. While Fordism during the post-war boom emphasized standardization and mass production, the shift toward a more flexible economy brought innovation in products and technologies to the forefront. New models appeared: innovative milieux (Maillat et al., 2008), industrial districts, technopoles. In contrast to the Schumpeterian reading of “clusters of

innovations” generating long economic cycles, these approaches show that innovation takes the form of a territorialized phenomenon, linked to the specific resources of regions in the context of globalization (Moulaert and Sekia, 2003).

Within this framework, territorial differentiation appears as a fundamental survival strategy. When a territory loses price competitiveness, competition may lead to economic erosion and out-migration, following the logic of the theory of optimal currency areas. However, local capacities for innovation sometimes enable the rebuilding of competitive positions through differentiation. Globalization thus reinforces the requirement for continuous innovation, grounded in locally mobilized resources, both individually and collectively.

From the 1990s onward, the growing mobility of knowledge, skilled labor, and capital required a language capable of articulating both mobility and anchoring of factors. Since the 2000s, the mobility of consumers—through approaches such as residential and present-based economies (Talandier 2018) or the “experience economy” (Lorentzen & Jeannerat)—has further complicated these mobility/anchorage dynamics.

Finally, the last section discusses a conception of economic development based on transformations “from above” and “from below.” These hierarchical and interactive transformations unfold through scale dynamics: decisions taken at a higher level (N) act upon flows and/or relationships at the lower level (N–1). These decisions translate at N–1 into phenomena of internalization/externalization of actors or resources by entities at that level (for instance, a firm or a network of actors). As for change from below, at a given level N, various actors reorganize their relations and/or the flows among them, through a combinatory logic of internalization/externalization that gives rise—through a transcendental logic—to a new entity, such as an innovation network or a new firm.

These processes illustrate the importance of thinking simultaneously about spatial forms, temporalities, and structural transformations of economic systems.

All these processes will be described using the language of Q-analysis to provide a systematic and comparative account of the main theories of territorial development over the past thirty years.

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