

3.2 Tying territory, society and transformation together

A Manifesto with an integral approach

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Why a Manifesto?

The EU-funded MATILDE Project was launched after the peak of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. Besides its humanitarian focus, it examines territorial inequality and spatial justice in light of examples of mountainous areas as a kind of laboratory of peripheral living conditions.¹ In European mountain and peripheral areas, the hosting of refugees has not until now been of major public concern. It can be assumed that peripheral areas are not the places that refugees most want to live in. Nor is it an easy task for the original local population to host overnight larger number of immigrants. Therefore, the hosting of refugees in mountain areas can be considered a social innovation. In addition, the coincidence of various global crises (climate, pandemic, global value chains) superposed and strongly influenced the project, especially when considering their interdependency and mutual self-reinforcement. In this way, the MATILDE Project links three key themes together: mobility, territorial development and social innovation.

Mobility and uneven territorial development

At least since the forced development of the social division of labour, i.e., since the colonial conquest of the world, territorial development has proceeded unevenly, with certain territories either gaining or losing importance. Associated with this have been population movements of immense proportions through flight and displacement driven by both explicit violence and economic pressure. Since the onset of modern capitalism, the concentration of people in cities has repeatedly registered new peaks, but these have been interspersed by contrary processes due to political, economic and humanitarian crises and which are manifest in both political mass movements and political-economic paradigm shifts. There is a recurrent pattern: in times of rapid economic growth, here are market expansion, an increasing social division of labour and

the concentration of residence in urban areas. By contrast, in times of recession, crisis and subsequent social paradigm shifts, marginalized areas consolidate, but without regaining their former political and economic significance (Bairoch, 1985; Pumain, 1999; Schuler et al., 2004). By adopting the approach of evolutionary economics and its concept of “trajectory,” one can explain why prosperous societies gain new development options while, at the same time, certain windows close so that there is no movement in reverse. Hence, the cities at the top of the territorial hierarchy today are those that in the past have managed to maintain urban and metropolitan growth amid unbridled global competition. This development has been enabled by a certain constancy of those cities’ ruling class over time and their continuous attraction of all sorts of capital generated elsewhere, combined with a flexible alternation of investment, disinvestment and reinvestment. The MATILDE Manifesto depicts these two key elements in its chapters on unequal development, the explanation of migration and the search for social and spatial justice.

Transformative social innovation

Still missing is the third element that might explain transformative change in society: social innovation. I prefer to speak explicitly of *transformative social innovation*, i.e., innovation that triggers changes in the relationships between social actors and institutions and not just improved regional business models. Crucial for the definition of social innovation is the scale applied to decide what is really *new* and what *social* means to avoid social and greenwashing. In this respect, the benevolent reception of migrants is frequently a social innovation, as has been shown in Italy in the cases of municipalities such as Riace (Reggio Calabria), Pettinengo (Biella) and others (Perlik and Membretti, 2018): local populations connect to humanitarian experiences of the past and reject ethnic/nationalist/identitarian instrumentalization.² Engaging in the reception and inclusion of migrants may enhance cohesion within mountain communities and may increase regional identity to stabilize them. With its focus on the reception of refugees (Theses 4–7), MATILDE clearly distinguishes itself not only from ethnic nationalism but also from national pseudosocialist concepts of regional identity (in the literature often euphemistically termed “left” populism). MATILDE thus offers a strong counterforce against regional egoism (Davezies, 2015), individual exclusion and racism.

Socioterritorial relationship

The Manifesto therefore brings together three issues that are usually separated. Migration experts typically tend to consider the positive or negative

impact of migrant reception for the benefit of the interest groups represented by them, i.e., immigrants, or in the opposite case, incumbent inhabitants. Regional developers have adopted “best practices” in promoting identity and distinction, and they seek to expand on international markets. Innovation experts hope for an entrepreneurial competitive advantage. This sectoral view obscures the causes of the current crises; it quickly favours particular interests and clientelism, and it ultimately inhibits progress in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Manifesto breaks up this sectoral view. It has the merit of showing in a condensed form to a broader public the interdependence among territorial disparities on a global and a regional scale, migrant flows and new options for transformation.

Critique

However, this integral approach is only partially successful, primarily because the ten theses have been written by individual authors and are thus conditioned by a heterogenous sectoral logic. The theses are additive rather than interrelated or interlocking. On the one hand, this means that part of the overall view is lost; on the other hand, it loses concreteness. This has consequences for the substantive positioning of humanitarian refugee reception and generates an overly optimistic view with regard to the development of peripheral areas:

- The message is not self-evident. There is no consensus in European societies that peripheral spaces should not be left to themselves; there is still a strong belief in market forces. The same applies to the reception of migrants: European societies are divided as never before; the debate is only mitigated by reduced migrant flows and the predominating topic of the COVID crisis. This problem cannot be remedied with a new narrative (i.e., a better communication).
- Indeed, COVID has given new functions to peripheral areas as temporary escapes from the sanitary insecurity of cities, as in the 14th century. However, it is completely unclear whether this can halt or even reverse the loss of importance that has occurred in recent years. On the contrary, there is a danger that the observable tendency towards a monofunctional, selective use of mountain areas will be reinforced.
- Therefore, although we see certain signs for transformation, the overly-euphoric stocktaking obscures the view for the missing link in the analysis of territorial disparities and the search for spatial justice.

In regard to the development of mountain regions, neoclassical economists rely on regulation by market forces, architects discover new creativity

through art and aesthetics instead of production and the ecological mainstream advocates a strict separation of cultural space and biosphere, i.e., tends to abandon sparsely populated territories. The *metrophilia* mentioned in the Manifesto (a very good term!) is an indicator that the connection between the well-being of the mountain periphery and the metropolitan cores – a prerequisite for a prosperous society – has fallen out of sight (as Thesis 8 clearly states). The appeals by the community of alpine research and development for an upgrading of the periphery – in recent years constantly repeated – do not help, because it remains unclear who (which social actors) should engage in such upgrading. The problem lies deeper. The hope that an immediate and enduring trend reversal will start with the COVID crisis seems too short-sighted and premature. It is true that, as a result of the pandemic, the population figures of the big cities are currently stagnating.³ This reflects that, if a big city can no longer exploit its structural advantages of manifold social interaction, it becomes too expensive for its citizens, and economic agglomeration advantages turn into *disadvantages*. The advocates of the free market might feel vindicated. But nobody should be deceived. With the recovery after lockdown, the city also may regain its structural advantages, not only via the greater opportunities for interaction, but also via the concentration of the built environment and infrastructures that impacts as a lock-in factor (“too big to fail”). When these cities develop problems, their weight – grown over decades – is so heavy that costly innovations are introduced first and foremost in them.⁴ Conversely, we see the selective valorization of mountain areas through aesthetization and gentrification under the label “landscape,” whereby an environmentally destructive infrastructure is built at the same time (for the example of the Himalayas: Jacquemet, 2018; Naitthani and Kainthola, 2015; for the Alps: Perlik, 2019). The generation of new dynamic hotspots and new peripheries is thus reproduced again and again. It therefore makes sense to look for the missing link that brings together migrant flows, spatial disparities and transformative social innovation.

Searching for the missing link

It is worth re-reading Rosa Luxemburg’s seminal 1913 work *The Accumulation of Capital*, which deals with one of the fundamental contradictions of capitalist societies: the compulsion to achieve perpetual growth for perpetual accumulation and the search by capital owners for ever new ways to privatize the commons. The book begins with an in-depth critique of Marx’s second volume of *The Capital*, which ideally assumed a completed penetration of market relations for 19th-century Europe. Not at all, Luxemburg says. Once the reproduction of the population has been achieved

(including measures for the damage caused by environmental degradation), it is necessary to find new investment opportunities for the surplus accumulated previously. In the 19th and 20th centuries, this expansion of markets took place as colonialism through the destruction of indigenous cultures and social practices – Luxemburg describes in detail the destruction of pre-colonial peasant societies in Algeria, India and China, as well as that of the smallholder settlers in North America. Today, in postcolonialism, the global instabilities are generated by geostrategic interests driving migration flows, as well as disinvestment from industrial production sites (relocations) and individual habitats (rural-urban domestic migration) to new places: for example, with the widespread introduction of second homes and the social enforcement of multilocal living practices. In short, capitalist market penetration (and also its territorial expression, urbanization) is never complete. It is a regularly recurring “primitive accumulation” that takes place whenever established products no longer generate the necessary profit margins, but depending on political regulations. The modern expression for it is “the paradigm of permanent growth” with the fascination of the buzzword *innovation* based on Schumpeter’s “creative destruction.”

Why this excursus into political economy? Because the logic of creating new commodities to reinvest overaccumulated benefits may serve as the missing link to build a coherent critique for the transformation of spatial and social relations. Consequently, the brief COVID-induced trend interruption of metropolitan concentration evaporates. On the contrary, the current new functions of mountain areas become highly selective and dependent on the development of the new platform economy invented in the metropolitan regions. New commodified functions are the following: mountain retreat for reasons of personal security, the investment of value in real estate because the other investment vehicles have lost performance or the search for additional tourism models because guaranteed snow coverage and the demand for ski tourism are declining. These specializations on global leisure markets follow a logic of economic autonomy, but they reinforce the dependence on external developments; in this sense, they narrow the future options for action instead of widening them. Breaking with this liberal-productivist⁵ logic, developed after the Fordist crisis of the 1980s, would once again necessitate a change of regime, i.e., a profound transformation of the conditions under which social wealth is produced (accumulation) and distributed (regulation).

Thesis 9 in the MATILDE Manifesto presents the foundational economy as an economic approach tailored to peripheral regions and the reception of migrants. However, this does not change the fact that the dominant economic processes follow a liberal-productivist logic which even the multiple crises cannot immediately put into question. But the foundational economy,

together with similar approaches, like the solidarity economy and a revitalization of the cooperative movement, may contribute to creating counter-tendencies for a change of regime. There is a considerable research potential in the entire range of alternative economic and political models beyond the current offer-oriented regional competition.

For a new relationship between the collective and the decentral, between identity and solidarity

Although it does not seem justified to be optimistic in a short-term change in favour of the peripheries, the current cumulation of several different crises offers the political potential for more profound emancipatory changes, i.e., transformative social innovation. They can be successful in the long run if the current division of societies into privileged centres and low-value-creating peripheries can be overcome. This requires abandoning the illusion that peripheries can manage on their own only if they are particularly innovative in commercial terms and compete with each other in an offer-oriented manner. Today's split between so-called "rural" areas and the internationally oriented metropolitan areas has produced devastating distortions, of which the USA, Brazil and Eastern Germany / Europe are only the most prominent examples (many of the Manifesto theses refer to them by citing Andrés Rodríguez-Pose's Brexit analysis). Representatives of mountain areas have long insisted on the superiority of decentralized structures and on strengthening regional identities. However, the current political polarization in many European countries, based on spatial types with their different life chances, puts this recurrent mantra into perspective. The result is often a mere shift of political power in favour of other, more assertive groups of actors, grounded in nationalist-regionalist thinking which promote social exclusion and racist discrimination against even more disadvantaged people. At the same time, they do little to change the fundamental structural strength of metropolitan regions and their dominance over the peripheries.

Rather, the reverse conclusion should be drawn: if decentralized structures today favour fragmented identities and milieus in which both "city" and "countryside" feel exploited by each other, then they must indeed be fundamentally questioned. This includes the strengthening of lowland/mountain linkages so that differences in productivity are mitigated with, for example, a possible conclusion to abandon regional business models mainly based on high-end long-distance tourism.

How this transformation of an offer-oriented, identity-based competition into more solidary structures in larger territorial units could come about – especially under conditions of worldwide migration flows that will not

decrease – requires a great deal of further research like that, for example, being currently conducted in the German-speaking area by the “Critical Land Research Working Group” (Maschke et al., 2020) for peripheral areas. In regard to social innovation and a solidarity economy, the CIRIEC network of the University of Liège has carried out significant groundwork. There is a multitude of such initiatives. Many of them do not know about each other. It is important to fill this lack of networking for further, cross-national migration research in mountain areas. For this, a wide spreading of this first version of the Manifesto is very desirable.

Notes

- 1 Many European mountain ranges are well developed, especially the Alps, but compared to metropolitan regions, they are peripheries.
- 2 It is assumed that hosting institutions practice honest arguments and try to find good solutions for the people involved on both sides. But we should always be aware that remote places may also be used to “hide” refugees to avoid integration and to get rid of them easily.
- 3 For example, school enrolments have declined in Paris, Lyon and Marseille.
- 4 This is the diagnosis for the current liberal-productivist regimes. Conditions may change. There are strong arguments for innovation due to peripherality (Glückler et al., 2022; Mayer et al., 2021) which may become, under changed regimes, more than a niche.
- 5 I prefer this term to the common “neoliberal” because, on the one hand, *neo-liberal* has become a very common pejorative term, although it is not precisely defined, and on the other hand, this term does not treat the fundamental question of what is produced and under what conditions for the (animate and inanimate) environment.

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