αειχώρος

Κείμενα Πολεοδομίας, Χωροταξίας και Ανάπτυξης

Ειδικό τεύχος – Αφιέρωμα

για τα 30 χρόνια του
Τμήματος Μηχανικών Χωροταξίας, Πολεοδομίας
& Περιφερειακής Ανάπτυξης

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Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Θεσσαλίας
Τμήμα Μηχανικών Χωροταξίας, Πολεοδομίας και Περιφερειακής Ανάπτυξης

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Περιεχόμενα

Geographies of Growth and Integration in Europe: old and new challenges for regional policy

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Abstract

This paper presents in a synoptic way the evolution of theoretical and empirical knowledge related to spatial inequalities and unbalanced growth, including the rise and decline of schools of thought and the conditions behind policy (in)effectiveness. The drivers of spatial selectivity, the persistency of underperforming regions, their integration experience and the rise of a geography of discontent are discussed in relation to the old and new challenges for regional policy.

Keywords
european integration, regional inequalities, discontent, regional policy

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Γεωγραφίες Ανάπτυξης και Ολοκλήρωσης στην Ευρώπη: παλιές και νέες προκλήσεις για την περιφερειακή πολιτική

Περίληψη

Η εργασία παρουσιάζει συνοπτικά την εξέλιξη της θεωρητικής και εμπειρικής γνώσης η οποία συσχετίζεται με τις χωρικές ανισότητες και την άνιση ανάπτυξη, την άνοδο αλλά και την υποχώρηση των σχετικών σχολών σκέψης και τους παράγοντες που επηρεάζουν την (αν)αποτελεσματικότητα της περιφερειακής πολιτικής. Η χωρική επιλεκτικότητα, η επίμονη υπο-απόδοση των λιγότερο ανεπτυγμένων περιοχών, η εμπειρία τους από τη διαδικασία της Ευρωπαϊκής ολοκλήρωσης και η άνοδος και διασπορά της πολιτικής δυσαρέσκειας εξετάζονται σε σχέση με τις παλιές και νέες προκλήσεις της περιφερειακής πολιτικής.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

ευρωπαϊκή ολοκλήρωση, περιφερειακές ανισότητες, δυσαρέσκεια, περιφερειακή πολιτική

1. INTRODUCTION

Scientific knowledge related to the spatial economy is in a state of flux. A wide spectrum of theories of socioeconomic growth and inequality have interacted, debated or enriched each other over the last few decades through a process of birth, growth, domination and decline that appears to have an embedded cyclical element. The evolution of knowledge in each round of scientific consolidation raises at least as many new questions as it answers, leading to new rounds of quest in an evolving space that constantly changes the conditions and the parameters of the discussion.

During this time period, the evidence seems to suggest that regional performance, especially in Europe, is, mostly, characterised by increasing or high and persistent inequalities (Iammarino et al., 2017), which are wider when they consider multidimensional measures of living standards and not just income (OECD, 2019).

The most critical issues in this long debate have been the identification of the drivers that differentiate growth performance across cities and regions and the ability of market forces or State mechanisms to reduce inequalities over space. Over the last 50 years, the theoretical debate on regional inequalities has been driven by the competition of two schools of thought: the convergence school[1], led by the neoclassical economic theory, and the divergence school[2], led by the theory of cumulative causation. The neoclassical school predicts convergence among advanced and less advanced regions on the basis of constant returns of scale in the production system and three different equilibrating mechanisms: diminishing capital productivity, interregional trade and interregional migration. Its dominance in economic thinking for a long period is mainly based on its ability to use formal testable models for its propositions.

On the opposite side of the theoretical spectrum, the divergence school of thought claims that growth is a spatially selective and cumulative process, which is likely to increase regional inequalities. This basic argument has been over the years supported to varying degrees by a diverse set of theoretical approaches including the urban growth models, the core-periphery models, the path dependency and unequal integration models, the new economic geography models and the endogenous growth models. In this setting, the typical drivers of spatial inequality or asymmetry are the internal or external economies of scale, a favourable geography, high quality human resources, large market size and a favourable industrial structure, or simply sharply different initial conditions in the growth process (Petrakos, 2008).

2. THE RISE, DECLINE AND MIX OF THEORIES

Although this long debate has been empirically supported by hundreds of research papers and reports, it may be the case that both processes of convergence and divergence coexist at all spatial levels, but in different proportions and different strengths, leading to multiple growth regimes. Their balance, however, over time and space changes with development levels and the broader geographical, institutional or political coordinates (Petrakos, 2008). Although national or regional evidence can go both ways, the persistence in regional inequalities over long periods of time in significant parts of the European economic space may suggest that market based automatic convergence mechanisms do not work effectively, or at least do not prevail over other, counteracting, divergence mechanisms.

These spatial dynamics may allow for a non-linear pattern of growth at the EU regional level and the formation of "growth" clubs in Europe (Iammarino et al., 2017): At the one end of the spectrum weaker regions converge to each other and, on the other, the more advanced regions form a European leading league with regions having high and very

1 Founded on the works of Solow (1956), Swan (1956), Heckscher (1919/1991), Ohlin (1933/1966) and later on Barro and Sala-i-Martin (1992).

2 Founded on the works of Myrdal (1957) and Hirschman (1958) and later on Romer (1986) and Krugman (1991).

high levels of development and a common set of favourable characteristics that diverge from the European average (Petrakos, 2008).

In each round of scientific discussions and debate that lasted roughly a decade, new tides of methodological approaches, new ingredients and new sets of evidence were coming to set new grounds, attract attention and typically shape the new dominant theoretical paradigm. From the concepts of critical scale, the regional multipliers, the big push and the cumulative nature of growth over space, the literature moved gradually to the celebrated hypotheses and market clearance mechanisms of the marginalist school and the concept of equilibrium before it was able to reload the dynamic and time-dependent aspects of the economy, as well as the discontinuities and the less convenient properties of space.

This rise and decline of theories, as well as the beginning in each round of an advanced version with new embedded elements, may simply suggest that the basic ingredients for the understanding of the changing economic space are already available. In that sense, a major task of regional science is to gauge the new signals of each period and suggest the right mix of theories and drivers shaping spatial dynamics and balances. In doing so, it is important to leave some room for a non-linear behaviour arising from the diminishing performance of most theories when they attempt to explain reality beyond a certain space-time-size margin.

Equally controversial is the terrain of public policies. The theoretical debates and divides have always had at the centre of their attention the State: how much State, what type of State, how centralised or decentralised it should be, how much power we should have at the local or the central level, how much spatial redistribution we want, whether spatial equity does any good to national efficiency. Waves of arguments and evidence in favour or against regional cohesion and convergence were in fact taking part in this very essential debate about the organisation of the spatial economy and the role, size (and the very existence) of public goods.

However, the most controversial question here is that of policy failure. Why regional policy has failed in so many instances to close the gap between the advanced and the less advanced regions? At the margins of this discussion, critical questions that often went unnoticed are challenging the linearity of theoretical propositions (more is always better than less, regardless of the existing levels) and discuss the limits of mainstream paradigms. Does a given increase in public investment have the same impact in a poor and a rich region, in a large and a small economy? Does it have the same impact if the initial level of Public Investment is 1% or 10% of local GDP? If the answer is probably no, how does this affect the way we look for empirical evidence with the use of linear models (Arvanitidis et al., 2010).

As the physical and mental space shrinks and at the same time expands, a new synthesis is needed to map, knit and embed into the main corpus of knowledge the shadows, the new edges and the new frontiers that emerge and have a different view, respond to different questions and suffer from different dilemmas and controversies.

3. SPATIAL SELECTIVITY IN GROWTH PROCESSES

Regional dynamics are characterised by spatial selectivity and an overall unfavourable environment for lagging-behind regions. Most drivers of regional growth tend to favour (conditionally or unconditionally) the larger, central, more advanced, metropolitan and with a better structure regions (Ciccone, 2002; Petrakos et al. 2011). A weaker growth performance is expected of peripheral, structurally diverging and lacking home-market and scale-effects regions. Although stories of success emerge in nearly all parts of Europe, their spatial frequency cannot change the dominant pattern, which remains intact for decades.

Although convergence and divergence patterns coexist, the former tend to prevail in the new millennium, as regional inequality in the EU has increased again, after a decline in the 1990s (Petrakos and Artelaris, 2009; Iammarino, et al., 2017). Convergence patterns are mostly explained by the stronger performance of a number of, mostly metropolitan, Central European regions, while divergence is mostly explained by the weaker performance of the low income regions (European Commission, 2018a). In fact, the EU is experiencing the formation of regional income clubs. The regions that belong to the “very high”, or “high” income group typically have a stronger performance in terms of GDP, employment and population growth, while the regions that belong to the “low” income group experience a net decline (Iammarino, et al., 2017). These diverging trends among the main regional clubs have an increasing importance, given that more than a quarter of EU residents live in “low” income regions (European Commission, 2017).

These regional groups are not equally prepared or able to deal with major challenges that will change significantly regional performance and balances in the future. According to the OECD (2019), three major megatrends will affect regions in the next decades: (a) digitalisation, automation and technological change in production, (b) demographic change, including urbanisation, ageing and migration, and (c) climate change and resource scarcity.

The first megatrend will lead to a major job reallocation across sectors and places, favouring productive systems, administrations and locations that have invested early enough in digital technology and higher education. The regions that will be unable to follow this trend will experience a dramatic decline in employment, as it is estimated that in some regions the jobs at risk can be up to 39% of total employment. Demographic change will lead to asymmetric population decline in many weak regions and will affect tax bases, the pension system and public services. Although the larger cities in Europe will continue to attract younger and more educated population and benefit from agglomeration economies, many peripheral regions will be faced with increasing population gaps that can only be filled by external migration, which raises a number of issues related to assimilation and cultural diversity. Although it is not easy to predict the spatial pattern of its effects, it is more likely that the places with better infrastructure and resources will be able to adapt faster to minimise the negative consequences of climate change (OECD, 2019).

4. PERSISTENTLY UNDERPERFORMING REGIONS

The inability of the least advanced regions to close the development gap and converge towards the national or European average presents a critical challenge for theory and policy. It has been noticed that, despite some exceptions, there is a surprising stability at the low end of the development scale, where the least performing regions are in many cases persistently the same.

This persistency in underperformance takes the form of a path-dependent process largely driven by some unspecified, but certainly interacting, internal forces and dynamics and it seems that it does not respond to typical policy prescriptions. In some cases, this long-term underperformance has led to the emergence of an “assisted economy” culture and, in some cases, to a “failure” mentality that makes the potential for breaking out of the vicious circle of “lagging behind” even more difficult. In some other cases, of course, institutional and cultural “failures” are more deeply rooted in systemic weaknesses of the national economies.

The question that arises is whether this persistent failure is the result of a regional market failure, policy failure, geographic barriers, institutional and cultural rigidities, some type of a “missing factor” in the regional base, or a combination of all these. Yet another question is why these persistently underperforming regions cannot learn and benefit from the success stories of the more advanced regions.

There is no convincing answer to this question as yet, partly because regional theory and policy are rarely informed from the experience of these regions. Contemporary regional growth theories emphasise the role of human capital, knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurship for a successful growth performance. However, in most underperforming regions, such factors are not only typically weak in the corresponding local bases but, to the extent that they can in fact be mobilised, they are still largely unable to allow these regions to break out of the underdevelopment trap. An implication of this is that development strategies emanating from theoretical models built on the experience of dynamic regions may be misleading or counterproductive for the persistently underperforming regional economies. In this way, we have a two-way missing causality: on the one hand, regional development theory practically ignores the lessons that can be derived from the experience of these regions and, on the other, its recommendations often fail to take into consideration the specific conditions of persistently lagging regions. As one may suspect, this eventually becomes a policy problem. Although regional policies and disposable funds intend to solve the underdevelopment problems of the lagging regions, they are informed by the experience of the successful ones. The argument is simple, but not necessarily correct: if a set of policies has contributed to the success of the advanced regions, then they should be capable to do the same in the less advanced ones.

This line of thought is based on two assumptions that are rarely made explicit: on the one hand, that less advanced regions are in the same trajectory (though in an earlier phase of development) as advanced ones; on the other, that success and failure are symmetric processes. This means that if the presence of a factor contributes to success in one place, its absence from another would explain failure. This should not necessarily be the case. In fact, extensive and diverse literature suggests that factors affecting economic potential may be different in advanced and less advanced regions and countries (Arvanitidis et al., 2010). The implications of this is that the same policy-framework is not appropriate to both advanced and less advanced regions.

5. INTEGRATING DISTANT AND WEAKER REGIONS

East-West integration in Europe started three decades ago with mainly asymmetric trade flows of an inter-industry type and significant factor movements of a neoclassical type (labour moved west and capital moved east), in a selective way that affected to a large extent the geography of development, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Petrakos et al, 2000).

Although economic integration is widely considered to be a positive-sum game, it has not escaped attention that (a) the EU has had an inferior growth performance than its main trade competitors during the last 2-3 decades, (b) that the post-euro period is characterised by lower growth, and (c) that the non-euro EU countries have better growth performance than the euro area. If integration is typically a win-win situation, how can the EU performance be explained? In fact, eliminating borders and all sorts of barriers to trade (including different currencies) releases forces of creation, but also forces of destruction. Inferior production structures in weaker regions are typically not able to maintain traditional and less competitive tradable activities that are typically replaced by imports from the more advanced regional trade partners. These destruction forces are different in strength among regions, but it seems that in many cases they are not trivial and are not always easy to counterbalance with the introduction of other more dynamic activities. The lack of quick adjustment mechanisms that will replace the declining tradable sectors or activities with new ones is one of the factors that keep inequalities high and EU growth performance weak. Although the history of EU integration includes significant success stories of cities, regions, or countries, the question whether integration into the EU has provided a stable growth path for all regions, even the weaker, does not get always a positive or an unconditional answer (Camagni 1992; Giannetti, 2002; Petrakos et al., 2005; Kallioras and Petrakos 2010; Petrakos et al, 2011; Petrakos et al, 2012; Petrakos and Psycharis, 2016). Equally challenging is the question related to the geography of integration, as it seems that there are limits to the benefits of West-East integration for the more distant regions of the previous or the next EU enlargement (Anagnostou et al. 2016; Petrakos et al, 2016).

6. THE REVENGE OF THE UNHAPPY PLACES

Despite progress in expanding and deepening the European project, the fact is that many people in the EU are not happy with it. According to the 2018 Eurobarometer, only 42% of EU citizens tend to trust the EU, while 48% tend not to trust it. These figures were even worse during the years of the economic crisis (2011-2014). This dissatisfaction by EU citizens is related to the conditions of their places and their lives and varies significantly among and within countries. Apart from the issues related to external conditions and the conflicts in the Middle East (immigration and terrorism), people are more frequently concerned about the state of public finances (deficits and austerity programs), the economic situation (weak or no growth) and unemployment (European Commission, 2018b).

Eight years after the financial crisis, most affected regions in the EU have not reached yet their pre-crisis GDP per capita levels, implying that the policy mix has left behind significant populations, failing to provide adequate support for their problems. This leads to rising dissatisfaction or discontent, which transforms economic pressure or difficulties in a number of locations to political developments that can be loud enough to be heard of or, even worse, that can set real and serious obstacles to the process of EU integration.

These political developments are in one sense the revenge of the unhappy places (Rodriguez-Pose, 2017) and may take the form of Brexit, growing political polarisation, collapse of established political parties, extreme nationalism or policies that threaten the global trading system (the latter, on the other side of the Atlantic).

This implies that places left behind by the process of integration, or places where policies were either weak or non-effective, and places that feel threatened by wider

European level processes or policies, have now found a way to fight back by voting populist, anti-systemic or anti-EU governments and politicians, or opt to leave the Union. This development is somehow changing the terrain of EU policymaking, as dissatisfaction with ineffective policies has now found a way to affect the grounds and balances on which policy decisions are made. Unhappy citizens change the composition of the EU Parliament (the two main centre-right and centre-left parties do not have any more the majority of the parliament) and perhaps that of the European Council, increasing the complexity in decision making and reducing the degrees of freedom in proceeding with the "business-as-usual" model of integration in the future. Given that democracy is deeply rooted in Europe, the voice of the excluded and the unhappy places and people will find ways to "disturb" political and economic orthodoxies. These disturbances can operate as a wake-up call in the short term, but in the longer term and in greater doses it is almost certain that they will cause centripetal forces and a permanent damage to the project of EU integration.

7. THE CHALLENGES FOR REGIONAL POLICY

Regional policy has to promote efficiency and equity at the same time, by designing a mix of top-down and place-based policies that are based on development theory, while at the same time remain sensitive to the experiences, conditions and capabilities of each territory. The great variability of the European economic space and the great variability in policy experiences indicate that uniformity in policy choices and a strict framework of policy directives should be avoided. The EU policy framework should encourage each country or region to adopt a balanced, knowledgeable and creative synthesis of different policy options that will be more suitable to deal with the place-specific mix of development problems (Barca, 2009; Petrakos, 2012).

What do we know about regional policy in the EU? Although its impact is clearly significant in terms of improving infrastructure and to a certain extent human capital in lagging regions, regional policy has not managed to reduce the development gap between the more advanced and the less advanced regions in Europe. Many regions have benefited by the development of new transportation networks and new urban, education or health infrastructure, but the impact on the productive base of the weaker regions has been less decisive and as a result inequalities have remained high and in some cases have increased.

Regional policy can be more effective to reduce income and productivity gaps among the EU regions if the following two conditions apply at the same time: (a) there is a stronger commitment of funds allocated to its operations, (b) the design and implementation of policy is drastically simplified and decentralised, allowing it to be more place-sensitive and more responsive to local needs.

The European Union has allocated 351.8 Billion euros for Cohesion Policy in the 2014-20 Programming Period. This is 32.5% of the total EU budget (1,082 billion euros) for the same period (European Commission, 2014). Although this is a significant figure, it accounts only for about 360 euros per year/per head in the regions with a GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average, or 98 euros per year/per head when the entire EU population is taken into consideration. Given the persistency of the regional problems, regional policy clearly needs more resources in order to counterbalance the impact of centripetal forces developing in the one-market, one-currency setting, to counterbalance the impact of other EU policies with a strong spatial footprint and also account for the missing pillars of European integration (fiscal, financial and political integration).

The increase in resources is rather unlikely to come from an increase in national contributions or a reallocation of resources among existing policies. Following recent initiatives, it is more likely to come through the expansion of the tax base with the introduction of a modest levy on the multinational giants operating in the EU and paying disproportionally low taxes. According to a recent Oxfam report (based on the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Database), just 1810 billionaires on Forbes's list hold as much wealth as the poorest 70 percent of humanity. These individuals are owners of giant multinationals that operate globally (and in Europe), typically avoid taxation through various legal arrangements and can afford (some may welcome) a modest tax on their operation in order to support the cohesion of the Union.

The second requirement for a more effective regional policy calls for a drastic reduction of its complexity in design and implementation, a reduction in its administrative burden and its time requirements in terms of delivery and a greater focus on results, instead of procedures. Simplification also means a more decentralised overall structure where the EU and national levels maintain their redistributive role and mainly the strategic and audit functions, while the regional level maintains most operational functions and more space to adapt policies to local environments. This is a simple but not necessarily easy step, as centralisation and complexity are directly related to power and control of established national and EU bureaucracies over the entire system of Structural and Investment Funds. Decentralisation will be effective if the EU and national levels develop mechanisms to check not only the absorption of the funds but also their impact on promoting productivity growth, new firms creation, employment growth, income growth, innovation, etc. This should provide the grounds for a more meaningful type of accountability, where the lower levels are held responsible for the productive use of allocated resources.

Simplification and decentralisation will allow policies to be better aligned to the local conditions of the weaker regions. Implementing effective place-based policies will not be an easy task. It requires the regional level to be able to meet the strategic priorities of the national and EU level and at the same time select a mix of policy instruments (infrastructure, human resources, investment and institutional reforms) that suits better its productive capabilities and advantages. This will take some time and local/regional administrations staffed with sufficient human resources. It will also take a thorough ex-post evaluation of policies in terms of stated goals, where local authorities are accountable for the results, not just the absorption of funds, in order to secure an optimum use of resources.

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Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Θεσσαλίας
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