

THE RELEVANCE OF GEOGRAPHY FOR SOCIETY : FROM GEOGRAPHY TO TERRITORIAL POLICY AND VICE VERSA

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Résumé

La question centrale dans cette contribution est comment des politiques territoriales peuvent être incluses plus fermement dans la recherche géographique, sociale et économique. La géographie, et la géographie sociale et économique en particulier, étudie l'organisation territoriale de la société. Par sa nature, la recherche géographique (fondamentale) est ou devrait être ancrée dans la société. Cette thèse est illustrée par trois lignes de recherches où le lien entre la géographie, comme science, et la politique est très étroit : (1) le développement urbain, (2) le développement économique régional et spatial et (3) l'aménagement du territoire.

Pour chacune des trois lignes de recherche, on montre que les politiques territoriales peuvent seulement être fructueuses si leur base est géographiquement enracinée. La géographie doit donc fournir des concepts scientifiquement basés. Car la politique fait des choix ; c'est également le devoir de la géographie de remettre en cause ces choix. Les exemples montrent que la géographie comme science fournit des concepts et des approches utiles pour des politiques territoriales. En tout cas, ils prouvent la pertinence de la géographie pour la société.

Mots-clés

le développement urbain, le développement économique régional et spatial, l'aménagement du territoire

Keywords

urban development, regional-economic and spatial-economic development, physical planning

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowing some of the fields of interest of the respected geographer that is celebrated with this *Liber Amicorum*, with this contribution I want to focus on an aspect that is also one of her concerns. This aspect deals with how territorial policies can be embedded more firmly in social and economic geographical research.

It is certain that my specific position has an influence on my appreciation of this topic. My concern for a better interaction between science and policy has to be seen as a scientist also working in a policy context and making « translations » from science to policy and vice-versa. This concern was presented when in 2002 the Belgian Royal Society celebrated its 125th anniversary. For this purpose at the *University Libre de Bruxelles*, an international colloquium was organised focussing on « *Territorial and geographical mutations : the last quarter of the XXth century in retrospect* ». I had the honour to present a lecture on : « *The place of geographers in territorial development policies : the geographer as a go between?* ». Especially the second part of this title indicates very clear that I think geography and the geographer have a 'natural vocation' to produce scientific

research that is relevant to society.

One of the leading themes in this *Liber* is to focus on how the different writers assess their own position in geography. For this purpose I grasp some elements of my own research that make clear how I see *my geography*. It is by no means my intention to reduce social and economic geography to the defended angle or to the topics that are presented below. It only gives an indication of how societal relevance is certainly present in geography research.

II. GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY SEEN FROM DIFFERENT RESEARCH ANGLES

Geography, especially social and economic geography, studies the territorial organization of society. So by its very nature, (fundamental) geographical research is or should be embedded in society. This thesis is illustrated from three research lines where the link between geography as a science and policy is or should be very close : (1) urban development, (2) regional and spatial economic development and (3) spatial planning. I will focus on them very briefly, while showing some relevant elements in the translation from geography to territorial policies.

A. Geography and urban development policy

Urban development research deals with several topics such as the relationship between demography and territory. Inspired on international (Cost of Urban Growth « CURB-project », by the Vienna Centre) and Dutch research (Van den Berg *et al.*, 1979a ; 1979b), the urban development stages were introduced in Flanders and Brussels at the beginning of the ninety eighties. Based on historical population evolution, the urban development stages from urbanisation, via suburbanisation to des-urbanisation and re-urbanisation were described by urban region (Cabus, 1980 ; 1985). It was possible to illustrate by urban region the evolution during time and to compare its position vis-à-vis other urban regions.

These development stages are now still considered to be relevant. Especially nowadays the question arises whether or not our cities are in the re-urbanisation stage ? **Figure 1 gives the example of the Brussels'urban region** where it is clear that except for the urbanisation and the first suburbanisation stage, all stages are present over time after World War II. To give a more profound explanation, this global exercise has to be refined on the basis of other figures like the evolution of households and the internal and external migration. An approach from households will reveal that the population decrease until 1995 in the Brussels Capital Region is relative, because of the so-called second demographic transition, resulting in smaller households. **A study of migration flows (Figure 2) reveals a positive and from 1998 on increasing external migration balance.** At the same time the internal migration balance remains negative. After a period of mild negative figures in the midst of the nineties, this internal balance becomes even more negative with growing migration flows to the suburban

areas. As a result there is an ongoing population change within Brussels and an ongoing suburbanisation towards the urban fringe. This indicates that the stage of re-urbanisation is by no means comparable with the former urbanisation stage.

In any case it challenges geographers as well as policy makers to develop sustainable urban concepts that take territorial interactions into account.

B. Geography and regional and spatial economic policy

In this short contribution I only focus very briefly on two perspectives concerning the relationship between economy and territory : (1) regional and spatial-economic research and (2) the relationship between the network economy and territory.

Regional and spatial-economic research remains an intriguing and broad research field. Besides understanding how space functions from a economic-geographical point of view, it produces basic knowledge for a spatial-economic policy. From the end of the ninety eighties on a « sub-regional » development policy was designed within Flanders. The basis for this policy was the recognition of the fact that besides regions eligible for the EU regional policy funding (objective 1, 2 and 5b) and development zones, also other regions within Flanders, although on a smaller level of scale, suffered from a lagging development. Based on geographical analyses, socio-economic atlases and regional reports (SERV, 1988 ; 1990a ; 1990b) so-called « impulse regions » were established. The program was financed by the money saved by *Thyl Gheyselincx*, the manager of the *Kempische Steenkoolmijnen*, when in the ninety eighties he closed the mines in the province of Limburg for the Belgian government. The map shows that these

Table 1. Urban development stages

		Population change				
		Core	Agglomeration	Sum	Banlieue	Sum
Urbanisation						
1. First stage	Centralisation	++	+/-	+/>++	+/>-	+/>++
2. Second Stage		++	+	+++	+	+++
Suburbanisation						
3. First stage	Decentralisation	+	+++	++	+++	+++
4. Second Stage		-	++	+	+++	++
Desurbanisation						
5. First stage	Decentralisation	--	+/>-	-	+++	+/>-
6. Second Stage		-	-	-	+++	+/>-
Re-urbanisation ?	Centralisation & decentralisation	+	+	+	+++	+/>++

Source : adapted from Cabus, 1980 ; Note : + = growth ; - = decline.

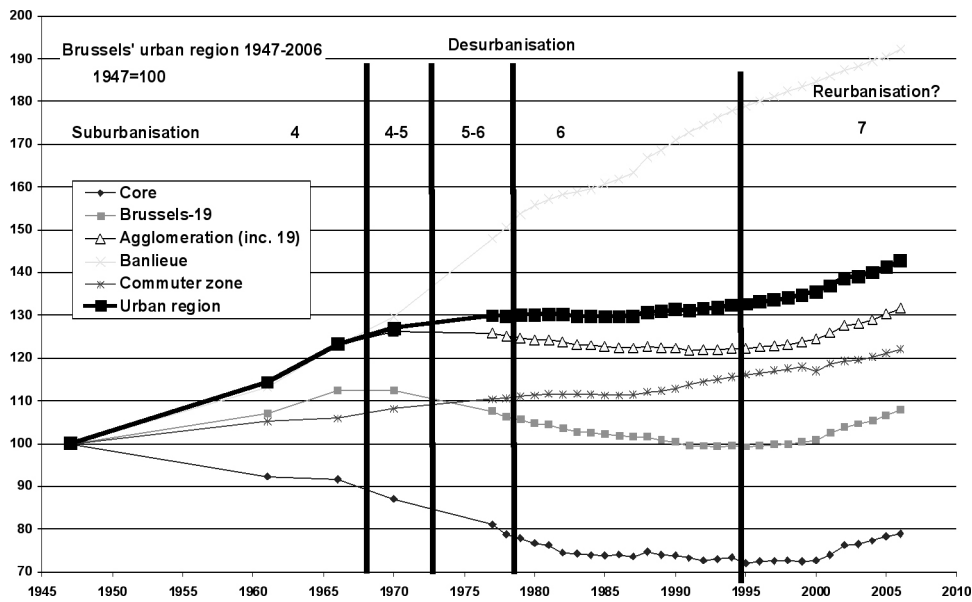


Figure 1. Urban development stages 1947-2006 in the Brussels' urban region
Source : Own calculations from Statistics Belgium

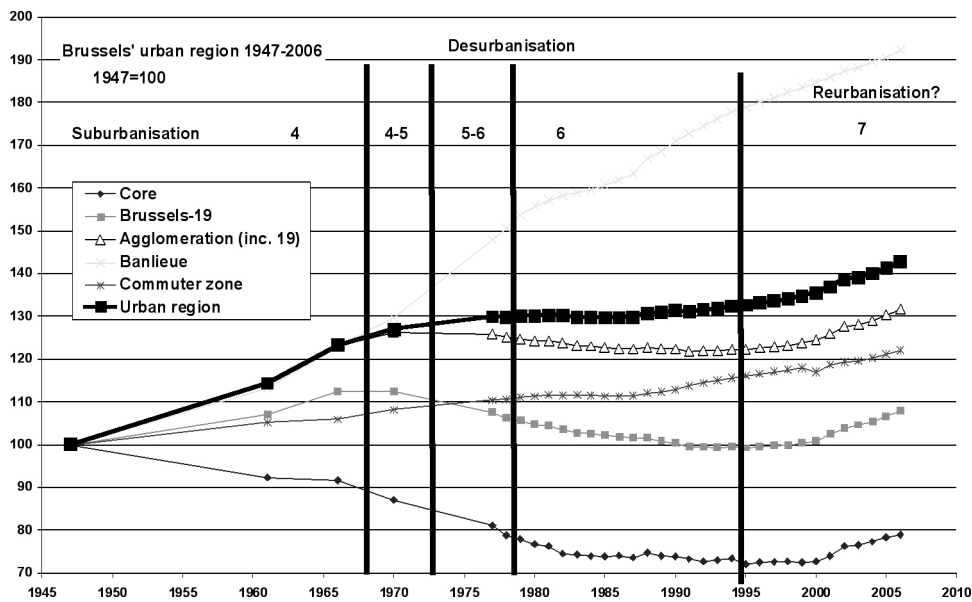


Figure 2. Population evolution in Brussels 1988-2007
Source : Own calculations from Statistics Belgium.

8 impulse regions are small and in most cases adjacent to development and/or EU structural funding regions. Like the European policy at that time, this impulse program was aiming at supporting lagging (sub-) regions. As a result of the global-local debate and the impact of regional development literature focusing on local endowments, innovation and organizational and institutional capacity (e.g. Cabus, 2001), a second boost in the Flemish sub-regional policy was produced. In this second boost more and more attention goes to non-economic factors important for regional development. Also all regions (and not only lagging regions) become partners in this sub-regional development policy. Partnerships grow between the local platforms and central authorities.

Nowadays, the sub-regional platforms are formalized with a decree (Decree of 07/05/2004, Belgian Monitor of 25/08/2004) installing « Regional Socio-Economic Dialogue Platforms » covering the whole of Flanders. These platforms are a tri-partite platform for social dialogue with the social partners (employees and employers organizations) and local and provincial authorities. They produce a regional pact and they discuss and advice labour market and spatial-economic policy measures important for the sub-region.

The research focus of the network economy produced the concept of the networked territory (inspired by e.g. on Castells, 1996) in my doctoral dissertation (Cabus,

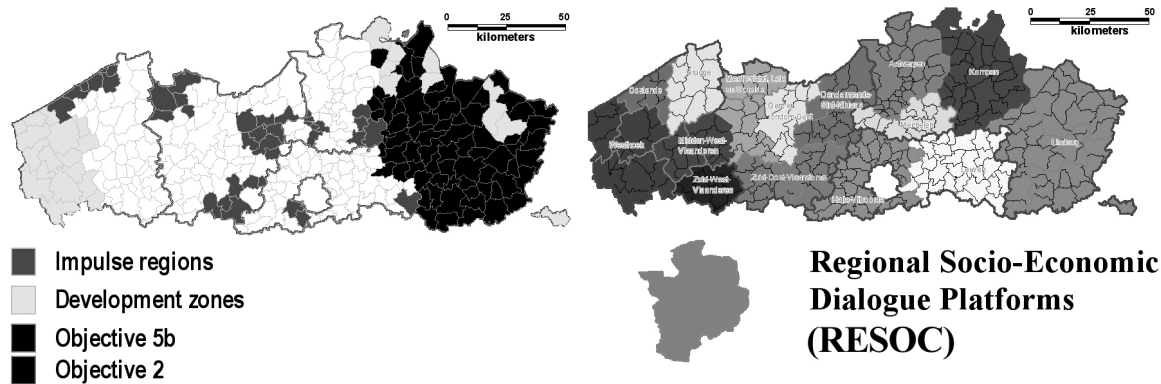


Figure 3. Sub-regional policy via impulse regions 1990-1994 and platforms from 2004 on
 Source : Of the author.

1999 ; 2000). Networking between economic agents is still increasing rapidly. To stay competitive, companies changed their organization and inter-firm relationships to a considerable degree over the last decades. New forms of corporate organizations and new cooperative strategies between producers, suppliers and clients have replaced fordist hierarchical structures. In these new industrial relationships flexibility of production and labour become the focal point of attention. In this process towards flexibility internal economies of scale are replaced by a system in which external economies and economies of scope are predominant. This system is characterized by a progressive externalization of the production structure, giving rise to a production chain functioning as a networked enterprise (Hinterhuber & Levin, 1994 ; Miles & Snow, 1995 ; Castells, 1996 ; Morgan 1997). Together with the process of externalization – that, of course, is only playing within existing firms – new firms will focus much quicker on their core competence as a result of the fierce competition. In these systems of inter-firm networking, big companies as well as SME are actively combined in the value chain (e.g. Storper, 1999) and jointly they are reconfiguring business systems (Normann, 2001). The external corporate organization – the network organization – becomes a determining part in the competitive position of the firms involved.

As a result, the production process has obviously evolved towards a more complex system. Resources are replaced by a network of industrial suppliers and business services. Capital becomes increasingly global while labour remains to great extend local. The territoriality of the network enterprise is thus playing on different geographical scales. An important scientific as well as policy question is how the network enterprise deals with the spatial configuration in order to keep the system economically and geographically running. What is the logic behind it and what type of geographical constellation results from the network economy ?

The understanding of the territorial consequences starts

from the replacement of internal economies of scale by external economies. In economic geography literature these external economies are in most case viewed as agglomeration economies, leading to geographical clustering. However, it is also crucial to introduce external economies linked to the network itself alongside agglomeration economies (Cabus & Vanhaverbeke, 2006 ; Cabus, 2006). One has to make a clear distinction between both (Suarez-Villa & Rama, 1996). Both are an expression of external economies, but while agglomeration economies trigger spatial clustering, network economies are the outcome of the network itself and do not necessarily invoke spatial clustering.

The resulting geography, the networked territories (Cabus, 1999 ; 2000), is completely different from an industrial district, innovative milieu or technology district (Maillat *et al.*, 1995). The latter emphasizes the mutual relationship between industrial and innovation dynamics resulting from local networking and geographic proximity. The networked territory where scale jumping (Swyngedouw, 1997 ; Uitermark, 2002.) is essential cuts across different socio-political entities (nation states and regions in the case of a federal state such as Belgium).

Figure 4 makes a synthesis of this reasoning that is fully in line with the Spatial Innovation Systems (SIS) approach of Oinas & Malecki (2002). They consider SIS as a link between National Innovation Systems (NIS) and Regional Innovation Systems (RIS), where firms and individuals are the connectors. SIS are overlapping and interlinked national, regional and sectoral systems of innovation which all are manifest in different configurations in space. Central in the SIS approach are the external relations of actors and the variability of relative weights of different places or regions. No innovation system is located in one place only. It may be local, regional or multinational, depending on the nature and size of the networks. As a result, the authors argue that it is not sufficient to focus only on particular RIS in

trying to understand technological change. When firms for example move a product from R&D into production, they shift the activities towards partners (and places) that specialize in manufacturing based economies of scale.

It is beyond any doubt that these views are of great importance for territorial policies e.g. a (spatial-) economic policy in general and a cluster policy in particular. For policymakers the existence of economic agents working in networked territories is not a pleasant thought because they lose grip on what is happening on the coherent territory they represent. On the other hand, not taking the existent networked territories into account will lead to a sure failure of any policy.

C. Geography and spatial planning

The link between geography and spatial planning is rather clear. There are of course other facets (e.g. urban design, landscape architecture, water management, etc.), but one might claim that spatial planning is a type of applied geography. In any case, like social and economic geography, a spatial planning policy should start

from societal processes shaping space. Indeed spatial planning concepts, such as urban contour planning, want to tackle undesired spatial consequences of these societal processes (e.g. suburbanisation, ribbon developments, etc.). These processes are portrayed and explained by social and economic geography.

Of course the difference between geography as a science and spatial policy is that the latter (and policies in general) is by definition a political process. It involves democratically legitimised political choices. It is then the task of the geographer to underpin these choices scientifically. At the same time the geographer has to question continuously these choices from his research on the impact of societal processes on space.

Because the law on spatial planning dates back from 1962, that is before the federalisation process started in Belgium, for the whole country district plans were made up in the ninety seventies and early ninety eighties. One of the tasks was to provide enough space for the different societal activities, while at the same to realise a number of important spatial objectives. These objectives were

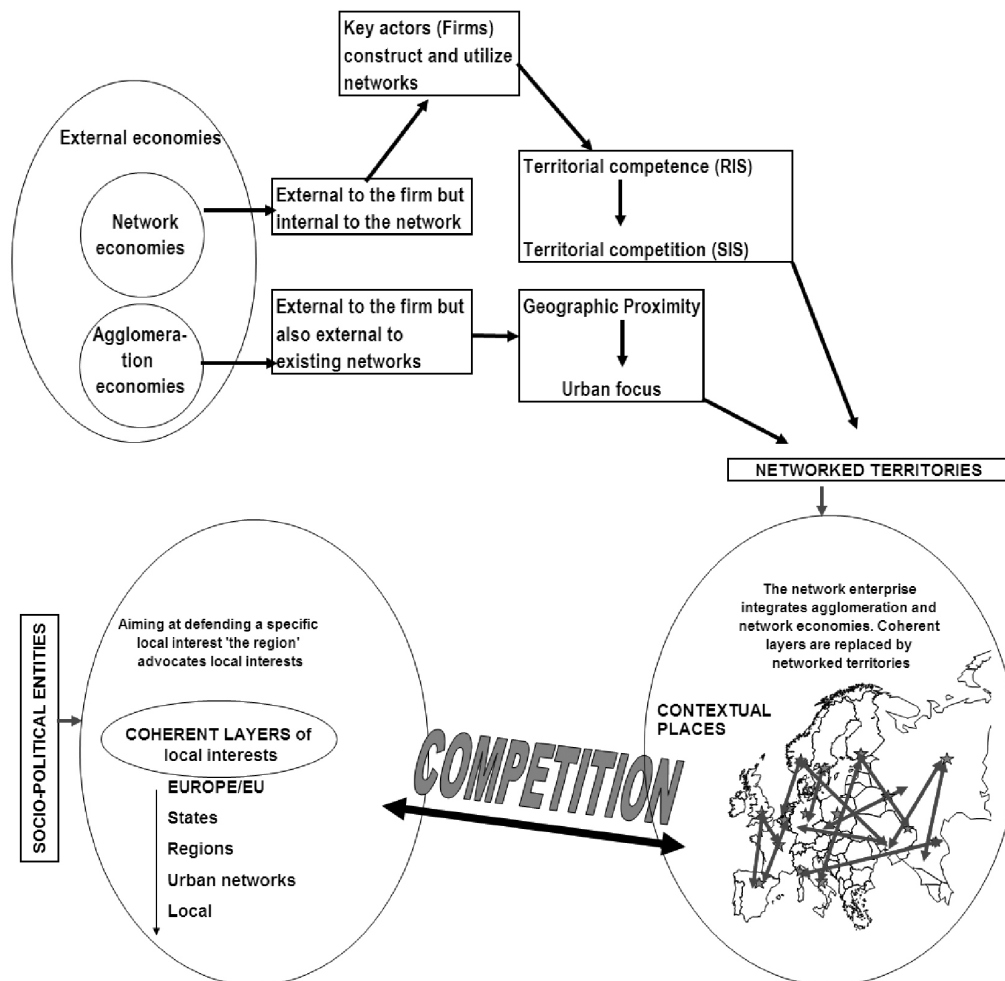


Figure 4. External economies in economic and geographic space
Source : Cabus, 1999 ; 2000 ; 2006.

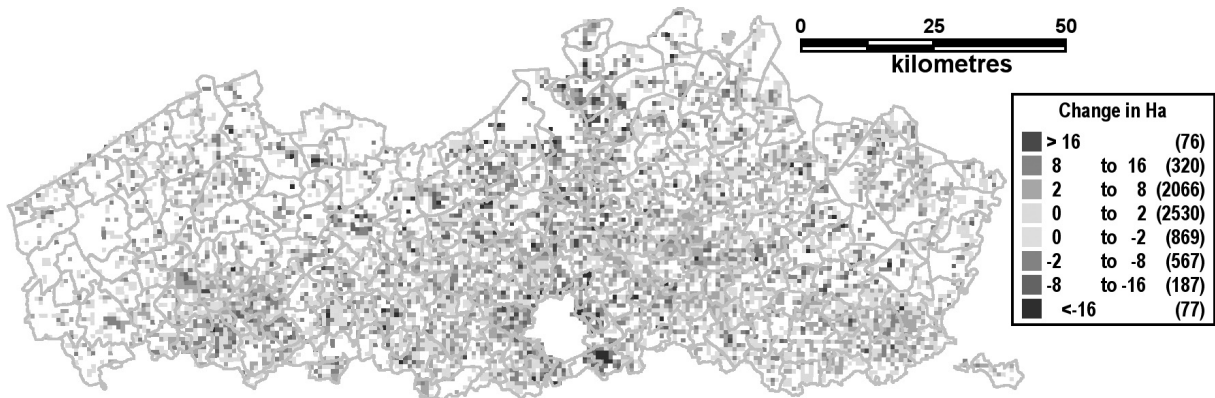


Figure 5. Changes in housing zones between the project and the final district plans
Source : Adapted from Cabus, 1983.

(E-Kompas, 1979) (1) to protect open space, (2) to assign housing zones adjacent to existing concentrations, (3) to assign housing and industrial zones in accordance with the development opportunities of the district, and (4) to prevent further ribbon developments and fragmentation of space. An overall objective was to tackle the ongoing suburbanisation at that time.

One might suppose that policy makers do really care about carrying out their objectives. To check policy actions in this respect, a thorough analysis was made (Cabus, 1983 ; 1984) of what was happening during the planning process between the stage of the project and the final district plans. In this period civilians and other societal agents could participate in the planning process and formulate their objections or suggestions to the project. Based on a political assessment of these objections and suggestions, the final plan was made up. The results of this participation process are presented in Figure 5 and in Table 2. With the exception of some specific areas (such as the « green belt » to the south-east of Brussels) where housing zones were crossed out, it was established that the participation process resulted in an additional regional city in Flanders (+86 km² new housing zones). The majority of this new housing zones are outside the urban areas (Table 2) and an important share are new strips alongside roads making a ribbon of about 374 km through Flanders.

Table 2. Change in housing zones according to the localisation in urban regions

	Change		Current share in housing zones
	Ha	%	%
Agglomeration	+566	6.6%	26.4%
Banlieue	+1414	16.5%	16.9%
Commuter zone	+2846	33.2%	24.8%
No urban region	+3758	43.8%	32.0%
Flanders	+8585	100.0%	100.0%

Source : Own calculations, Urban regions 2001 (Luyten & Van Hecke, 2007).

Besides the relevancy of these observations as such and the contradiction between these observations and the policy objectives, this type of research proves the importance of confronting spatial policy views to the geographical reality. It can learn a lot about the feasibility of the designed policy and of the effectiveness of spatial policy instruments in achieving the projected objectives. These statements of the early ninety eighties remain valid in the current situation where new instruments (e.g. Structure Plan for Flanders, Ministry Of The Flemish Community, 1997) have been developed to cope with spatial developments.

III. ENDING REMARKS

The leading theme in this contribution was to underpin the relevance of geography for society. It started from the fact that **social and economic geography** research investigates the territorial organization of society and is therefore embedded in society. This thesis was illustrated with three research lines connected with three policy fields. For all three it was shown that territorial polices can only be fruitful if their basis is geographically rooted. Therefore geography can and must provide scientifically based concepts. As policy is a political process making choices, it is also the duty of geography

to question these choices.

It is clear that this contribution is only a very small sample of relevant relationships between geography and territorial policies. But these examples show that geography as a science provides useful even essential concepts and approaches for territorial policies.

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