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THE DEVELOPING GEOGRAPHY OF GEONET

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INTRODUCTION

Geography is a dynamic field of study, both with regard to its subject matter and its approaches. The world it studies is forever changing in response to technological, economic, social and cultural forces. Each of these factors causes multiform spatial change, both at the macro and the micro-level of scale. The evolution is all but even. In the history of human civilization, there are times at which change seems to flare up. These are times of transition, wherein one mode of accumulation is replaced by another and concomitantly, alternate modes of regulation are put into place. In between these transitions, there are longer periods in which the changes work themselves out more gradually.

There is a broad consensus that western societies – and with them, other parts of the world – are currently in the midst of one of those transitional periods when many trends seem to have reached turning points. The previous transition marked the decline of the mercantile society and the rise of the industrial society; this turn of affairs profoundly affected the fate of nations as it created a new world order. The current transition is intimately linked to the proliferation of new information technologies (CASTELLS, 1989). These technologies have ushered in massive economic restructuring and concomitant social change around the world. The implication is that, on the one hand, the fate of societies and their respective nations now depends ever more closely on a single global market, on an integrated world system. On the other hand, there are local effects and distinct regional variations. The world system consists of series of "pecking orders" of countries, regions, and cities. Decision-makers in many local areas are actively shaping their territories to take maximum advantage of new opportunities, and to ascend the scale. Policy instruments are newly devised or borrowed from elsewhere to create favorable conditions for development and to promote economic growth. Many of these policies aim to improve the human capital of localities through education and training.

This development of the world – the object of inquiry in human geography – is paralleled by a profound change of the discipline itself. Only a few decades ago, geography's highest aim was to provide accurate descriptions of the complexity of social phenomena and their spatial patterns. Few practitioners aimed their sights beyond their immediate surroundings, of which they acquired an intimate knowledge. Just like in other fields of study, the description of – in this case, regional – variations has now been made subservient to the goal of explanation. Underlying the need for explanation is the broadly shared assumption that it will lend credence to intervention, that understanding the forces of change will result in more effective policies. At the same time, it is noted that valid explanations require a broader scope of study than a single region can provide. Comparative research, as well as studies on a macro-scale, thus received a new impetus. Consequently, the shifts challenge geographers to acquaint themselves more intimately with other localities and other regions of the world than their own. At the same time, this stimulated the interest in learning from others, in international exchanges of information and viewpoints. To this end, the construction and maintenance of international professional networks rose on the agenda.

These networks are important for the exchange of information among the professionals in the discipline; at the same time, they are also important to those who are in the process of becoming a geographer. Networks function as the conduits for the dissemination of information about other places. They also offer the opportunity to acquire first-hand knowledge of the learning processes that lie at the root of the data. The networks have proved to be crucial to the education of those who have been directly involved, and even to the far greater number who profited indirectly. Slowly but surely, geography is shedding the last remnants of its former parochialism. And while in some respects, the decline of colorful regional traditions is to be lamented, the international exchange has clearly enriched and strengthened the discipline as a whole.

This article focuses on the evolution of a particular network of geographers: GEONET. It describes GEONET's institutional context as well as its evolution, both in geographical coverage and in magnitude. This particular network was widely seen as a successful application of the use of this instrument to improve the quality of geography as a discipline across countries. The lessons derived from its 10 years existence are to be taken to heart, and to be applied in its current successor program.

NETWORKS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

In the most abstract way, networks consist of nodes and the linkages between them. Within geography, the concept

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of network has frequently been applied to settlements. This was emphatically the case in traditional central place theory, one of the oldest theoretically based abstractions of the real world applied in the field. But its view of cities as elements in regional systems is giving way to a conception of places as nodes in networks of complementary entities at a wider scale. This interpretation of relations as complementary has largely replaced the more ancient phenomenon of competitive links between cities. Historically, cities have been the locus of political power and, as such, a spatial expression of centralized control.

The successful cities of previous epochs were the pivots of competing global empires, rivals in the political, ideological and military arenas. Portugal is a case in point. As was the case in each of the other empires, its urban system consisted above all of links between economic sub-systems that served the needs of the center. Worldwide, its subsidiary centers of control were arranged hierarchically. The international relations of the regional centers were complementary and mostly confined to links with the primary center of their own sub-system. But in recent times, this limited form of global competition between the centers of empires has been replaced by intense interactions of various sorts among a wide array of places. In this new conception of the urban system, the roles of the cities are complementarity: all cities are players on a single field, subjected to the same rules, but with their own abilities and aspirations.

Conceiving of systems in this manner, competition between places and complementarity of places become the two sides of a single coin (GRASLAND and JENSEN-BUTLER, 1997). The territorial network 'logic' of a hierarchical order of centers, each controlling a limited market area, evolved to generate an interurban division of labor. Eventually, this evolved into a true network 'logic' based upon the maximization of innovation potential. The city network that corresponds to this type of cooperation is the synergy network, with high levels of levels of interconnection and information exchange (CAMAGNI, 1992). Such networks are true "learning networks". The growing dependence of cities and regions on this type of interaction has vastly increased the number of contacts among places. They become tied into webs of relations which are so instrumental to the functioning of society at large that the current mode of regulation has been dubbed "the Network Society" (CASTELLS, 1996). Its success has also promoted the use of networks as instruments to disseminate information.

The European Union and its forerunners have frequently resorted to the creation of networks for this purpose. The rational was that networks could help to achieve defined goals. For instance, in the context of its spatial planning policy, the European Community promoted the development of networks among European cities to stimulate "best practice". To this end, it promoted the dissemination of information among the members of such networks as

Eurocities, involving over 40 cities in Europe which cooperate in such fields as economic development, environment, technology, urban regeneration, and culture (MARLOW, 1991). Various thematic networks of cities – such as Telecities, composed of cities with an interest in the promotion of telematic applications – serve a similar purpose in a more narrowly circumscribed field.

The European Union resorts to the promotion of networks as a strategy to pursue goals in fields where it has no formal jurisdiction because of the subsidiarity principle: policy is to be formulated and implemented at the lowest level of government that can reasonably be expected to carry the responsibility (VAN GINNEKEN, 1995). These networks may consist of cities as in the examples given above, or of other organizations, such as institutions of higher learning.

Like planning and urban policy, the responsibility for education has largely been left to the national governments within the European Union. Nevertheless, the Union sees it as its responsibility to promote cooperation among the European institutions of learning and their staffs. One of the most important goals set by the European Commission to be achieved by this cooperation is to provide a more even distribution of learning opportunities for the students. Its purpose is to stimulate the development of human capital in all parts of the Union. In addition, exposing untold numbers of students to the first-hand experience of living and learning in another member state, was to fuel the idea of further integration. For future decision-makers, Europe became something tangible, a factor to be reckoned with, not just an abstract ideal. But because of the limitations on its statute, "Brussels" had to resort to the offer of subsidies to activate the players in the context of a network. This became the ERASMUS network, a large family of cooperation agreements among faculties and departments of virtually all institutions of higher learning in Europe. Most of its networks of agreements consisted of links among organizations in a single discipline, which has also helped to improve the quality of the education offered by its members by exposing them to new ideas and novel ways of training their students. In its original form, the program was abolished in 1997.

THE ERASMUS PROGRAM: A TRUE LEARNING NETWORK

After some years of experimentation with joint-study programs and other forms of inter-university cooperation in Europe, ERASMUS was officially launched in 1987. As stated in the formal decisions that founded the program (87/327/EEC and 89/663/EEC), it aimed at attaining five formal objectives. These were the following:

"(1) To achieve a significant increase in the number of students from higher education institutions

(HEIs) spending an integrated period of study in another Member State, in order that the Community may draw upon an adequate pool of manpower with first hand experience of economic and social aspects of other Member States, while ensuring equality of opportunity for male and female students in such mobility.

(2) To promote broad and intensive cooperation in vocational training between universities in all Member States.

(3) To harness the full intellectual potential of universities in the Community by means of increased mobility of teaching staff, thereby improving the quality of training provided by the universities with a view to securing the competitiveness of the Community in world markets.

(4) To strengthen the interaction between citizens in different Member States with a view to consolidating the concept of a People's Europe.

(5) To ensure the development of a pool of graduates with direct experience of intra-Community cooperation, thereby creating the basis upon which intensified cooperation in the economic and social sectors can develop at Community level."

These goals were to be attained by implementing a number of strategies. These were expressed as the four ERASMUS Actions:

* Action I – the creation of university networks, specifically the inter-university cooperation programs (ICPs). These programs were funded through specific grants for the formation of networks for student mobility (SM), for the exchange of teaching staff (TS), for the development of common curricula (CD), for short intensive programs (IP), and finally, by grants for study visits (STV);

* Action II – student mobility grants. These grants were made available to students to compensate them for incurring the extra costs of studying abroad (travel, accommodation, etc.);

* Action III – measures to promote the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study abroad by the home institution. To this end, grants were made available to the National Academic Recognition Information Centers (NARICs) and to institutions participating in the pilot scheme of the so-called European Community Course Credit Transfer System (ECTS);

* Action IV – complementary measures. The funds made available under this title were intended to cover the costs of the dissemination of information about ERASMUS.

Many institutions responded to this initiative by the then European Economic Community. Often on the basis of existing contacts of individual staff members who supported the goals of increased cooperation and student exchange, numerous networks were established. Many of these new networks were initially small, but the successful ones grew in scope and size, by drawing in more of their contacts and by finding additional resources. Thus, they created the inter-institutional cooperation programs (ICPs), the backbone of the Erasmus Program. Successful ICPs, such as GEONET discussed below, often depended on individual staff members willing to invest heavily in the ERASMUS model of internationalization of education. These individuals spent untold hours of work to mobilize support – both inside and outside their own organizations – and invested their knowledge, skills, ingenuity, and often their reputations to make the program work. They also had to generate the financial means to cover the various kinds of overhead costs from various sources.

ERASMUS grants greatly facilitated the process, through the funding of joint planning meetings, allowances for teaching staff exchange or intensive programs, etc. Yet, the money allocated in Brussels did not cover the costs for all the work at the grassroots level, where the ERASMUS ideals would have to materialize. Hundreds of network coordinators and thousands of local program coordinators within the networks of the ICPs have made the program work: by adapting existing curriculums to suit the needs of an international student audience; by mobilizing support within their departments or faculties; by the creation and maintenance of information flows within and between institutions; by devising the complex arrangements for each individual exchange student to study successfully at a partner institution; by investing in the design of teaching staff exchange or intensive programs; and finally, by finding the ways to implement the validation and accreditation of study results achieved abroad.

Thanks to the efforts and enthusiasm of all the academic and support staff to take care of these important details – ranging from securing housing in already overtaxed student housing facilities to guiding the visiting students through the bureaucratic mazes of the universities and their wider societies – ERASMUS became a success story. BEESLEY *et al.* (1993) described some of the successful outcomes of the first five-year period. Within these initial five years, 150,000 students made use of ERASMUS student mobility programs; during the academic year of 1991/1992, more than 3,600 teachers worked abroad for an average duration of 3.7 weeks; and about one-quarter of all eligible institutions participated in ERASMUS activities.

The real benefits of the exchange program, however, cannot be expressed in numbers: the international exchange provided the students and staff involved with an entirely new experience which has affected the contents of the curriculum far beyond the exchanges themselves. The program provided a substantial stimulus for the creation or expansion of a truly European dimension in people's mental landscape.

GEONET: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ERASMUS NETWORK

One among the many successful ICPs of the ERASMUS program was a network of geography departments, GEONET. The Geographical Institute of the University of Coimbra was one of the members of this network from Day One. This ICP showed an interesting development during its existence, which is typical of the successful networks instituted under the ERASMUS program chapters. But also the limitations of the program regulations are illustrated in the discussion that follows.

GEONET is the acronym for Geography Network, one of the early Erasmus inter-institutional cooperation programs (ICPs) with a focus on human geography and related subjects such as (regional) planning. During the stage of its largest expansion, GEONET linked thirteen geography departments in eight countries (Table I).

Throughout its existence, until the abolition of the discipline-based ICPs after 1996/97, GEONET was coordinated by the Faculty of Geographical Sciences of Utrecht University. The network promoted international student exchange and the creation of conditions for the facilitation of student mobility has consistently been the main goal of GEONET. Teaching staff exchange and intensive programs have been pursued, but they were seen as additional instruments for creating international learning experiences for large numbers of students.

Table I – Member institutions of the GEONET ICP

Country	Geography departments at the universities of:
France	Toulouse (Toulouse – Le Mirail)
Germany	Greifswald
Netherlands	Utrecht
Norway	Oslo
Portugal	Coimbra
Spain	Barcelona (Universitat de Barcelona), León, Madrid (Complutense), Palma de Mallorca, Sevilla
Sweden	Stockholm
United Kingdom	Enfield (Middlesex University), London (University College)

Throughout the years of its expansion, GEONET has maintained a good balance in north-south cooperation. Seven of the participating departments are from southern Europe (five in Spain, one in Portugal, one in southern France), six are north or northwest European (two in Scandinavia, two in the United Kingdom, one in northern Germany, one in the Netherlands).

GEONET was the result of a merger of two separate pre-existing networks, both coordinated by Utrecht. These networks had existed as separate entities for a few years after the mid-1980s. They were based on individual contacts between staff members of these institutions, and in both cases, the opportunity offered by the ERASMUS program

was seized upon to formalize the cooperation. One of these two student exchange programs was a bilateral link between Middlesex University (at that time: Middlesex Polytechnic) and Utrecht, aiming at the mutual exchange of a substantial number of students in structured programs. An important element was the option offered by Middlesex to include the Utrecht students in their program for practical placements. For the exchange students, this offered a tempting opportunity to be exposed to a broader range of experiences than the attendance of classes. On the basis of the practical work in English local authorities, companies or other institutions, they were able to write the thesis they needed to submit for their graduation in Utrecht. From the very beginning, their work was supervised by a staff member at Middlesex. Furthermore, procedures were put in place to allow for the work to be graded at the host institution and for the grade to be transposed to the Dutch grading system with only a marginal check on the work to assure that it met the requirements of the Utrecht program.

The other program consisted of a network that was also in a sense bilateral: between Utrecht and five Iberian institutions (at that time without Palma and León, but including Santander). This small network mirrored two dimensions of student demand. On the one hand, this was the desire expressed by the Spanish and Portuguese universities for student training in fields that were not yet well developed in southern Europe, but were available at Utrecht (Geographical Information Systems, research methodology and training in empirical geographical research techniques). On the other hand, the Utrecht geography students had expressed a keen interest to do research in the new Community member states Spain and Portugal. A wide range of topics could be pursued. Trade and investment links between the Netherlands and Spain/ /Portugal were rapidly expanding and their effects could be monitored. The application of the EC *acquis communautaire* to the new member states and the realization of Structure Funds projects were changing the economy and society of Spain and Portugal; again leading to many developments in which geographers have an interest. Moreover, the federalization process showed a great effect on the political organization of Spain in particular, which aroused the interest of other students. These changes provided academic challenges to especially economic, urban, and regional geographers. Consequently, numerous Dutch students were keen to enroll in course work in Spain and Portugal and to carry out research projects under the supervision of local specialists. These projects proved to be an invaluable experience for the students involved, but also provided information and insights in the regional and sectoral developments of the Iberian countries.

The merging of these two networks was initiated by Utrecht, trying to diminish the administrative and management tasks inherent to student exchange programs. But soon a much greater advantage became clear. The merger

provided Spanish and Portuguese students with expanded options to study in northwestern Europe. And for Middlesex students, it opened new opportunities to enroll in Southern European universities. Between 1989 and 1994, a gradual expansion of the network from seven to thirteen partners was realized, which showed the strong development of demand for places for students. This expansion was a matter of ample discussion during the annual joint network meetings.

Many potential new partners came knocking at the doors of the network, and existing partners suggested several new potential links. The criterion for enlargement has always been functionality: would a newly proposed link meet existing exchange demand of students; would it improve the north-south balance within the network; would it create opportunities for departments that had formerly been excluded from internationalization (such as Greifswald, which became a member of GEONET immediately upon the reunification of Germany.

Considering the ample possibilities for expansion, the network has grown only modestly. The reason to apply caution was that the representatives shared the opinion that student exchanges – especially when the partner institution is entrusted with the grading of the study results – require a sufficient level of personal contact, as well as detailed knowledge of the institutions, departments, study programs, and facilities abroad. In other words, everyone involved shared the deep seated conviction that an ICP such as GEONET can only flourish on the basis of a solid network of well-informed local coordinators. In their turn, these need to be able to count on positive attitudes, cooperation, and the facilities available within their respective departments and universities. Such arrangements cannot easily be developed in a purely administrative manner by contract. Much of the success hinges on the goodwill of the partners, because a large share of the movements of individual students contain unforeseen aspects.

Staying the course of investing in network quality and slow growth resulted in substantial qualitative and quantitative change of the student mobility patterns within GEONET. The quantitative aspect of this change may by illustrated by comparing the student flows of 1990-1991 and 1995-1996, respectively (see Tables II and III). In 1990--1991, the then newly-merged network was still very strongly polarized towards Utrecht as both sender and receiver of students. Utrecht was involved in each of the student flows, either as the home institution or as the destination. The only other major sender and receiver of students was Middlesex University, but it also had only a bilateral relation with Utrecht. The total mobility amounted to 32 students in that academic year.

This situation of limited and polarized student mobility contrasts strongly with the 1995-1996 matrix of GEONET student mobility. During that academic year, a total of 57 students studied abroad within the network. But now, Utrecht was either the sender or receiver of only 34 of these students. This means that the rate of polarization had fallen from 100 percent in 1990-1991 to 59 percent. GEONET had truly become a network. Numerous new links had evolved: between Oslo and Sevilla, Stockholm and Madrid, Toulouse and Greifswald, León and London, etc. This greater rate of connectivity of the network is also obvious on another level: between and the 'northern' and 'southern' partners. Twenty-two students moved among the various partner institutions in the 'north', 15 moved

Table II – GEONET student mobility 1990-1991
(in number of students)

from to>	Barcelona	Coimbra	Enfield	León	Utrecht
Barcelona					2
Enfield					12
León					1
London					1
Sevilla					2
Utrecht	2	2	8	2	
Complutense Madrid in 1990-1991 not involved in student mobility

Table III – GEONET student mobility 1995-1996 (in number of students)

to>	Barcelona	Enfield	Greifswald	León	London	Madrid	Oslo	Sevilla	Stockholm	Toulouse	Utrecht
Barcelona							1			1	1
Greifswald				2					1		2
León				2						1	1
London				1						1	
Madrid				2					1	1	2
Oslo				1				1		1	
Palma				1							
Sevilla				1							1
Stockholm		1				1					3
Toulouse	1		1								1
Utrecht	7	2		2	2		5	2	3		
Coimbra in 1995-1996 not involved in student mobility

from 'south' to 'north', 16 from 'north' to 'south', and 4 from 'south' to 'south'. The last figure was limited due to the regulations contained in the Erasmus program, which prevented the exchange of students between institutions in a single country. Because so many of the partners among the southern institutions were Spanish, student mobility was of necessity limited.

Equally important as the development of the number of exchange students are the qualitative changes. These related to first, the improving quality of information, for students and local coordinators, about accommodation services, language training facilities, credit transfer arrangements, student facilities in partner universities. Secondly, they included the larger choice of destinations for exchange students within the network. Meanwhile, the quality of the programs for the visiting students had also improved because of the increased awareness of the entry level of students from specific partner institutions and their specific expectations and requirements.

Apart from its student mobility program, GEONET was able to obtain grants for teaching staff exchange and for intensive programs. Unfortunately, ERASMUS funding for teaching staff exchange proved to be highly varied and unpredictable. As a consequence, money allocation for teaching staff exchange within the network had to remain rather haphazard; strategic planning of such exchange was not really possible at any time. Nevertheless, some more structural programs were realized for a few years at least, such as a 'Contemporary Britain' course offered by staff from Enfield in Utrecht exposing a much wider group of students to the benefits of internationalization. At other times, GEONET staff participated in Coimbra's 'Geography of Europe' course.

A final element provided by GEONET was the series of intensive programs on 'Regional effects of European integration'. Over a five-year periods, this course has been an annual event in Utrecht; the course was offered once in Barcelona. The intensive programs demonstrated how valuable it can be to bring together teaching staff and students from various parts of Europe for one week in one single place. But the success depends on the extensive preparation of the students beforehand. They have to complete their assignments of studying a large amount of readings, in addition to the preparation of papers or presentations for the course itself. Because these assignments required the students to use examples and illustrations from their own countries, a week of intensive exchange and discussion of ideas, provided a learning environment that the participants consistently perceived as highly informative and rewarding.

A key factor for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of all these GEONET activities, were the annual meetings of all local coordinators. Face-to-face contacts

proved to be of crucial importance to the success of the network. The meetings allowed for the needed planning and evaluation, as well as for a thorough discussion of the objectives of the program. In the margin of these meetings, there was always a lively 'market' in which the demand and the supply of the exchange were efficiently matched and where numerous small bilateral exchange problems were resolved. As the meetings tended to shift around the member institutions, each of the coordinators was also able to evaluate to facilities, which sometimes proved helpful in the preparation of students before they went. Finally, the positive atmosphere at these meetings affected also other staff, and did a great deal to promote goodwill for the program in the institutions.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

In 1997, the European Union program for the international exchange of students was drastically changed as the Erasmus program was incorporated in the SOCRATES initiative. The avowed goal of this transformation was to diminish the incredible amount of administrative work at the Brussels' ERASMUS office. This office had to approve the applications and the financial reports of over three thousand ICPs annually. Instead, there are now contracts with over 2000 institutions of higher learning in Europe to participate in international student exchange. Each institution is allowed to devise its own procedures and enter into contracts with any other institutional participant in the SOCRATES program. In practice, this meant that as the ICPs were terminated, GEONET had run its course.

There are some clear gains to be derived from this organizational transformation, at least on paper. For the students at participating institutions, it generally meant that they could choose to study abroad at any institution from among a much wider array than before. The ICPs had been limited by their budgets, and above all by the capacity of the organizers to maintain the necessary contacts. By pooling the exchange slots within the universities, there is even a greater flexibility in numbers. Not least, the transfer of the responsibilities to the local bureaucracies has liberated the coordinators from many administrative tasks.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the experience gained from GEONET points toward serious drawbacks of the formal abolition of the networks. The rise of the network society can be explained by the extraordinary amount of flexibility these allow. Face-to-face contacts and the intimate interaction with partner institutions are very important prerequisites for network quality. It is therefore very unfortunate that annual meetings of disciplinary networks are no longer possible under the new SOCRATES regime. The experience of GEONET has shown how important the good social relations fostered by the program were to resolve the myriad small problems that occur on a regular basis.

In the final analysis, the success of any network hinges on the involvement of individuals, who embody the goodwill of the program as well as the rich traditions of their institutions. Cooperation is based on trust and close involvement, the willingness to go the extra mile when requested by friends among the professional contacts. GEONET was able to generate that trust, and there are countless examples of securing a slot for an exchange student – or even shifting locations of intensive courses at the last minute – by simply picking up the telephone and making the request. That has been the area where individuals have been able to make their greatest contribution to the functioning of the network, far greater that may be gleaned from the numbers of students that have actually enrolled in a particular institution abroad. Professor Pereira – to whom this study is dedicated – has made major contributions to GEONET in this respect. As one of its founding members, he promoted and witnessed the expansion of this network to make it a real factor in the internationalization of geography education in Europe. In that respect, the story of GEONET is a testimony to Professor Pereira's achievements as an educator: he has effectively shared his accumulated knowledge and the potential of his contacts with new generations of European geographers.

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