

Francesca Gambarotto

Padua. It was the first half of the 1980s when Roberto arrived. At the Faculty of Political Sciences you breathed a thick air produced by the local political climate. Roberto used to tell us that at that time Padua was a place very unwilling to dialogue and to design international research activity.

I attended his course of regional economics few years after his arrival. He brought a new spirit in our students' life suggesting new intellectual challenges about the meaning of economic space, why production is spatially concentrated, why regions differ in their economic growth pathways. In that time, Roberto realized cycles of lectures with some international professors who made research at the frontier of regional studies: Philippe Aydalot (University of Paris I), founder of GREMI (Groupe de Recherche Européen sur les Milieux Innovateurs), Chris Freeman, Nick Von Tunzelmann and Keith Pavitt (SPRU, University of Sussex), who investigated the role of innovation on the economic dynamics, Alexis Jacquemain (University of Louvain-la-Neuve), expert of the institutional role in the industrial competition, Peter Nijkamp (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) who studied regional and environmental economics. At that time, all these professors were recognized as particularly innovative for their theoretical analyses.

For us, young students, facing these professors meant to face a new larger world of knowledge. We perceived, for the first time, the university as the centre of the world. We had the opportunity to have a dialogue with well-known researchers not only during the lessons but also in the real life. We could meet them in Camagni's office or over a coffee to feed our passion on urban and regional studies. Many among us started to open their mind on the complexity of territorial problems caused by market economies. Roberto was particularly able to involve us in new research projects. This attitude was a novelty for us because we were not used to participate actively in field projects and neither to a more informal academic

F. Gambarotto (✉)
University of Padua, Padua, Italy
e-mail: Francesca.Gambarotto@unipd.it

relationship. In that period, he travelled a lot, especially to France, where he contributed to the development of the *milieu innovateur* theory. We enthusiastically accepted his coming and going, always herald of new ideas, while his colleagues reacted warmly or even openly in contrast. With this new academic routine, Roberto opened a new season in which two different research methods compared: the research of the local community, defined by those academic *élites* that renovate themselves selecting people and research topics within the local groups and the second one, open to the international networks that produce innovative ideas through the interaction of different approaches, experiences and methodologies. It was too early for the Faculty to accept the challenge suggested by Roberto—strongly supported by Eugenio Benedetti—and to modernize the local academic reproduction. I remember very difficult times during which Roberto tried, with strong conviction, to bring brilliant economists in Padua. He truly believed to be able to transform a local laboratory in regional science into a national reference.

Roberto, “the Milanese” learnt to love Padua, “the periphery”, and tried to build a new research excellence for the university. However, he left Padua before this research area grew. Few years later, the seed he placed found a fertile environment at the new department of economics. This was possible thanks to his professional and human vitalism during his stay at the university of Padua. The research community on territorial analysis in Padua would like to give him special thanks for his fundamental contribution.

From student to young researcher, it was a short step. The first research projects to which I collaborated with Roberto, gave me the opportunity to meet the Venetian entrepreneurs in their workplaces. For the first time, I could observe, and thus understand, the production system of my region. Roberto was a good teacher. Thanks to his teaching, I understood the relevance to get in touch with the real economy, its actors, how they act and relate locally and globally. To understand the development of a place, it is necessary not to stop in front of evidence but to look for the features and specific elements. Roberto was never satisfied with the available theoretical tools. He dismantled and reassembled concepts with a flexible and productive thought. This professional legacy has been a gift that I have used to gain the freedom of thinking and the trust in the scientific dialogue. Quoting Oscar Wilde “the real things in life are not taught nor learnt, but meet”. Good Bye, Maestro!