



# GEOGRAPHY AND THE POWER OF EMPATHY. EXPLORING PLACES THROUGH FRIENDSHIP. EDITORIAL

Giancarlo Cotella<sup>1</sup> , Tomasz Komornicki<sup>2</sup> , Barbara Szejgiec-Kolenda<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Politecnico di Torino  
39 Viale Mattioli, 10125 Turin: Italy  
[giancarlo.cotella@polito.it](mailto:giancarlo.cotella@polito.it)

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences  
Twarda 51/55, 00-818 Warsaw: Poland  
[t.komorn@twarda.pan.pl](mailto:t.komorn@twarda.pan.pl) • [b.szejgiec@twarda.pan.pl](mailto:b.szejgiec@twarda.pan.pl)

## Introduction

In the vast tapestry of human experience, interactions with others serve as the threads that weave our understanding of the world. From the bustling streets of urban metropolises to the serene landscapes of rural communities, every encounter presents an opportunity for geographic learning. However, it is not merely the physical landscapes that shape our understanding of geography; rather, it is the people inhabiting these spaces who hold the keys to unlocking its depths (Wilson, 2017). Professor Konrad Czapiewski had certainly understood this aspect, so much so that he pivoted his whole academic path around it, in an attempt to enrich its exploration of geography through the profound impact of empathy and friendliness, in turn enlightening us on how interpersonal connections can enrich our comprehension of the world around us. In this editorial we celebrate Professor Czapiewski's memory, conscious of the fact that, by knowing him, we have learned a new, perhaps more human way to approach academia (Korica, 2022). The collection of contributions included in this special issue, and the warm messages that the various authors include presenting what Konrad meant for them both in their scholarly and private life, is yet another evidence of his impact on people's life, as well as on the overall academic community.

After this introduction, we briefly elaborate on the role that empathy and friendliness may play, as two attitudes that facilitate the understanding of the human landscape. Drawing on that, we argue that an empathic, proactive attitude may facilitate the activation of reciprocal learning processes, favouring understanding through local knowledge and empowering local communities and people in the process (Brown et al., 2019). After that, the text turns more personal, as it reflects on how Professor Czapiewski has practiced this approach in its heterodox practice as an 'empathic geographer'. Various anecdotes are presented, drawing on the experience of the editors, that had the opportunity to share some parts of their academic paths with Konrad. Finally, the special issue and its contributions are briefly introduced to the reader, as a collection of articles that witness how Professor Czapiewski had through time established fruitful, friendly relations with academics from multiple contexts and places.

Conscious that this short text does not manage to display to a full extent the passion that you've dedicated to this job – and to the people you have met along the way due to it – we at least hope that it will make you smile, if you have the chance to read it, wherever you may be now. Know that you have taught us how practice our role in a more human way – and that you are deeply missed.

## **Understanding the human landscape: the role of empathy and friendliness**

Geography transcends the mere study of maps and terrain, to encompass the intricate interplay between physical environments and human societies (Lowenthal, 1961). From cultural practices to socio-economic structures, every aspect of human life leaves an indelible mark on the geographic landscape (Bunkše, 2007). In this light, only by engaging with people from diverse backgrounds it is possible to gain invaluable insights into the multifacetedness of human existence. Whether conversing with indigenous communities about their deep-rooted connections to the land or discussing urbanization with city dwellers, each interaction offers a window into the dynamic relationship between humanity and its surroundings. This contextual knowledge is vital for interpreting data accurately and making meaningful conclusions.

At the heart of meaningful interactions lies empathy – the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Brown et al., 2019). In the context of geographic learning, empathy serves as a bridge connecting individuals across cultural divides. By empathizing with the lived experiences of others, we cultivate a deeper appreciation for the nuances of different landscapes (Wilson, 2017). For instance, listening to the concerns of farmers grappling with climate change fosters empathy towards the environmental challenges facing agricultural regions. Similarly, empathetic engagement with refugees fleeing conflict zones sheds light on the geopolitical forces shaping migration patterns. Through empathy, we transcend geographical boundaries, forging connections that transcend mere cartographic representations. When practiced, empathy requires friendliness, as the latter serves as the cornerstone of positive interpersonal interactions, fostering mutual respect and understanding. In the realm of geographic learning, a friendly demeanour opens doors to new perspectives and insights. Moreover, the warmth of genuine hospitality often elicits a reciprocal openness, encouraging individuals to share their knowledge and experiences freely.

Only by embracing empathy and friendliness as guiding principles, it is possible to cultivate an environment where geographic learning flourishes organically, enriching both the learner and the learned (Evans, 2012; Lund et al., 2016). More importantly, this approach supports the dismantling of those stereotypes and preconceived notions that often obscure our understanding of unfamiliar regions and cultures. By engaging with people from diverse backgrounds, we challenge stereotypes and confront biases, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of the world. Such interactions also enhance collaboration with experts from various disciplines, bringing diverse perspectives and leading to more holistic reflections which due to global challenges is even more important nowadays (cf. Castree, 2015).

## Fragmented memories of a friendly, empathic approach<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary science, despite declarations and arguments from various sides, is becoming increasingly atomised. We lock ourselves inside narrow research themes, sub-disciplines, units. We adhere to traditional or modern, quantitative or qualitative, theoretical or applied research approaches. There are not many people who try to break free from these silos, and one of them was undoubtedly Professor Konrad Czapiewski. During his academic activity, he often didn't fit 'labels', being at the same time a 'traditional geographers' while building interdisciplinary bridges through empathy and curiosity, and often questionings old and new concepts and methods, and himself. It was through this open-mindedness that attracted and connected people and, thanks to it, Konrad developed friendly links with in representatives of different disciplines, from different generations, different institutions, different countries, different political and personal views. Not only he made friend with these people, but acted as a catalyst among them, as a bridge that smothered down conflicts, in return favouring tolerance, understanding and dialogue.

In this light, reminiscing about Konrad is a scientific retrospective inextricably intertwined with personal reflection, and the images that remain in our memory link substantive discussion with conversations about everyday life situations. Importantly these memories also always have a geographical dimension. They take place in space, in specific places in the world, locations that we will always associate with Konrad, with the subjects of common discussions, with his perception of space. We present below some of the 'Konrad's pins' stuck on our mental maps of the world. We could add dozens more, and we are sure that the authors of the contributions of this special issue feels the same.

**Bulgaria, 2005. Plane Warsaw-Sofia** (Tomasz Komornicki). This was probably my first trip abroad together with Konrad. We were flying to a bilateral seminar with a study trip to the Bulgarian-Greek borderland. Of course, we already knew each other well, among other things from working together at the Polish Geographical Society. Sitting next to me on the plane, however, Konrad for the first time presented me with his view of science, his own career, his work at the Institute, and his planned doctorate. To be honest, this vision seemed a bit naïve to me at the time. I urged him towards a more focused subject matter. I did not quite believe that relying so much on passion and openness could achieve a high level of scientific research. I saw dangers in the dispersion of the subject matter, the lack of time, the scarcity of financial resources. Today I have to say that Konrad was right. I don't know if this is a prescription for everyone, but in his case it worked. As he presented himself to me then, he remained in the next 17 years of his life.

**Warsaw Regional Forum, 2005. Konrad's office** (Giancarlo Cotella). My first meeting with Konrad was rather surreal. I had just started my doctoral path and, given the geographical focus of my research on the Europeanisation of Central and Eastern Europe, I attended the Warsaw Regional Forum. It was my first conference ever, and I was inexperienced in how scientific events works. I arrived at the conference building one day earlier and knocked at the office door of the person indicated in the programme as the main reference for the event. To my surprise, instead of an old Polish professor I faced a person of my age when the door opened. Konrad introduced himself and he asked me where was I accommodated – a detail I had completely overlooked when planning my trip, positive that I would have figured out something when in Warsaw. He started to laugh, and offered to host me in the top-floor of the conference building, where rooms for visiting researchers are located. Then he dedicated his afternoon to introduce me to the people at the Institute, show me around, and chat about my research interest in front of some 'Polish specialities'. In one day,

<sup>1</sup> Some elements included in this text have been published in Polish language in *Przegląd Geograficzny* (see memories of Tomasz Komornicki in [Bednarek-Szczyńska et al., 2024](#)).

we became friend, as I had not experienced such open attitude in a person before. Since then I attended every Warsaw Regional Forum, to benefiting of the precious balance between research and friendship that Konrad, as gatekeeper of the event, was always so keen to ensure.

**Babadag, 2008. A restaurant at the bus station** (Tomasz). Konrad always prepared carefully for his trips. This applied not only to the scientific basis. Even before the trip, he would recommend reportage or fiction books related to the planned destination to us fellow travellers. One of his favourite writers was Andrzej Stasiuk. When, after the content part of the Polish-Romanian seminar, the study tour took place, it was necessary to find a place for lunch. Despite the contrary suggestions of our Romanian hosts, Konrad managed to convince everyone that it should be a restaurant in Babadag, the title town of one of Stasiuk's books *On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe* (2011, English edition). We eventually dined there in a rather flimsy establishment next to a bus station filled with stray dogs. Konrad's joy at visiting this city was greater than when we visited the great metropolises or the most famous museums together. Like Andrzej Stasiuk, he felt a deep bond (or maybe even fascination?) with the peripheries of Central and Eastern Europe. I think this formed a unique basis for his academic work on rural areas.

**St. Petersburg, 2008. AESOP Young Academics Conference** (Giancarlo). Few years after my first meeting with Konrad, I organised a Conference of the AESOP Young Academics Network in St. Petersburg. I invited him to attend, and he took part together with our mutual colleague Krzysztof Janc. Most participants were fascinated by the many sightseeing opportunities offered by the city, by its museums and heritage. I remember one evening at a restaurant, asking to Konrad what they had been doing in their free time in the city. His answer puzzled me at that time, as he and Krzysztof had taken the underground, till the very last stops of some of the lines, and then spent hours walking around, simply sitting in a bar or a restaurant, talking to some local people. After getting to know Konrad better throughout the years, I understood that this was Konrad's approach to new places, and their discovery. Meet the people in their daily environment, experience with them some bits and pieces of their time, always animated by a genuine curiosity and openness to the others point of view.

**Slovakia, 2014** (Barbara Szejgiec-Kolenda). During my first trip abroad as part of my work at the Institute, Konrad appeared to be an excellent organiser. Not only did he introduce the 'younger' staff members to the arcana of cooperation with our dear colleagues from the Slovak Academy of Sciences, but he also co-developed the programme of scientific cooperation trip with his familiar dedication. He was a leader and a guide, discussing with interest the successive interweaving scientific and social points of the trip. And he tried to 'infect' other participants with his passion and approach to research and philosophy of science, to getting to know places and the world. And while this was not his first visit to this country, I am convinced that he enjoyed meeting the people and visiting those places each time. This stimulated his appetite for knowledge, he also gained the experience of going further into the unexplored, both literally and scientifically. During this trip, despite the unfavourable weather conditions, he proved more than once that one is an explorer all the time. It is a fair statement to say that the maxim *carpe diem* accompanied his scientific work.

**Marklowice Górne – Polish border areas, 2018** (Barbara). It was not only the peripheries of other Central and Eastern European countries that were of interest to Konrad. The Polish peripheries too. Nor did Konrad shy away from arduous work. In the daily hustle and bustle of working on texts or scientific projects, in the generally prevalent pursuit of academic assessment points, he was able to stop and contest reality. When we organised field research taking place simultaneously at several Polish border crossings, how surprised I was when Konrad was one of the first persons willing to participate. In his opinion, such field research was not only an opportunity to deepen

his skills, but also an inspiration to undertake further in-depth research. Despite using quantitative methods, he also never 'gave up' on traditional human geography as a science, in which field research (observation) is one of the primary research methods. And this made him an even more fascinating researcher.

**Warsaw, 2022** (Barbara). My last meeting with Konrad took place a few months before his passing. Right before my planned extended absence, we discussed his busy schedule for the next summer months and planned future various research activities. At that time, Konrad was deeply engaged in preparing research on the territorial impacts of population influx due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. He was eagerly anticipating the initial results. Sadly, he never got the chance to explore them. All what remains are preliminary research plans, ideas for articles ... interrupted discussions, and an empty office. I already miss, and will continue to miss, those fleeting moments to stop and chat in the institute's hallway. From these conversations, numerous new, interesting, and unique works and conclusions emerged.

**Peniche, SPOT project meeting, 2022** (Giancarlo). My last memory of Konrad is related to an intensive students' workshop organised in Portugal in Peniche, in the framework of the Erasmus+ project SPOT. While the colleagues of the other teams involved in the project arrived at the event the evening before, Konrad and others from the Institute opted for landing in Oporto some days before, and renting a car to slowly reach the venue. This allowed them to participate, unexpectedly, to a night of celebrations for the winning of the football league from the Porto team, as well as to visit a number of over places that certainly do not appear on the main sightseeing map. In a project focusing on the impact of tourism overflow and its impact on 'hot locations', this approach to the slow discovering of places was refreshing, and Konrad and his colleagues managed to contribute to our discussion with students and local stakeholders from their personal perspective, in so doing adding further nuances to the activity.

**Paris, 2022** (Tomasz). Konrad was a scientist who did his own thing. He wasn't in a hurry, as many are nowadays, he didn't fight for evaluation points and honoraria, yet he was extremely active. He assumed that patience was important in science, not quick promotions. He enjoyed the work he did, new projects, methodological approaches, the results, even small ones, of analyses. This approach paid off with publications, grants awarded and life balance. His recollection of one of their last 'discussion evenings' together confirms this. It took place in Paris during the hot summer of 2022, in the occasion of Congress of the International Geographical Union. After the proceedings, we went with a 'Polish' group to a wine bar in the neighbourhood of the Pantheon. The discussion revolved around the role of geography as a scientific discipline, staff changes at our Institute, and the principles of unit evaluation. Opinions, as usual in such situations, were divided. The person who kept his distance from the opinions expressed, sometimes in hard words, was Konrad. He argued that research was about enjoyment and satisfaction, not a struggle to be judged according to one criteria or another. He seemed certain that reliability, creativity and good organisation were a guarantee of success in science. This success will come on its own, sooner or later, it does not need to be artificially accelerated. The course of the Paris discussion, and the question of the correctness of such an approach, came back to me a few weeks later with the tragic news of Konrad's death.

## A roadmap for the reader

The short anecdotes presented above are just some glimpses of Konrad's attitude towards research and the discovery of the world. We were lucky enough to experience it first-hand and, in some cases, to challenge the way in which we see and do things in the process. As acknowledged by many of the authors contributing to this special issue, we are not alone in this. The mix between academic networking and personal friendship remains in many cases hard to unfold in Konrad's work, and this is well testified by the articles collected here. Through them, several colleagues and friends have decided to remember Konrad, discussing the outcomes of research works for which, in one way or another, the relations with him have been important.

After this editorial, an international group of scholars coordinated by Alexander Wandl (Wandl et al., 2023) report some insights from the REPAiR Horizon 2020 project, within which Konrad served as coordinator of the Polish research team. More in detail, the article discusses a holistic, multidimensional transition assessment tool developed in the framework of the project and tested across several urban regions. The proposed methodology is certainly of interest for regional and urban policy-makers, planners and stakeholders aiming at understanding what it takes to nudge the development of regions and cities towards circularity. The authors from the University of Naples, coordinated by Libera Amenta (Amenta, et al., 2023), also question themselves on how 'repair' peri-urban landscapes and ecologies. They explore this issue through a Living-Lab experience developed in the Campania region (Italy), that investigates the ecological dimension within an urban metabolism approach, with the aim to achieve communities' and institutional engagement in the co-creation of knowledge and regeneration strategies.

In his contribution titled *Rural-Urban Inequalities and Spatial Justice in Europe*, Michael Woods (2023) draws on the analysis conducted as part of the Horizon 2020 IMAJINE project, to examine patterns of rural-urban inequality in Europe. The contribution reveals a broad trajectory of convergence between rural and urban areas that is cross-cut by pockets of persistent disadvantage and by contrasts between different parts of Europe. In so doing, it shows that, while EU programmes have had some impact on material measures of inequality, perceived spatial injustice remains, creating opportunities for disruptive political movements. Spatial justice is also at the core of the contribution authored by Apostolos G. Papadopoulos and Loukia-Maria Fratsea (2023), that focus their attention on migrant infrastructures for refugees in Greece. The authors draw on empirical evidence to explore territorial inequalities and their links with different forms of mobility in both urban and rural areas of the country. While the discussion on arrival infrastructures mainly relates to urban settings, the paper shows that the rural context informs and enriches the debate, allowing to be considered in terms of non-fixed assemblages of formal and informal arrangements that fulfill both tangible and less tangible needs and requirements. Also their work, Vladimír Székely, Ján Novotný and Daniel Michniak (2023) reflects on spatial justice and exclusion, exploring the actual possibility to visit Slovakian regional centres via public transportation, in so doing reflecting on the actual accessibility of Service of General Interest throughout the country. More in detail, the study dedicates attention to disadvantaged areas in terms of public transport and to the quantity of the affected population at potential risk of social exclusion.

Post-socialist rural peripheries are also at the centre of the interest of the contribution by Vladan Hruška, Kateřina Pittlová and Zdeňka Smutná (2023), that presents insights from a large survey focusing on how local economies work in Czechia and what is the extent of local expenditure therein. The results of the study show that only one quarter of expenditure is local in its essence, something that can be imputable, the authors argue, to the specifics of socialist

agriculture and post-socialist economic restructuring and significantly reduce the potential for the economic localisation endeavour. Similarly, [Ladislav Novotný](#), [Marián Kulla](#), [Janetta Nestorová Dická](#), [Loránt Pregi \(2023\)](#) focus on rural economy in Slovakia, discussing in their work how rural areas have recently experienced exceptional dynamics. To demonstrate their argument, the authors assess the development, spatial distribution and sectoral structure of jobs in the Slovak rural areas over the last 30 years. The study confirms that municipalities considered rural administratively showed neutral or positive changes in the number of jobs and strong shift from agricultural to diversified rural economy. However, when excluding suburban areas from consideration, the remaining rural municipalities show a rapid decline, revealing a challenge that still need to be addressed. Also Andras Donat Kovacs and his collaborators reflect on the episodes of delay in territorial development that affect rural areas, with particular focus on the Hungarian context. Their work discusses how, over the last two decades, development policies in the region have been unsuccessful on multiple occasions, unable to alter the core negative trends significantly. The author highlight that this may be imputable to the inertness of spatial governance and planning, and by exploring deficiencies and shortcomings of the adopted policies, they individuate the main factors that have slowed down territorial development.

The focus of the special issue shifts then on the Ukrainian context, with the contribution authored by [Eugenia Maruniak](#), [Leonid Rudenko](#), [Sergiy Lisovskyi \(2023\)](#) that discusses the spatial dimension of the armed conflict that is currently taking place there. More in detail, they argue that Russia's geopolitical influence and the geo-economic impact of various global actors have had a great influence since the outbreak of the war, leading to large-scale changes in the structure of regional centres, significant social shifts, and further policy transformation at all levels. Communities and territories affected by the war consequences to varying degrees now demonstrate different patterns of development capacity and resilience, as well as its vision, which obviously leads to functional changes.

The special issue is concluded by four contributions that presents more personal tributes to the academic and human figures of Professor Konrad Czapiewski. Firstly, [Denic Cerić and Tomasz Komornicki \(2023\)](#) revive the history of the Warsaw Regional Forum, from its first edition in 2003 until Konrad unexpected demise, stressing how the event has been for many a venue for exchanging science, forging friendship and, more in general, happiness. The interinstitutional cooperation among different branches of the national academies of science that still characterise the research environment of several Central and Eastern European Countries has been one of the main infrastructure that contributed to unfold Konrad's research path. This is explicitly recalled by [Bianca Mitrică](#), [Ines Grigorescu](#), [Mihaela Persu](#), [Nicoleta Damian \(2023\)](#), reflecting in their contribution on the scientific collaboration between Polish and Romanian geographers. In particular, they discuss the last bilateral project on *Internal peripheries in Polish and Romanian regions – role of endogenous and exogenous factors in their development processes*, coordinated by Konrad from the Polish side, that had focused on the identification of solutions to the lagging socioeconomic and social development of both countries' internal peripheries. The role of the Warsaw Regional Forum is also recalled in the contribution of [Margarita Ilieva \(2023\)](#) that, in her farewell message, also celebrates the active role played by Konrad in the framework of the bilateral cooperation between scientists from the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Geography of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Finally, [Melinda Smahó \(2023\)](#) concludes the volume with an ode to friendship, witnessing once again how Konrad's memory will continue living with many of us and how through his action and academic practice, he has taught us how empathy and friendliness can contribute to enrich our work.

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