Hindrances, obstacles and challenges to Europe's industrial Renaissance

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Since the onset of the health crisis (2020), and even before for some European countries, the industrial renaissance has become a new central element in the rhetoric of economic policies.

The objective of competitiveness and, in some cases, industrial sovereignty, has gradually converged with that of achieving a necessary ecological transition.

The link between industrial competitiveness and ecological transition has taken various forms, including decarbonization and the promotion of a circular industry.

The territorial level has most often been considered as the most relevant for bringing together industrial competitiveness and ecological transition. Decarbonization projects have focused on industrial sites that emit high levels of CO2. Industrial circularity has been conceived at the level of specific territories.

However, the momentum outlined above appears to have been halted or even broken several months ago. Obstacles, many of them long-standing, and new ones are appearing that are calling into question the industrial renaissance process and its link with the ecological transition.

The aim of this presentation is threefold:

- To identify and better distinguish the obstacles to industrial renaissance.

- Propose a preliminary reflection on the stakes of an industrial renaissance based on overcoming these hindrances and obstacles.

[To lay the foundations for a European research project on these themes by identifying, during the conference, researchers likely to be interested in this project].

1. Identify and better distinguish the barriers and obstacles to industrial revival

It is necessary to clarify and partially illustrate what is meant by barriers and obstacles to industrial revival and to differentiate them from the factors that led to deindustrialization.

1.1 Do not consider equivalent the factors of deindustrialization with the barriers and obstacles to reindustrialization

There is a wealth of literature documenting deindustrialization in Europe, as well as an equally abundant body of literature explaining the factors behind this process[1].

Beyond the diversity, and even the divergences, among authors in their accounts of the factors behind deindustrialization, we believe that it is now time to move beyond the analysis of these factors and engage in a heuristic process that considers not deindustrialization but reindustrialization.

Clearly, this process is proving difficult to implement in all European countries. In order to further reflect on these difficulties, we believe that a distinction between obstacles and barriers to reindustrialization can shed light on public and private strategies aimed at promoting a genuine industrial renaissance.

1.2 Considering different national and regional situations

There are significant differences between European countries depending on whether they have undergone deindustrialization. The process of industrial revival cannot be the same in all cases, given the different possible configurations.

Some European countries, such as England, France, Italy, and even Spain, have undergone a long and profound process of deindustrialization.

This process has affected certain countries in Eastern and Southern Europe to a much lesser extent, as their industrial base was less developed.

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[1] It seems sufficient to remember the increasing diffusion of global supply chains broke the relations among firms and the dynamic links along the industrial filière: the extreme price competition between local intermediate producers and alternative producers in new industrialising countries has been at the origin of the failure and/or market exit of many small and medium-sized firms in a lot of areas and regions in Europe. In the medium term this process reduced even the capacity to introduce new products and new collections in leading firms and, in the long term, even the firms' orientation to invest. As a final result, some leading firms stopped producing in ancient and historical industrial places.

This process produced negative effects even on firms and territories (like industrial districts) which didn't compete on prices because the narrative in the business environment was

rapidly influenced by the mercatist (strictly market oriented) approach /ideology which became the only way to organize industrial production in the world (reducing costs and wages).

As for Germany, the process of deindustrialization, if confirmed, is recent and partial, mainly affecting a limited number of activities (primarily the automotive industry).

The industrial renaissance does not therefore raise the same questions or pose the same challenges in different European countries. The obstacles and barriers encountered cannot be identical.

It is important to note that within different countries, there are significant contrasts from one region to another.

1.3 The dual epistemological basis of our proposal

1.3.1 Our initial hypothesis at this stage is that the process of reindustrialization is not the reverse of the process of deindustrialization.

While a new industry must be built, and even if it is built in part on the old industrial base, reindustrialization does not consist of a kind of return to the past. It will be an industrial "renaissance" in the sense of a new birth, a profound transformation of industry both in its processes and, even more so, in its purposes.

1.3.2 The second hypothesis is that the barriers and obstacles to industrial revival differ in nature from the factors that led to deindustrialization.

These latter factors, which have been analysed retrospectively, may not have disappeared and may, in part, be responsible for creating barriers or obstacles to industrial revival. However, since the latter follows a different trajectory from that which underpinned the previous process of industrialization/deindustrialization, it is unlikely that the obstacles and barriers to industrial revival are comparable to the factors that led to deindustrialization. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a continuum between the factors that led to deindustrialization and the obstacles to industrial revival, which should be highlighted.

However, this continuum does not mean that new obstacles and barriers have not emerged. The global health crisis that began in 2020, the geopolitical shift following the war in Ukraine in 2022, and the US presidential election in 2024 have all had a major impact on production systems in recent years, particularly on the organization and functioning of global value chains.

2. An initial characterization and three illustrations of the distinction between barriers and obstacles to industrial revival

Distinguishing between brakes and obstacles means identifying difficulties that can be mitigated, which slow down the chosen trajectory (brakes), and barriers (obstacles) that must be overcome because, if not, they constitute radical impediments that make it impossible to achieve the trajectory. The line between brakes and obstacles is tenuous and evolving. A brake that is not mitigated but, on the contrary, deepens or worsens could become an obstacle. Certainly, there is an element of arbitrariness in classifying a particular impediment to industrial revival as either a brake or an obstacle.

Barriers and obstacles may have emerged recently, or they may be legacies of the past, having functioned as factors of deindustrialization.

There are numerous factors from the past as well as current obstacles and barriers, and we have chosen to highlight three of them, respectively in the fields of labour, ecological transition and territorial dynamics.

We could just as easily have mentioned other obstacles, including the lack of a genuine European industrial policy which, accompanied by adequate skills at national level (knowledge of economic structure, productive interrelationships, spillover mechanisms, the ability to mobilise public procurement to promote crucial sectors), could trigger cascades of investment and the creation of stable, well-paid jobs in strategic sectors, guaranteeing Europe's economic autonomy.

2.1 An initial illustration in the field of work of the (porous) boundary between barriers and obstacles, as well as the continuum between factors of deindustrialization and barriers/obstacles to industrial revival

The often-porous boundary between barriers and obstacles to industrial revival can be illustrated by taking the example of skills and, more generally, the representation of work.

2.1.1 The unavailability of skills: an obstacle to industrial revival

It has often been said that the unavailability of certain skills is an obstacle to reindustrialization. Measures have therefore been taken to remove or at least mitigate this obstacle, including training and qualification initiatives and the development of apprenticeships[2].

2.1.2 The continued perception of labour as a cost: an obstacle to industrial revival

By changing our approach and identifying not obstacles but barriers to industrial revival, we can consider that one current barrier is the perception of labour as a cost that needs to be reduced. It is difficult, when the obstacle is invisible and therefore not understood, to substantially remove the barrier of skills availability, because the image of industry and its standards is that of a field of activity that is not likely to recognize and value skills.

2.1.3 A representation of labour as a taylorist act geared towards productivity: a long-standing factor in deindustrialization

Looking now at the continuum between factors of deindustrialization and obstacles to industrial revival, we can safely say that viewing work as a cost to be reduced may have been a factor in deindustrialization in the past.

This way of viewing labour as a cost went hand in hand with the goal of improving cost competitiveness with a view to increasing exports. This approach has not only failed to prevent deindustrialisation but has exacerbated it. By failing to significantly reduce labour costs, the obsession with cost competitiveness has promoted the idea that it is not possible to produce on European soil and be competitive. The widespread trend towards offshoring that began in the

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2 Problems often arise due to a lack of confidence on the part of some stakeholders (especially private ones) who are unwilling to get involved in the common challenge by investing resources and time in reflection and collective action. We refer here to the xperience of the Shillmatching project of the lnterreg program on which the University of lnsubria was involved.

early 1980s has thus intensified, with the disastrous consequences we are all familiar with in terms of employment and the future of many regions.
However, this apparent "parallel" observation is only partially relevant, because today's new industrial configurations are different from those at the turn of the previous century and mobilize the cognitive and relational capacities of workers much more, or rather in a different way, as they are now faced with increasingly frequent disruptions and unprecedented problems. We are therefore a long way from Taylorism and the relentless pursuit of productivity gains through the elimination of downtime that characterized the world of work during the process of industrialization and then deindustrialization.

It is highly likely that the spread of artificial intelligence (AI) will further increase the mobilization of the cognitive and relational capacities of employees, or at least some of them, as AI solves many problems that were previously the responsibility of humans at work. New barriers and obstacles to industrial revival are sure to emerge, such as the ability of employees and organizations to integrate this new technological reality.

2.2 A second illustration in the field of ecological transition of the (still porous) boundary between barriers and obstacles, as well as the continuum between factors of deindustrialization and barriers/obstacles to industrial revival

In recent years, reindustrialization has become a goal for many countries, while at the same time issues related to environmental protection have been recognized as a high priority. The combination of these two goals, which would bring about a profound transformation in the way we produce and inhabit the planet, has encountered and continues to encounter numerous obstacles.

2.2.1 Recurring obstacles to linking reindustrialization and ecological transition

Linking these two perspectives initially led to the belief that "green" growth was desirable and possible, driven by the boom in productive activities (industrial and services) related to the environment.

More recently, the perspective has broadened to the point where it has been considered that the industrial renaissance of industrialized countries would mainly take place within the context of ecological transition. Countries such as France have thus committed significant resources to programs such as "France 2030," targeting ecological objectives such as decarbonization and the promotion of the circular economy. In Europe, the "Green New Deal" has provided substantial funding for several global investment projects, particularly in carbon- free energy, aimed at addressing major environmental and climate issues while promoting social justice.

Across the Atlantic, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) program has provided substantial subsidies for industrial activities, guiding them toward ecological objectives.

The concept of "ecological competitiveness" has thus been promoted to a certain audience.

2.2.2 Green growth did not prevent deindustrialization; it accompanied it

However, obstacles and barriers quickly emerged in the effective implementation of the coupling between industry and ecology, well before the concept of ecological competitiveness was introduced into public debate. Before that, green growth had already encountered

substantial obstacles, dashing the hopes of those who believed that the process of deindustrialization could be halted or even reversed by implementing a project based on technological choices aimed at improving industrial and energy processes.

The goal of green growth has been hampered by factors, some of which have contributed to deindustrialization. Foremost among these factors, if not the depletion predicted by the Meadows report (avoided by technical progress?), is at least the rising cost of raw materials and energy linked to the imbalance between growing demand for energy and materials and resources made more expensive by the need for increasingly heavy investment and transportation costs to obtain them.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, contrary to the recommendations made by Jacques Delors, former President of the European Community and then of the European Union, the European Union has never undertaken a massive investment programme in the environmental field led by the Commission itself. The management of European funds earmarked from 2020 onwards by the NextGenerationEu (NGEU) programme has been delegated to European states, which have sometimes used these funds for purposes that bear little relation to the programme's philosophy (supporting investment in the ecological and digital transition).

So-called “green” growth has not prevented climate change, various forms of pollution, or, more generally, the crossing of several planetary boundaries. Nor has it led to a new industrial boom. Ultimately, green growth has turned out to be a myth that was quickly debunked, much like the “new economy” at the turn of the century. Green growth has been an illusory prospect that has delayed awareness of the need for a profound transformation of the development model.

2.2.3 Recent obstacles and barriers to the coupling of industry and ecology

New obstacles and barriers have emerged in the effective implementation of the coupling of industry and ecology in recent years. These obstacles are now evident, having led some countries to abandon the path they had chosen a few years earlier. This is the case in the United States, where the Trump administration has ended the IRA program and effectively abandoned any decarbonization goals. This is also partly the case in Europe, where the “compass” now seems to be much more focused on competitiveness than on ecological transition.

It seems necessary to understand the reasons for such a change in direction and, at the same time, to examine its various manifestations at the level of different national and subnational economies. While some European countries or territories now seem to be explicitly prioritizing their competitiveness by abandoning the prospect of an ecological transition of their industry, others do not appear to oppose these two objectives.

At this stage of reflection, it seems that the separation, or even the opposition, between competitiveness and ecological transition is based both on “objective” facts and on the dominant system of representation.

2.2.4 Various kind of barriers and obstacles to the coupling of industry and ecology

The barriers and obstacles to the coupling of industry and ecology are of various kinds. Some could be considered “objective,” while others stem from our systems of representation.

Objective factors that reinforce opposition between industry and ecology

Among the factors that can be considered "objective" and that create opposition between industry and ecology, which is considered prohibitive by "thinkers of life," are, in particular, the multiple interests that underpin the carbon economy—interests that support a linear model that is at least two centuries old— the ecological disasters and various forms of pollution caused by industry, the potential assets that would be or will be lost in the event of a paradigm shift in industry, and the question of who will bear the cost of their devaluation.

It can even be argued that less environmentally friendly forms of circular economy, such as recycling glass rather than reusing it, contribute to slowing down the development of more sober and environmentally friendly solutions.

Factors associated with representation systems

Factors associated with representation systems are just as important as objective factors, and they are intertwined.

Economists have largely ignored issues relating to nature and ecology.

The separation between competitiveness and ecological transition stems from a very powerful separation (exogeneity) assumed by analytical frameworks and, consequently, by the dominant macroeconomic models between economics and ecology, as well as from the primacy most often given to the former, more precisely, a certain conception of the former that sees nature as a reservoir of resources that can be tapped indefinitely and pollution as a "mere" negative externality that can be offset or resolved with technological solutions based on the assumption that there are only different forms of capital —productive capital, human capital, natural capital—and that these are interchangeable.

So why should the "economy" be concerned about the finite nature of non-renewable resources?

When it comes to pollution, in the best-case scenario, a price (a monetary value) set for nature for the ecosystem services it is supposed to provide us with should be enough to protect it.

And when it comes to the depletion of natural resources or capital, technical capital would be an unlimited substitute.

The opposition between competitiveness and ecological transition is thus based on a separation that makes it possible to pit them against each other. When a link is suggested, it is supposed to be managed by setting a monetary value or establishing a market (such as one for pollution rights).

2.3 A third illustration in the field of territorial dynamics of the (porous) boundary between constraints and obstacles, as well as the continuum between factors of deindustrialization and constraints/obstacles to industrial revival

2.3.1 The unequal capacity of territories to have a development strategy: a factor in the deindustrialization of these territories

While some regions have benefited from a rich history of cooperation[3], this is far from being the case for all regions in Europe. Weak territorial cohesion and a lack of community spirit have often contributed to deindustrialisation, hindering initiatives to reindustrialise and introduce new activities.

The weakness of territorial cohesion has often resulted in little attention being paid to maintaining a sufficient level of "quality" in the factors of production, labour and capital.
The central role of labour and skills training has thus often been neglected in regions that have undergone deindustrialisation, even though it could have acted as a guarantee or an opportunity for reindustrialisation and regional development.

The same has been true of local savings, which some regions have been unable to prevent from « leaking » away. Without the possibility of using the region's financial resources locally, not only do insurmountable difficulties arise in financing investments, but the opportunity to think in terms of regional governance is also lost.
In some cases, the disappearance of non-profit-oriented, long-term credit institutions (public or cooperative) has had the effect of undermining the vision of a shared future among local stakeholders, thereby contributing to deindustrialisation.

The existence or, conversely, the absence or weakness of the mechanical engineering sector has also often been an important factor in the sustainability of the industrial trajectory of many regions. This very specific sector is, in fact, the « backbone » of local production system, with fundamental knowledge and skills without which it is impossible to manage the production of capital goods and the maintenance of facilities, or to ensure the sequential efficiency of the production process.
While price and cost competition is devastating for « light » secondary industrial processing sectors (textiles, footwear, food industry, etc.), the intersectoral or relational links generated by mechanical engineering promote multiple development opportunities with the possibility of offering new products or even building reference markets.
Having failed to establish or preserve a significant mechanical engineering sector, many regions have been unable to ensure the continuity of their regional production system and sufficient decision-making autonomy.

2.3.2 The unequal capacity of territories to have a development strategy: a brake and obstacle to the ecological revival of these territories

The difficulty, or even inability, to interpret the profound economic and geopolitical changes that have taken place in recent years, as well as the failure to develop an acceptable vision for the future – one that promotes the region's resources rather than relying on state aid – through dialogue between regional stakeholders to achieve a shared vision and, subsequently,

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[3] In some areas, even before the crisis of 2007-2008, certain phenomena and forms of deindustrialization were faced by a changing mechanism in the interaction among firms and in the valorization of high professional competences moving the economic structure towards other complementary sectors (Ivrea, St. Etienne and Cholet represent interesting cases, whereas in other territories the emerging of cultural and scientific competences pushed local society and economy towards services (high education and health services in Pavia, for instance).

identifying the interventions and initiatives necessary for territorial development, constitute insurmountable obstacles to reindustrialisation and the economic revival of territories.

While many regions are still experiencing a gradual decline in the rate of new manufacturing start-ups, it can nevertheless be observed that certain peripheral regions, by promoting education and essential health services (equivalent to a guarantee of public goods provision), have reversed the demographic and economic trend: companies have located their production facilities in these areas of repopulation and community maintenance. This process has led to a shift in production facilities and employment towards rural and low-mountain areas with a high quality of life.

More generally, when there is a perceived public interest in regional development and collective well-being (or in increasing the employment rate), the community is willing to undertake initiatives and interventions that change employment and make economic relations denser and more intense, mobilising the territory's resources by promoting its cultural and landscape assets, as well as existing professional skills (which, in some countries such as Italy and Greece, often come from abroad).

Many rural areas have thus rethought how to mobilise labour resources to develop material production (e.g. local agriculture and local manufacturing), sometimes accompanying initiatives offering seasonal tourist services (agritourism and related services), particularly with the development of "slow tourism". Agropolitical[4] development is therefore a fruitful trend that should be recognised and encouraged.

Rurality, as Lavigne (2025)[5] points out, rather than being a relic of a bygone era, seems to be a valuable lever for transition to the future.

"Rural areas (such as small and medium-sized towns) are places to be revisited, where change could emerge... provided we look at them differently (...). And on which the emergence of another model (of society and business) could be anchored, one that is more deeply rooted, sustainable and collective[6]".

In these territories, there is a cultural and social movement promoting reindustrialisation or the revitalisation of certain territorial systems by integrating them around high-level skills – even in terms of international relations and extensive networks – that were once typical of large cities.

These are typical examples in which social conditions based on local culture and society are able to multiply energies and awareness on existing territorial resources (usually higher than

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4 John Friedmann et Clyde Weaver, 1979, Territory and Function : the Evolution of Regional Planning, University of California Press.

5 Elisabeth Lavigne, 2025, La ruralité : vestige d'un passé révolu... ou précieux levier de transition pour demain ? https://utopies.com/publications/om-20-ruralite-vestige-d-un-passe-revolu-ou-precieux-levier-de-transition- pour-demain/

6 There are some very interesting cases that have come to the attention of the public and

various stakeholders
in different locations. These include the case of the "Montagna del Latte" (Milk Mountain) in the Apennines of Reggio Emilia, the case of the "City of Lakes" in the cross-border area between Lombardy and Ticino, and the case of the Matelica and Valdaso areas in the Marche region.

supposed because hidden and underutilized) (Hirschman, 1963), creating the conditions for bottom-up initiatives and development on the ground (Scott and Garofoli, 2007).

3. Conclusion

The main points raised in this contribution are summarised here in the form of public policy recommendations.

We have selected three points but will focus primarily on the third.

No longer limiting to analyses and diagnoses focusing solely on the factors of deindustrialisation

Beyond the diversity, and even the divergences, between analyses seeking to explain the factors of deindustrialisation, we believe that it is now time to move beyond simply analysing these factors and to embark on a heuristic process that considers not the process of deindustrialisation, but that of reindustrialisation.

Considering different national situations

There are significant differences between European countries depending on whether or not they have undergone a process of deindustrialisation. The process of industrial revival cannot be the same in all cases, given the different possible configurations.

Some European countries, such as England, France, Italy and even Spain, have undergone a long and profound process of deindustrialisation.

This process has had a much lesser impact on certain countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, whose industrial base was less developed.

As for Germany, the process of deindustrialisation, if confirmed, is recent and partial, affecting mainly a limited number of activities (primarily the automotive industry).

It is important to note that within the various countries, there are significant contrasts from one region to another.

Distinguishing between barriers and obstacles to industrial revival and illustrating this distinction

- An initial illustration in the field of labour of the boundary between barriers and obstacles

A legacy of the past and a factor in deindustrialisation, the perception of labour as a cost that must be reduced is now not just a hindrance but an obstacle to industrial revival.

Failing to significantly reduce labour costs, the obsession with cost competitiveness has fostered the idea that it is not possible to manufacture in Europe and be competitive. The widespread trend towards offshoring that began in the early 1980s has thus intensified, with the disastrous consequences we are all familiar with in terms of employment and the future of many regions.

- A second illustration in the field of ecological transition of the boundary between obstacles and barriers

« Green growth», an obstacle to industrial revival based on ecological transition, has not prevented deindustrialisation, but has accompanied it.

The goal of so-called « green growth » has been hampered by factors, some of which have contributed to deindustrialisation.
Foremost among these factors, if not the depletion predicted by the Meadows report (avoided by technical progress?), is at least the rising cost of raw materials and energy linked to the imbalance between growing demand for energy and materials and resources made more expensive by the need to make increasingly heavy investments and transport costs to obtain them.

The separation, or even opposition, between competitiveness and ecological transition promoted by the European Commission and relayed by national governments is based both on « objective » facts and on the dominant system of representation.

Both constitute obstacles to an industrial renaissance based on ecological transition.

Among the factors that can be considered objective in creating opposition between industry and ecology are:
- the multiple interests underlying the carbon economy - interests that support a linear model dating back at least two centuries -
- ecological disasters and various forms of pollution caused by industry
- potential assets that would be or will be stranded in the event of a paradigm shift in industry and the question of who will bear the cost of their devaluation.
Factors associated with representation systems are just as important as objective factors, and they are intertwined.
Economists have largely ignored issues relating to nature and ecology.
The separation between competitiveness and ecological transition stems from a certain conception of the economy that sees nature as a reservoir of resources that can be drawn on indefinitely, and pollution as a “mere” negative externality that can be offset or resolved with technological solutions based on the assumption that there are only different forms of capital - productive capital, human capital, natural capital- and that these are interchangeable.

- A third illustration in the field of territorial dynamics at the border between constraints and obstacles

The unequal capacity of territories to implement a development strategy: a factor in the deindustrialisation of these territories and an obstacle to industrial revival

A new approach to economy and society is necessary. Territorial actors should be relevant to organize and improve economic system and its sustainability in time.

The new international disequilibria and the increase in relative prices for agriculture and manufacturing products should clarify the enormous fields for proximity production in agriculture and industry valorizing labour, professional competences, potential entrepreneurship and local financial resources to satisfy a large amount of local and regional demand. We had already certain good practices on this field, starting with zero km programme in Italian agriculture and with the proximity manufacturing and competences

hybridization of the re-industrialization programme in France through the Fabrique des Territoires, favouring a different perspective through the mutualisation of spaces and competences within the local communities (cf. tiers-lieux).

This should allow a double objective, making possible both to overcome the economic crisis, maintaining territorial cohesion in Europe and the sustainable development. In fact, the reduction of international supply chains will ameliorate the sustainable conditions for production, reducing costs and major pollution in transports and logistic services. All this will produce not only environmental sustainability but even social and economic sustainability.

We believe it is now necessary to conclude by emphasising the concept of autonomy, which is based on the ability to understand economic and social risks and to produce a vision of the future. This concept is based on the development of local resources (labour, entrepreneurship, skills and financial resources) in order to provide the main goods and services for the well-being of the population, through the use of resources, the organisation of production, and the provision of public and collective services to keep people in the community. Autonomy is linked to the logic of this process. Without production capacity, there can be no autonomy.

Certain competences are necessary for an active and autonomous territory: a) the competences for understanding the position of the territory (and his community) in the national and international framework; b) the capability of construction of a shared interpretation of changes, challenges and opportunities for territorial development; c) the introduction of instruments and tools for coherent initiatives, investments and projects for the future.

With regard more specifically to the ecological renaissance or ecology of certain territories, it must be noted that the « circular » economy finds in the territorial space a field of application that is favourable in principle but does not always materialise.

Recycling, reuse and sharing of certain goods rather than individual ownership find fertile ground in the triple proximity that constitutes the territory: geographical proximity, proximity through the complementarity of resources held by local actors, and proximity through shared values. However, it is not always a given that this triple proximity will materialise, which hinders the capacity of the territorial space to develop with a view to ecological transition.

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