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## A visit to the academic György Enyedi in the citadel of science

*György Enyedi (born in Budapest, 25 August 1930), geographer, winner of the Széchenyi Award, economist, ordinary member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS), vice-president of HAS between 1999 and 2002, editor of significant scientific journals, president of the editorial board of the journal Space and Society, author of many studies published in Regional Statistics, research professor.*



*Home of the Academy's research institutes at Országház u. 30 in the Buda Castle*

*How could you fit publishing in our modest journal into your activities? There are so many other forums where your work has been published.*

It is important for me to be present in major international journals. I have always been interested in the regional differences of economy and society, in matters related to both

geography and economics. I obtained a degree in economics, then became a doctor of economic geography at the University of Economics and later a candidate of geography, but my interests have always been the same. Somehow life dictated that in the beginning I was interested in agricultural differences, and this is where the topic of villages came from, which later led to villages and towns.

Numbers have always been needed to explain regional differences. Differences have to be expressed and measured. I've never been satisfied by statements that were only based on logic or emotions. A reliable statistical data supply and source of information are essential for me. I have always valued people who produce such data and do that reliably.

After that – just at the time I entered the international scene –, a so-called quantitative revolution of geography began, meaning that formulas, models and mathematical formulas were introduced in regional process research; models of towns, modelling the catchment area of a city and so on. Since I knew the related international literature quite well despite my country's relative isolation, I was very much interested in this trend. My international career can be attributed in part to my involvement in this new trend.

I don't see statisticians as merely data providers, but as people who value data and analyse them as well. I find the job of a statistician fascinating. A good statistician does not only write data down, but is also clearly aware of the content of the data, the potential errors and what can only be estimated in a manner that is sufficiently accurate.

There were statisticians at the University of Economics, and I knew György Péter, so it seemed to be logical to be in contact with the people who produce the regional data I use for my research.

*What other sources does an economist-geographer use?*

Other sources were the planning departments of county councils, where you could also find data. I researched the regional differences in agriculture for a while. That was actually by chance. I finished university in 1953, and then I had four different jobs in two years, which were quite eventful. I worked in Gödöllő at the Agricultural Economy Department, so I dealt with agriculture. Even during my time at university, when I worked as an assistant lecturer for a year, I preferred agriculture because the data were reliable. Industrial data were almost impossible to work with in practice.

*For political reasons?*

This type of data could not be broken down into regions. But there were political reasons as well. Industrial data were very hard to access.

*Were strategic sectors shrouded in secrecy?*

Yes. For example, "sensitive" industries were left out of industrial statistics. And which industries were sensitive? Almost all heavy industry, chemistry and so on, was sensitive. You have to imagine an extremely imperfect service that hardly provided any data from industrial locations.

*Neither do we have enough information of this sort now.*

That's right. The 1970s and 1980s were better from this point of view.

*At least there were no secret towns, as there were in the Soviet Union. Closed towns have been placed on the map of the Russian Federation only recently.*

According to one of my Russian information sources such places still exist... So, the regional differences in agriculture are more clearly related to the geographic environment, quality of soil, climate and water, than industrial differences are. In connection with industry deployment, the theory of industrial location also described important factors, but these did not really play a role in practice, especially in the beginning.

Political reasons were more important. For example, the city of Szeged needed industries because there were not enough factories, and the working class was weak. Or there was a case when a military plant was placed in a forest. Of course, they put a sign prohibiting photography at the side of the road leading there, alerting even the worst spy to the fact that there was a military plant there.

So, when Regional Statistics was launched under different titles, a group of friends with similar professional interests developed around it, which was also a real fellowship. Long lasting friendships were made, and the group included county directors of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office and students alike.

*So you have always been interested in geography, ever since choosing your career. Why? Were you not attracted by other intellectual careers, by technology or medicine? Why geography? Were you influenced by your travels or reading?*

The longest journey I made during my childhood was between Budapest and Diósjenő, which is only a distance of about 50 miles. Once I visited Lake Balaton as well. However, I have always been interested in the world itself. Reading made me really curious about different people and different places. Why did I not become a geography teacher? Well, I have to admit that I did not want to be a teacher.

*Why not? You attended the Piarist College, where you must have had some good teachers. At least, the results achieved by the school's pupils suggest this.*

There were some good teachers there indeed, since part of my education from my school years has remained, what you could perhaps call my "classic schooling". I'm not sure. I did not really want to deal with kids as mischievous as I used to be. I was neither an eminent student, nor a sweet-tempered child. I attended the University of Economics, but I was not really aware of what would happen to me there. I immediately discovered the Economic Geography Department, where I became a kind of errand boy who dusted books and did calculations. That was already in my first year. It was a coincidence that György Markos established the Faculty of Economics and Regional Planning when I finished my second year. He was a versatile, but controversial person, who inspired his students to turn the world upside down. Regional planning and my insatiable curiosity for the world fitted together perfectly. We – as an exception – could receive our diploma by

also learning the geography material of Eötvös Loránd University. Professors came from there to teach us geography. We completed the geography and economics programmes, and those who passed a state exam in education became teachers as well. I didn't take that exam for the reasons I've explained already. So I became an economist.

I guess there are such coincidences in everyone's lives. It is important to be able to make a decision and seize the opportunity if something turns up. It was convenient that we had the library of the Hungarian Geographical Society at hand. The Society was re-established in 1952 after it had been banned in 1949.

*What possible reasons could there have been to ban it?*

Geographers were bad guys; they dealt with geopolitics. And Teleki was the founder of that department... Anyway, quite a lot of scientific associations like this were banned at that time. The Geographical Society was revived in 1952. Fortunately, its library was not closed and it still received forbidden Western journals, which otherwise were not allowed to be brought into the country, as swap issues. (Only their faults make dictatorships bearable.) So it was forbidden to order Western journals, but we received these ones in return. Copies of the Geographical Review were distributed by the Society, though no one was interested in them. So I was aware of the main focus of research in the world. After geography went beyond the world of description and simple reviews of nature and discoveries, it tried to formalise, describe in models and analyse from the aspect of economics the differences between towns and villages, population density and so on.

*In what language did you receive information?*

Of course, I had to learn some languages. I read and write in a few languages and I did not learn these as a child. The main ones are French and English. I also learnt Russian, Polish and naturally German, which any child from Budapest had some knowledge of. Latin was a key to other languages, so I also read in Italian and Spanish. However, I only give lectures in French and English.

*How did you turn to regional science?*

What exactly regional science is, and whether it is the same as a modern approach to geography or not, is still debated today. What I call regional science – and I accept that there might be many other definitions – is a form of interdisciplinary knowledge. It is not a kind of discipline such as mathematics or geology, or their like. When regional science examines the development of regions, it needs to compare economic incentives, environmental differences, cultural traditions and so on in order to understand why the region of Nyírség, for example, is underdeveloped. There is not simply one cause: it is not only the low level of investment, the level of education, or the quality of the soil. It is all of them, influencing one another. In my opinion, the key is the social process which either exploits or neglects a natural resource. This is why being not just a geographer, but also an economist was an advantage for me and, vice versa, as someone who deals with regional economy it was an advantage to be a geographer, too.

I was not just involved in economic differences, but even ventured into the field of sociology to some extent as I was a professor at the Sociology Institute of Eötvös Loránd University. I lectured in the same field there as I did elsewhere, the development of settlements, only with greater emphasis on the social aspect. This approach provides an answer to the often raised question: why is the relationship between the countryside and cities like this or like that? Why are they enemies or allies? What kind of regional differences concern everyone in a country, in Europe, in the world, and why are there such differences? I define regional science as the discipline that answers these questions.

*It was surely not by chance that you became the first director-general of the Centre for Regional Studies? How did you become involved in its foundation and how is it that you are still involved there today?*

To begin with the last part of the question, this is due to the attention and kindness of my successors after I resigned from management at the age of 61 (quite wisely I think), because I did not want to deal with administration. The best age for this kind of science organisation management is from 40 to 60.

*So you thought that you should not spend time dealing with administration as you had passed that age?*

My decision to resign coincided with the change of regime in the country and I thought I would write great books on synthesis in my spare time. Of course, later I felt a certain sense of disappointment because, instead of writing books like that, I was given duties in academic life, which I naturally did with pleasure. I held offices at the Academy, including that of vice-president for a few years, thus I was involved in science organisation and decision making.

*Do you regret that now?*

No, I don't. I had duties with UNESCO as well. Until recently, I was vice-president of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Council of the Management of Social Transformations, which meant I stayed in Paris for 3 years and I certainly do not regret that. Thanks to UNESCO, I could get in touch with the whole world. Most European researchers only know Europe and America. Unlike them, with the help of the International Geographical Union and UNESCO, I had the chance to get to know those parts of the world where most of the people in the world live, who are presumably going to play an increasing role in the future. This diversity meant that I was not just an economist interested in regional differences – or in other words not a lawyer interested in the county system and the system of regional administration – but someone who tried to make a synthesis of these. Of course, I did not do this alone, but by working together with experts in public administration reform. So, to be able to form an opinion on the subject of “county or region”, I needed colleagues with expertise in the principles of public administration in addition to my own professional knowledge.

But to return to the first part of your question, I would like to tell you about when I was at the Geographical Research Institute, where I worked from 1960 and was deputy director for a decade. There I was finally able to initiate research in this direction. We had a Regional Development Department, but natural resources were more in the focus of research in the institute, so I felt somewhat constricted. And then – a coincidence, a very sad coincidence, happened – a lawyer friend of mine Ottó Bihari, who was the director of the Transdanubian Research Institute based in Pécs, died. We first met at university. He died at an early age. He was only 62. After becoming director in Pécs, he recruited a young team in the Transdanubian Research Institute and called me to see them once a month and talk to the young men and women there because they had no idea what regional development was. Indeed, how could they have known? They were lawyers, economists, historians, who had studied in Pécs.

The deputy director in Pécs, Kálmán Kulcsár, was aware of my feelings regarding the constrictions at the Geographical Research Institute and, after the death of Bihari, told me, “Now you have the chance: if you accept the position of director there, you can keep your team in Budapest.”

*Could you keep your team because the new institute was intended to be a network? In other words, if you became director in Pécs, could the department in Budapest be affiliated to it?*

Yes. Moreover, I was already kind of a founding father. We had created a small group researching settlements in Kecskemét and the Geographical Research Institute had a group in Békéscsaba, too. So I linked them all and this is how the Centre for Regional Studies became a network. My opinion was that regional processes can truly be understood on site, whilst living there. A researcher can only see the essence by actually living in a given county and not just by spending a week at the planning department.

*So statistical data are not enough, and you may need something else as well.*

When you live somewhere, you come to understand personal contacts and social traditions. Although this may not be pleasant to hear, there are some regions in this country which I once indignantly called “self-disadvantaged” because they did everything they could to remain underdeveloped. They were afraid of modernisation. They were either afraid of learning, or they could not learn. “We would do anything for development, but unfortunately we lost the battle of Mohács” – this kind of complaint has always made me really angry. As it is said, one should not curse the graves of one’s ancestors, but one should go forward all the time and learn! It is possible to climb out of poverty. I’m a first generation intellectual, so I understand this very well. You need to go forward. People are often too sluggish to do anything. They do not serve the interests of their villages, towns, regions enough in order to go forward.

A memorable incident in the USA comes to mind. In 1966–67 the Ford Foundation offered me a research scholarship (once again thanks to my position at the Geographical Union). I wanted to study the agricultural regions there, and later I wrote a book on the

agriculture of the USA. I was at a small university in Missoula in Montana, which I chose because the agriculture there was typified by huge areas with extensive animal husbandry, especially cattle. I was interested in how the people in this region lived and organised a ranch of several thousand acres with only 8 workers. I financed my travels as a visiting lecturer at universities. In Missoula, they said that the students were farm boys, so I should lecture doctoral students on the demarcation of agricultural regions. I had a model, considered a novelty at that time, which was in effect about factor analysis. I was also encouraged to talk about Hungary, because they had no idea where it was. So I gave an informative presentation on the history of Hungarians: who we are, what we do and alike. In keeping with Hungarian habits I talked about the battle of Mohács as a turning point after which we could not keep up with Europe and so on. Afterwards, a student came to me and asked with no trace of sarcasm but with the best intentions, “Did I understand you right? When was that battle exactly?” I said that it was in 1526. Then he looked at me and asked, “And what have you done since then?” He was absolutely right. I realised that we always blame the past, while in the USA, which was not even 200 years old when I was there, people always look forward. I tried to learn the lessons myself and put them into practice together with my colleagues, often with success. I would point out that when I resigned as the director of the Centre for Regional Studies only one of the heads of unit was more than 40 years old, and the others were in their 30s. They are forward-looking, and the institute has been working for more than 25 years now.

*So perhaps interdisciplinarity is the common denominator? Is the reason why the Centre for Regional Studies (CRS) can co-operate so well with the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, or its journal “Regional Statistics”, because they collect and publish so many types of data? We, statisticians, may not be so “interdisciplinary”, but we try to explain almost all areas of life in figures.*

I used to attend meetings of the Regional Statistics Department. Although only one person was an expert in agriculture, the department on the whole was in practice familiar with everything that I was interested in. There was an industrial statistics expert who not only knew data but the internal organisation of the industries as well. He was also familiar with what we now call outsourcing. This process was already known at that time, and outsourced industrial units were planted in rural areas. So one person specialised in these rural industry plantations, while another was well-versed in education. Regional statistics as a profession involves a specific technique, the collection, management and evaluation of statistical data, but you also need to know what to collect. Regional statisticians do know that. The profession itself is interdisciplinary. It gives answers in the form of exact data to questions that need to be worked on and be evaluated by regional economists, public administration experts and sociologists. This is why I value the work of data collectors who know what kind of data is needed for something and how life is organised in different sectors.

*And we are lucky to have the CRS, whose researchers, experienced specialists and career-starters alike, are willing to and even like to use our data for scientific methods that we, statisticians, rarely apply.*

And Regional Statistics often provides space for publications in connection with methodology.

*Besides young researchers at the CRS, our editors have good working relationships with professors and PhD students at the Regional Studies Department of Eötvös Loránd University. Revisers are chosen from a wider group including these people, too.*

Indeed, József Nemes Nagy and his department play an important role in forming regional science. That is a good workshop. Once I used to teach him as well. I taught specialist groups, and he was a student in one of those. Imre Lengyel at the Economics Department of Szeged University of Science (who is now president of the Regional Studies Committee at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) is also a prominent person when it comes to regional science. So not only is there a Centre for Regional Studies, but there are some departments at universities, and soon regional studies will appear in bachelor degree programmes.

*You have mentioned your students many times. I've read in an interview with you that one of your students is in your family. Seeing both you and Mrs. Enyedi as authors of publications in Regional Statistics seems to confirm this...*

Yes, my wife is an agricultural economist and I used to teach her. There is only one year between us. Her career began at the Agricultural Economics Institute and continued in the Institute of Economic Planning. For me the greatest joy is to see people of my grandchildren's age bringing me their manuscripts...

*People of your grandchildren's age, or your grandchildren themselves?*

No, my grandchildren are still quite young. My granddaughter is 20 and my grandson is only 16. My granddaughter is about to leave secondary school now and I often tell her that she is going to "train to be unemployed" because she would like to study literature.

*Would you try to influence her if she asked you what to study?*

No, I would not.

*And did you influence your daughter? Did she ask you about becoming a film director?*

We have had a good relationship ever since she was a child. I have to think for a moment to answer this question... Anyway, she finished eight semesters at the Faculty of Economic Mathematics although she did not complete her degree. However, this helped her to develop a kind of mentality. When she left school, she was not sure what to study but she got into the University of Economics. She was interested in several areas, but chose the Faculty of Economic Mathematics. In the meantime, she tried her hand at writing and in the visual arts as well, showing at a photo exhibition. In the end, she decided to study cinematography. At the time she was in her fourth year at the University of Economics, so she could have continued there had she been rejected as a film director. I said, "Of course you should try it! You want it, go for it!" 6 people were selected – including her – out of 600 applicants. It is not a problem if someone at the age of 18 is



not sure what they want to be. I think there are many young people who have multiple fields of interest. Maybe they will be the best experts due to their wide range of interests. They certainly will not have a narrow range of vision. What you are going to be comes from deep inside.

*When did it first occur to you that you may become vice-president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences? Did recognition for your achievements in science organisation and research motivate you?*

I have never thought about that. I felt satisfied when I could do what I like. However, I think a good researcher is vain to some extent. Obviously, a researcher is not motivated by the desire to get rich quick, but wants to know something, and being vain means being successful in one's own field of research. How can you measure success when it comes to sciences? Being quoted, having followers, well something like that. Actually I did not plan a managerial career, but when I was asked to become the head of the Geographical Research Institute, I was just a lecturer in Gödöllő. I am grateful to Gödöllő for giving me 5 years of calm, during which I could prepare. Moreover, it was a very pleasing gesture when, half a century later, I was elected professor emeritus there a few years ago. So now I have a relationship with Gödöllő again. Perhaps saying yes to the offer at that time was due to an inclination to go forward, but I did the research to satisfy my curiosity, in other words I wanted to be successful.

*So you're a curious person.*

Yes, I am. I wanted to be successful, which, however, did not mean status or some kind of need for authority.

*Are you still curious after many years of research, or have you become less inquisitive as you have found the answers? Or is the opposite true? Are you becoming more and more curious all the time?*

I find it hard to judge myself in such terms. Curiosity does remain of course. Someone who loses it could perhaps be a successful servant of science, but not a real creator. Creative power declines as you get older. At my age, you will not make new discoveries. How long this is possible depends on the profession itself. It is said that physicians and mathematicians are only really creative until they reach 30. On the other hand, curiosity and recognition remains in such a changing world. Now, it is not me who needs to reveal secrets – I simply prepare my students and colleagues to create their own world.

*You have been and still are a member of many scientific bodies. You have received many acknowledgments. What is your attitude towards these? Do you have a favourite scientific society, one you most enjoyed working for in the past or are even working for now?*

Rather in the past, due to my age and health. Actually, I liked teaching. I mean teaching what I know, not what other authors wrote in their books. I was attracted by the scientific students' association, the doctoral school... and as to which society I liked best? I could

truly satisfy my interests in the context of geography. Economics had a period – which is now coming to an end – when it excluded space from its scope of scrutiny. There used to be an economic geography department at the university that I had a close relationship with. Today, economic geography is only an optional subject for students at one of the faculties. So economists are not interested in regions anymore because they have learnt by now that regional differences do count, and those great models of the world are not working in a way that the Chicago School visualised. It was a great revelation when it came to light that things are not working the way they were supposed to and that more than one model exists for the economy of the world. Emerging China and India are evidence of this. China is going to come out of the economic crisis with an enormous advantage. They have a huge amount of free capital...

So, I prefer geography. I entered the field of geography while it was being revitalised and my economic research was really useful there. I received much recognition for this from the International Geographical Union. I was vice-president of the Union between 1984 and 1992. It gave me a budget that enabled me to travel around the world.

*Where is the Union based?*

It does not have a base. The centre is always around the secretary-general. The secretary-general should not only have good organisational skills, but also the ability to access funds and have a strong organisation behind him. Now someone from South Korea is the secretary-general. Two years ago in Tunis I was given the highest possible award that a geographer can receive from the Geographical Union. It has a French name: Lauréat d'Honneur. I am also an honorary member of the Hungarian Geographical Society, and I still publish in the *Geographical Review*. Maybe this is the professional framework then. My favourites are the regionalists anyway. The Hungarian Regional Science Association.

*Professor, I have here a study from Regional Statistics that you wrote 25 years ago. It would be very interesting for the readers if you published your current thoughts in connection with the future of regional development and compared these to the opinion you held a quarter of a century ago.*

That is a kind offer and I can't refuse it immediately. It sounds like an interesting challenge for me. One always re-reads one's writing with pleasure as it is so good. I will read it through and will see. (I have some homework now by the way, because Ferenc Erdei was born 100 years ago and I am working on a study about him, entitled "The city and its surroundings in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century".) So I will not say a definite yes either...

*Thank you very much for the interview.*

And thank you for your interest and attention.

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*Translated by Gábor Ákos Csutorás*