Foreword

“Proximity” is a very difficult word. It appears at the outset to be no more than an innocuous reference to physical contiguity or juxtaposition but on further scrutiny unfolds into multiple declensions with a vast diversity of applications in both the physical and social worlds. A large body of research on these matters has accumulated over the last two or three decades, much of it now summarized and extended in this authoritative *Handbook* edited by André Torre and Delphine Gallaud.

Academic interest in proximity as a theoretical and empirical problem has its roots in concerns about geographic space and regional economics that came to the fore after the Second World War, and that entered into a vibrant phase of development spanning the three or four decades after the mid-1950s. Debate in this phase revolved in significant (though not exclusive) ways on distance metrics and associated costs and their influence on the locational structure of geographic space. As research along these lines continued to proliferate in the 1990s and into the present century, a growing concern with more multidimensional and hybrid concepts of distance and space began to materialize in the writings of the School of Proximity pioneered by André Torre and a number of fellow economists in French universities. The ideas of this school of thought diffused rapidly to other disciplines and other countries so that today it forms a far-flung international community of scholars intent on deciphering the many subtle and important implications of proximity not only for economics but also for the dynamics of social life in general.

Readers of the text that follows will rapidly become aware that the notion of proximity has widely ranging ramifications in both spatial terms and social terms. It refers not only to matters of closeness, distance, and degrees of separation in the Euclidean sense, but also to forms of connection, community and interaction in the psycho-sociological sense. As such, the idea is peculiarly fitted to serve as a key concept in social science at large in the 21st century. Even in a world that is moving towards ever greater states of planetary distension via new methods of transport, communication and information flow, proximity remains not just a useful but a crucially important notion. In spite of globalization, this is a world in which the international dimension is reflexively underpinned by a more intimate order of things comprising a mosaic of regional economies and communities internally organized around powerful local imperatives of proximity rooted in the transactions, positive externalities, economies of scale, and social/cultural relationships that hold these aggregations of human activity together in complex forms of organic solidarity. At the same time, globalization and the technologies that help to underpin it have fostered the rise of a new field of proximity effects that exist purely in cyber-space where a plethora of new virtual organizations, communities and interest groups have come into being, frequently and increasingly without any underlying spatial association.

These trends reflect another major phase-shift that is becoming more and more insistent as the 21st century progresses. With the continuing penetration of new digital technologies into economy and society, many lingering relational and organizational rigidities are being steadily eroded away to be replaced by more flexible, rapidly adjustable and

transitory modes of interchange. The most dramatic instance of this turn of events is apparent in the new cognitive-cultural economy based on sectors like technologically advanced manufacturing, finance and business operations, and cultural products such as cinematography, fashion design and tourist services. Proximity is implicated in a host of problematic outcomes endemic to these sectors, ranging from their peculiar kinds of input-output relations to their complex internal labor processes where collaboration, cooperation, teamwork, tacit learning, and commitment to innovation are at a premium.

All of this turbulence in the contemporary world has created a situation marked by a constantly shifting interplay between geographically localized proximities and geographically distant but psychologically and organizationally meaningful proximities. We are by no means anywhere near the state of reality that has been described in some quarters as the “end of geography,” yet large swaths of relational reality have nevertheless been transformed by the Internet in ways that dissolve physical distance away while maintaining and amplifying other kinds of proximity. One of the burning questions that we face today is how this interplay will evolve in the future and how it will be expressed in the spatial organization and coherence of human society. This *Handbook* offers an abundance of clues about possible responses to this and other critical questions raised by recent research on proximity. The answers to these questions are pregnant with far-reaching implications for understanding and shaping how urban and regional geographies, institutions, political alignments and human conviviality will develop over the 21st century.

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