



Obituary Kees Gorter (1961–2001)

In October 2001, our dear colleague Kees Gorter passed away after a fight of just over a year with an illness that could not be won. In a short period of time after having defended his PhD thesis in 1991, Kees rapidly developed into an important member of the Department of Spatial Economics at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. We will remember his dedication to his work but especially also his colleagues and students, his humor, his characteristic smile, and his unique ability to put things into the right perspectives. His academic career was important, but his wife and children were his everything.

Kees graduated in Econometrics at the University of Amsterdam. Already as a student, his academic talents were spotted. This resulted in a working paper published in 1986 titled ‘Unemployment Benefits and Search Behavior – An empirical investigation’ that Kees wrote as student assistant together with Geert Ridder. The first sentences of that first paper are worthy of citing: ‘At the end of January 1986 the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the Netherlands was 15.2%. Hence, it is hardly surprising that there is a lively public discussion on the causes of and cures for this high unemployment rate’. It neatly reflects the keen interest of Kees on highly relevant, empirically challenging and timely research questions with important implications for policy. Looking back, this paper was clearly an important starting point for his research agenda that developed.

This first academic success of Kees more or less naturally led to a subsequent position as a research associate at the Tinbergen Institute and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in July 1987. This resulted in his PhD thesis titled ‘The Dynamics of Unemployment and Vacancies of

Regional Labour Markets’ supervised by Peter Nijkamp and Piet Rietveld. His thesis was a unique combination of spatial and labour economics. It nicely reflected the interest of Kees in both these fields and turned him into a liaison between the departments of Economics and Spatial Economics at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His PhD thesis consisted of no less than 10 individual chapters. In those chapters, he developed a new analytical approach to study imbalances on the labour market emphasizing the dynamic and spatial aspects of processes on the labour market. Studying space-time dynamics was novel in those days. It provided insights that were of high policy relevance in a period when strong and persistent disequilibria on the labour market were among the most pressing challenges that Western societies were facing. Together with currently leading scholars in the field such as Gerard van den Berg, Wolter Hassink, Jos van Ommeren, Jan van Ours and Giovanni Russo, his PhD work resulted in a series of important publications in the course of the 1990s and early 2000s in leading journals in the fields of spatial and labour economics (see the bibliography at the end with an overview of publications in Web of Science, including an overview of citations to the work). The work provided important contributions to enhance our understanding of the rising share of long-term unemployment in most industrial countries. It deepened our understanding of the problem of both quantitative as well as qualitative mismatches on the labour market.

Referring to the ‘Stellingen’ in his thesis, the number of citations received are probably an underestimate since, in his own words: ‘Het niet corresponderen van de eerste voorletter van een auteur met de eerste letter van diens roepnaam leidt in het wetenschappelijke circuit tot verwarring’ (‘stelling 7’ by Cornelis (roepnaam Kees) Gorter).

But his interests were broader and developed after having finished his PhD in topics such as entrepreneurship, innovation and retail investments, with a special interest in Indonesia, joining intellectual forces with Piet Rietveld. During these years, Kees also developed into a highly esteemed supervisor of PhD students at the department. He played important roles in the supervision of Giovanni Russo, Marthen Ndoen, Arno van der Vlist and Thomas de Graaff, who defended their theses in, respectively, 1996, 2000, 2001 and 2002. The style of supervising was nicely summarized by Arno van der Vlist in his Preface: ‘Cees turned out to be the best sparring partner one could wish for, with whom I discussed new ideas and econometric issues, mostly ending in laughter’.

And finally, Kees also developed into an important driver behind the lively and productive research atmosphere at the department, not only by his optimistic mood and humor, but also as member of the party committee together with Erik Verhoef for several years. His interest in the work of others, irrespective of the field of research, was characteristic for Kees and gave him an important role in new members of the department quickly feeling at home.

For many, working with Kees was more than just being colleagues. His genuine interest in the wellbeing of his colleagues will be remembered by many and will be deeply missed. We are sad, but also extremely grateful for the many contributions that Kees made to academia in general, and the development of the department of Spatial Economics in particular.

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