

SPECIAL ISSUE: Exploring Spatial Justice in times of disruptions

Exploring spatial justice in times of disruptions: Introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

The concept of spatial justice encompasses a number of diverse theoretical, political and normative issues. It sheds light on the way resources are allocated across different types of territories and how spatial patterns influence, enhance or confine people's opportunities. As such, the concept of spatial justice prompts a rethink of many of the substantial challenges of urban and regional development, which explains its topicality amongst policymakers and academics alike. The ARL International Summer School 2022 has thus invited doctoral students and other early career researchers to Stockholm University to debate conceptual, methodological and empirical aspects under the theme 'Exploring spatial justice in times of disruptions'. The articles in this special issue underscore the importance of the quest to understand this multifaceted concept from different perspectives.

Keywords

spatial justice, social justice, just transformation, territorial cohesion

Spatial justice: a timely, multifaceted concept

The concept of spatial justice encompasses a number of diverse theoretical, political and normative issues. It sheds light on the way resources are allocated across different types of territories and how spatial patterns influence, enhance or confine people's opportunities. Inevitably, space plays a crucial role in reproducing structural inequalities, since the space in which we live limits or enhances the opportunities and capacities of individuals and groups. A number of human geographers and planning scholars contend that concepts of justice are inevitably related to the spatial dimension and what political and socio-economic conditions are considered relevant (Marcuse, 2009; Soja, 2010). Therefore, a spatial perspective can offer a useful analytical frame to elucidate at least some of the causes and concrete implications of

social (in)justice, highlighting the intersection of the concepts of spatial justice and social justice. In this respect, Madanipour et al. (2022, p. 810) note that,

if the concept of spatial justice is emptied of its social content, it loses its meaning and turns into an empty abstraction. [...] Spatial justice, therefore, stresses the relational spatiality of (in)justice in society.

Within the EU, for instance, a number of studies problematise how various conceptions of social justice are translated into programmatic European policy concepts such as the European Social Model and territorial cohesion (Davoudi, 2005; Faludi, 2007; Madanipour et al., 2022). In this vein, the concept of spatial justice prompts a rethink of the substantial challenges of urban and regional development, such as the growing disparities between prosperous and disadvantaged towns and regions, as well as access to various types of infrastructure and (public) services. Other topical examples in which issues of fairness and justness are debated from a spatial perspective is the access to affordable housing for low-income groups and exposure to environmental risks, such as atmospheric loading in congested urban areas or the risk of floods in riparian zones. These substantial challenges are further exacerbated by a number of significant recent disruptions (the COVID-19 pandemic, wars and conflicts) and ongoing transformation processes (net zero, digitalisation and the fourth industrial revolution), which may either impede or facilitate the search for effective, just and transformative responses. Nonetheless, all of these challenges and disruptions render the importance of the quest to understand the implications of spatial (in)justice greater than ever.

The concept of spatial justice is not only related to the mechanisms, implications and limitations of redistributive efforts locally, but also to the extent to which related planning and development work is based upon fair, democratic, collaborative and transparent processes. Hence, research has focused on two main dimensions of the concept: the first considers the 'fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them' (Soja, 2009, p. 2), while the other problematises the quality of governance by shedding light on (decision-making) processes and democratic involvement in urban and regional development (Healey 2003, 2010). This classical distinction between procedural and distributive justice has been helpful for analyses, particularly when the implications of local development policies and projects are at stake (Weck & Schmitt, 2023). However, in practice, these two dimensions need to be brought together, since planners and other professionals in the public realm are often concerned with both a 'just distribution' of resources, but also one that is 'justly arrived at' (Campbell & Marshall, 2006, p. 250). Further complicating the debate of the concept of spatial justice is the fact that it is underpinned by different starting points in political theory, proceeding either from notions of equity, equality or rather welfarist ideals (Moroni, 2019; Davoudi & Brooks, 2014). Within planning studies alone, Dadashpoor and

Alvandipour (2020) have in their extensive analysis of the literature identified no less than ‘five schools of justice in planning thought’.

We argue that whilst spatial justice is a multifaceted notion that gives rise to various (and to some extent competing) interpretations and applications in theory and practice, it offers a promising analytical frame to investigate and discuss a number of topical and policy-relevant issues. Therefore, the ARL – Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association – has in cooperation with the Department of Human Geography at Stockholm University organised its International Summer School 2022 under the theme ‘Exploring spatial justice in times of disruptions’ to give doctoral students and other early career researchers from backgrounds such as human geography, spatial planning and sociology the opportunity to present and discuss conceptual, methodological and empirical issues. The summer school also included presentations by four keynote speakers. This special issue includes a selection of articles based on the work presented at the summer school, which will be briefly introduced below.

The articles in this special issue

In her debate article, Sabine Baumgart (ARL – Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association) discusses how urban health and spatial resilience contribute to spatial justice (Baumgart, 2023). She addresses the built urban environment as a main challenge and focal point and highlights the importance of collecting and evaluating data to monitor spatial development, especially for urban neighbourhoods and their populations. Referring to the Health Map of Barton and Grant (2006) and to the City Resilience Profiling Tool developed by UN-Habitat (2021), she concludes that sustainable structures and processes must be operationalised at all planning levels with a focus on spatial justice. She thus argues that responsibilities, available resources and funding should be allocated accordingly, not least to improve the resilience of spatial infrastructures.

Pedro Franco and Eduarda Marques da Costa (both University of Lisbon) examine public services in European regions under the umbrella of ‘territorial cohesion’ during the economic crisis (Franco & Marques da Costa, 2023). They find that due to political and economic changes, regional disparities in service provision have increased. Via a principal component analysis and a cluster analysis, they identify four main drivers of regional disparities: socioeconomic conditions and health/social care, urbanisation and higher education, local public administration, and age structure. Regions that score best on these factors are the core European regions that are part of the most powerful states with dynamic, solidified economies. Furthermore, they observe asymmetries between urban and rural or more peripheral regions. Hence, Franco and Marques da Costa recommend that politicians and planning practitioners should focus on the provision of public services as a long-term task.

In her article ‘Can local development actions be transformative and contribute to more just spaces?’ Sabine Weck (ILS – Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development) develops an analytical framework, which she then applies to review 15 case studies (Weck, 2023). She identifies a number of elements and processes across her sample of cases which mutually influence each other and can either trigger or halt transformative change in a locality. Weck argues that place-based actions need a greater focus on fair, inclusive and transparent decision-making processes over resources, the building of trust and capacities among individuals and stakeholders, otherwise they run the risk of becoming habituated to quick fixes instead of developing long-term strategic agency towards more sustainable and just spatial development.

Dorcas Nthoki Nyamai (TU Dortmund) investigates how urban commuters perceive justice and whether/how their understanding of justice is linked to urban mobility (Nyamai, 2023). She analyses spatial justice in the context of urban mobility in Nairobi through qualitative interviews with urban commuters. She uncovers how multiple risks, the lack of law enforcement, corruption and infrastructural deficits undermine the principles of fairness and equity in relation to commuting in Nairobi. It is evident that the dysfunctional urban mobility system produces varying degrees of injustice that are experienced by virtually all urban commuters in Nairobi. She concludes that civic education and raising awareness as well as strengthening the institutions and systems that are designed to uphold the rule of law are important factors in moving towards a just mobility system.

Final remarks

The contributions in this special issue underscore how the importance of the quest to understand the implications of spatial justice is greater than ever. While the concept of spatial justice is in vogue in academia and planning practice, further theoretical and empirical studies and reflections are required. We assume that in the near future the implications of further technological advancements and different types of disruptions and crises (e.g. pandemics, environmental hazards, climate change induced migration and conflicts) will trigger an even greater need to revisit the concept of justice in a spatial perspective.

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