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## Spatial Justice

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Abstract:

This entry locates spatial justice (i.e. the analysis of the spatial dimension of justice) in critical Social Sciences theory, and retraces the development of the concept from Political Philosophy to Geography, Planning, Environmental and Development Studies, as well as its connections to activism and global policy circles. Three major topical dimensions of the concept are identified, the urban, environmental justice and global justice. An overview of the globalization of the concept outside of the Anglo-American sphere is provided at the end of the entry.

Keywords:

critical theory

ethics, justice, and human rights

spatial thinking

Main Text:

The exploration of the spatial dimension of justice and the introduction of the concept of spatial justice itself is a relatively new avenue for Social Sciences. The debates around the notion have indeed appeared on and off the academic radars of disciplines such as Geography and Planning since the early 1970ies. Marked by a strong resurgence in the late 2000s, these debates around spatial justice have also tended to outgrow academia itself to diffuse in global policy and activist circles.

The starting point of the academic interest for the concept lies in the search for a means of

understanding inequalities differently and more thoroughly, in order *inter alia* to pave the way for their more efficient reduction. Spatial justice is thus strongly anchored in critical Social Sciences and must consequently be understood as a theory for action. The growing importance of the debates around the concept, as well as their globalization outside of the Anglo-American academia, testify to the current importance of this goal: the exacerbation of inequalities from local to global scales in the late 20th century, as well as the claims for justice that accompany them, would indeed appear to have made this research imperative.

A fairly simple understanding of spatial justice lies in the taking into consideration of the multiple articulations of the spatial dimensions of justice, understood as the articulated expression of inequalities. The issue of whether spatial justice is derivative of social justice or a category of its own is central to the more recent debates (Harvey 1992, Marcuse 2009, Soja 2010, Iveson 2011). For most authors, space works as a receptacle for justice (or injustice), as can be seen for instance with public policies aimed at reducing territorial inequalities for residents' access to specific public services. Yet, for Soja, space can also be a producer of justice or injustice, as can be seen for instance with the territorial stigma attached to specific neighborhood and, by extension, to their inhabitants in their search for social betterment. Furthermore, since justice is understood as the articulation of inequalities, the difficulty of pinpointing spatial justice lies in the infinite variety of these articulations and the subjective dimension of justice they encapsulate, casting doubt on the possibility of finding an impartial judge of what would intrinsically be just spatially (Gervais-Lambony & Dufaux 2009). All authors whose work engages the concept of spatial justice agree though on the fact that our current neoliberal world works as a massive producer of injustice and that the search for a more just world should be first and foremost on the agenda of progressive Social Sciences (critical Social Sciences in particular) as well as of disciplines more structurally action-oriented such as planning (Fainstein 2011).

Most recent understandings and theories of spatial justice have their roots in Political Philosophy, with its two principal (yet not necessarily antagonistic) approaches of justice, the distributive one concerned with the fair distribution of resources and goods, and the procedural one where the focus lies in the reaching of just decision-making processes. The work of John Rawls (Rawls 1971) has been starting point for most scholars thereafter. In his work, Rawls discusses in particular the notion of equity as a fundamental principle of justice. Equity, as a basis for the reaching of the more utopian principle of equality, emphasizes the need to “even out” the unevenness of the social terrain for the more vulnerable in society. A spatial declination of equity lies in the development of territorialized public policies, aiming at redressing imbalances between regions, at a variety of scales, via a focus of public action on the more disadvantaged ones. Rawls has been criticized for his liberal understanding of justice as well as for his universalist approach by communitarians, yet the procedural critique of justice intrinsic to his use of equity paved the way for other significant work exploring the dual nature of procedural and distributive justice. The works of Iris Marion Young (Young 1990), in line with discussions around the politics of difference, is another strong influence. It clearly emphasizes the procedural dimension of justice and dissects five different forms of oppression and their roles in the production of injustice. Finally, the contemporary work of Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1998), reconciles both approaches of justice and underpins their co-construction: using the example of welfare as a classic distributive form of justice, she underlines that welfare also works as producer of categories within society (i.e. recognition of difference), and concludes that there can be no redistribution without recognition, and no recognition without distribution.

By extension, most of the works focusing on the spatial dimension of justice explore the interaction between the procedural and redistributive approaches. A typology of this work reveals three main topics, the urban, the environmental and the global.

The urban question is the most prominent exploration of spatial justice. Since the restructuring of capitalism in neoliberal times is specifically ground in cities, they have been identified as the current major producers of injustice (Harvey 1992), as well as the most fertile ground for the development of justice. Geographers and planners have thus explored the possibility of attaining a "just city" via a reorganization of the praxis (Fainstein 2011). In all of this work, the use of the concept of spatial justice to understand social movements and their claims for justice strongly intersects the work of Henri Lefebvre on the Right to the City (Lefebvre 1969): Lefebvre's 1960ies call for the appropriation of the instruments of control over the city has been revived by contemporary authors interested in the procedural dimension of justice, such as Edward W. Soja. As Soja puts it, calls for justice ask for 'greater control over how the spaces in which we live are socially produced' (Soja 2010, 7). He also underlines in his analysis of the spatially-based Bus Riders Union mobilization, a collective fighting the injustice of the lack of access to jobs and mobility in the metropolis, the profoundly spatial dimension of justice, and he opens up avenues for more efficient mobilizations for greater justice through the use of this specifically spatial dimension.

A second declination of spatial justice focusses on environmental issues, sometimes in tandem with the urban question, sometimes with global justice in mind: this work explores the uneven allocation of green resources, as well as social mobilizations towards greater equity in their distribution (Harvey 1996), but is also concerned with underlining the contradictions between the social and environmental dimensions of policies aimed at environmental protection or sustainable development. While this declination speaks to a locational variety of situations of injustice (rural areas targeted by mega-projects endangering the environment, areas zoned as Nature reserves which are also homes for indigenous populations, environmental racism perpetrated against minority neighborhoods, etc.), the urban dimension of environmental justice is the most developed, also because mobilizations are all the more visible there. The concept of environmental justice is also the one that has been the most shared between academia and activism, in particular from a very early connexion between environmental justice and civil rights movements in the United States, but subsequently through a global diffusion of the concept to a great variety of other countries (Walker 2011).

Thirdly, a less explored dimension focuses on the issue of global justice and has been produced by Geographers interested in the politics of scale and public policies, and scholars interested in Development. Alain Reynaud for instance (Reynaud 1981) tried to conceptualize inequalities and injustice at a great variety of scale using concepts such as that of center/periphery to characterize power relations between First and Third Worlds, but also at national, regional and local scales. While the development of the concept of global justice remains at a more theoretical level so far, the implications for praxis could prove multiple. In this line, Bernard Bret for instance questions the issue of just territorialized public policies and the proper scale to design them, based on case studies in France and Brazil (Bret 2015).

Finally, a remarkable development of the concept of spatial justice lies in its global development amongst several schools of Geography and Planning. In Europe for instance, the metropolitan order and its injustices as well as the profound impact of the economic crisis have fostered this development. In emerging countries and cities, this development could be seen as logical given the importance of the issues of both inequalities and access to the control of space in freshly established democratic societies: meaningfully, one of the first discussions of spatial justice was published by Gordon Pirie writing from the 1980ies unjust South Africa (Pirie 1983). Often tied today to reflexions on the Right to the city and based in urban universities already familiar with radical approaches, these schools aim at connecting various stakeholders (be they academics, politicians, citizens, etc.) to produce new forms of mobilizations towards spatial justice. Don

Mitchell's People's Geography project appears as an emblematic example of this academic positioning (<http://www.peoplesgeographyproject.org/>), but new ones have emerged, for instance the Spatial justice initiative based at the University of Delft (<https://spatialjustice.blog>), or the "Social justice and the city" program led by Mona Fawaz in Beirut ([https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/programs/social\\_justice/Pages/sj\\_city.aspx](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/programs/social_justice/Pages/sj_city.aspx)). This development speaks to the double epistemological renewal of Social sciences, the spatial turn and the Southern turn, but it can also address profound methodological changes (Salamanca & Pizarro 2016). Ultimately, spatial justice has fed a whole new range of publications careful to articulate the concept with their local editorial milieu, be they in French, Spanish or Portuguese, aimed at academic or non-academic readers, etc. (see in particular the bilingual journal *justice spatiale/spatial justice*, <http://www.jssj.org>).

#### SEE ALSO:

cross-reference:

EURS0488 Spatial inequality  
EURS0271 Right to the city  
EURS0091 Environmental justice  
EURS0169 Just City

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Suggested Readings:

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Author Mini-Biography:

Sophie DIDIER is a geographer and Professor at the Paris School of Planning (Université Paris Est, Marne-la-Vallée) and a former Director of Research at the French Institute of South Africa in Johannesburg. She has recently published several articles on the circulation of security models and their relation to neoliberalization, and is currently interested in the negotiated understandings of time and temporalities, in particular in the crossing of the Right to the city and of the Right to memory. She is a member of the editorial board of the bilingual journal *justice spatiale/spatial justice*.

Aurélie QUENTIN is senior lecturer in urban studies at Paris Nanterre University and editor of the bilingual journal *justice spatiale/spatial justice*. She works on urban politics and citizen practices in Andean cities and on the articulation between urban neoliberalization and postneoliberalism in Latin America with a special interest in public housing policies. She has recently begun the development of a comparative perspective of the Right to city in Africa and Latin America.