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JSSJ Meets RELOCAL – Mobilizations, Meaning and Uses of the Concept of Spatial Justice in a European Research Project

Cyril Blondel | Estelle Evrard | Sarolta Németh | Laura Noguera

ABSTRACT

The editors of this special issue are part of the H2020 2016-2020 research project RELOCAL: “Resituating the local in cohesion and territorial development”. This project is concerned with the achievements and impacts of local and regional development throughout Europe. It explores the local effects of such development processes – in particular, how they might mitigate disadvantaged local areas and contribute to reducing disparities between places. The RELOCAL project draws on 33 case studies of local contexts across Europe. Fragments of empirical analysis underlie the research of several papers presented in this issue. As this project brings together a number of researchers from all over Europe, spread across 14 research institutions, it is an opportunity to reflect upon how each team and individual researcher relates the notion of spatial justice to their respective country and how, while doing their field work, their own understanding of this notion has evolved. Using the opportunity of a consortium meeting in Łódź, Poland, (5-6 March 2019), there has been bilateral exchange with some of the researchers. The following text is a short extract of this discussion¹.

Keywords: spatial justice, RELOCAL, conceptualization, case studies, territorial cohesion, Europe

Participants:

Interviewers: Cyril Blondel and Estelle Evrard (**CB** and **EE**, University of Luxembourg), Sarolta Németh (**SN**, University of Eastern Finland) and Laura Noguera (**LN**, MCRIT Barcelona, Spain)

Interviewees (RELOCAL): Thomas Borén (**TB**, Stockholm University, Sweden), Timothy Heleniak, Linnea Löfving and Gustaf Norlen (**TH**, **LL** and **GN**, NORDREGIO, Sweden), Petri Kahila (**PK**, University of Eastern Finland), Viktoria Kamuf and Felix Matzke (**VK** and **FM**, ILS Dortmund, Germany), Ali Madanipour (**AM**, University of Newcastle, UK), Patricia Melo, (**PM**, ISEG Lisboa, Portugal), Tomasz Napierata (**TN**, University of Łódź, Poland), Lefteris Topaloglou and Victor Cupcea (**LT** and **VC**, University of Thessaly, Volos, Greece), Jan Jacob Trip, Kees Dol, Arie Romein (**JT**, **KS** and **AR**, TU Delft, Netherlands), George Iulian Zamfir, (**GIZ**, Foundation DESIRE, Romania).

1. Interviews were conducted separately, so answers provided in this text do not always correspond to one another.



10/2019

Transcription: Tom Royer

Text editing: Cyril Blondel and Estelle Evrard

CB/EE/SN/LN: What does spatial justice mean in your national context and do local stakeholders make use of the concept or are they more inclined to use other terms that they would consider closest to this concept?

AM: In the UK context, the analysis of spatial justice depends on the scale, as in any other context. In the UK, there is a very clear north/south divide, and this divide has been exacerbated with all the recent changes: economic crisis, neoliberal policies and now Brexit. These changes lead to a further concentration of wealth and opportunities in the south-east, whereas the north suffers, in particular, from a lack of opportunities and resources. But when you go inside each of these areas, you see more nuances in the spatial distribution of opportunities and resources. Even within the areas that are very rich, you can see pockets of deep deprivation. And in areas that are generally considered to be deprived, you see pockets of wealth. So it is not as clear-cut. It depends on the resolution of our cartography, if you like, in terms of mapping spatial justice in the national context. It varies depending on how far inside we go.

Differences in power exist at the regional level [for instance between Scotland and England]. At the local level, the English local authorities are not powerful enough. And they are highly dependent on the national government for their resources. And it becomes more and more difficult for the local authorities to decide how to spend, on whatever priorities, because what we see is continuous cuts in provision and in services in many places. One choice for the local authorities has been the privatisation of services and outsourcing them, just managing their smaller budgets. Those are the issues of spatial justice in the sense that there is a lack of autonomy and lack of sufficient resources at the local level. And then sometimes it's up to the local groups, civil society groups, to look after things. But as we know, they are not consistent; they cannot deliver, to a consistent level, services that are now being withdrawn. So what you see, for example in the case of public parks, is that some local authorities are starting to give their control out to local communities or volunteers or charities or local groups who look after the park, but their ability to do so is somewhat limited.

TH, LL, GN: Certainly in the Swedish national context, this is the social welfare system; there is an effort to provide equal opportunities across income groups and certainly equality across space. During our fieldwork, the people we talked to in local government said that they have the mandate to try to include everybody. But the word "justice" is quite political in the Swedish context, so civil servants would instead talk about differences or inequalities.

TB: In Sweden, "spatial justice" is only sometimes used in academic discourse and not in policy discourse. I think the position of these researchers is normative, in the sense that their purpose is to contribute to changes that would make it better for people.

PM: Portugal has a strategy for regional cohesion, and as part of that you have both national policies and local policies, supported either by LEADER if it is in rural areas or by some of the cohesion funding instruments. So those all fit into the national strategy for regional cohesion. I guess that is how I would link it in my national context to spatial justice, or a deliberate way to try to promote more spatial justice through policy-making. Now the question is: I'm unsure whether I should relate to spatial justice in terms of desired outcomes; I mean by that whether the outcomes are more equally spread geographically or if the rules of the game, so the more procedural element, represent fair play.

One thing is whether you set up rules that make sure that everyone, regardless of where they live, gets access to exactly the same resources, same services, like school, health services. At the moment, this doesn't happen because in some areas in Portugal, the population is very low. So they close schools and children have to go much further away to go to the nearest school. That is not spatial justice at the starting point, and hence there will be no spatial justice at the endpoint in terms of when you look at the average educational level of different people. They will be more likely to have higher education if they were, for example, in an urban area, because they could access it there.

So, in that case spatial justice would mean whether the opportunities you have access to in a given region are more or less the same, regardless of where you were born or where you grow up.

VK: In Germany, from a political point of view, the term is translated into "an equity of living standards".

FM: This is written in the law, that everybody should have the same opportunities to live and maintain their lives. Aside from this, there are different geographical or sociological terms used, like regional disparities or spatial disadvantages.

VK: What is also important is that a national commission for the equity of living conditions was also established in 2018, and they look at the question from different perspectives. And one of their main focus areas is the urban/rural divide, but also the urban/rural links.

And of course, one of the major questions in Germany still, and also for this commission, is the divide between eastern and western Germany.

TN: First of all, in Poland, there is actually no such notion as spatial justice in the minds of our stakeholders, or in the law. But when we introduced the idea of spatial justice to our stakeholders, they realised, "Oh gosh, there is something like this." So, during

the interviews, during the focus panels and so on, we introduced the concept of spatial justice, and then they realised that, "Oh, so actually we are working with this, we are working for this, and trying to handle this." This is what actually happened during this project; we introduced the notion of spatial justice into the minds of stakeholders, and now they can just use it.

However, a lot of our ideas are closely related to spatial justice, and stakeholders are aware of it. For example, social justice, which is very close to spatial justice in practical contexts, is not emphasised so much. But when talking about social justice, they use the idea of social justice, they know how to interpret it, how to introduce it in their policies, and so on. Some of our stakeholders know something about territorial cohesion. And some are very familiar with regional development. So this is also another notion, another term they know, one that they want to introduce, and they want to address too when discussing those issues.

And the last thing I would like to say about spatial justice is in the context of the word "spatial" in general, rather than "spatial justice". The problem in Poland is that the awareness amongst our stakeholders about geographical space in general is very limited. For them, it is very challenging to define anything in the spatial context, so they do not feel comfortable defining spaces, even if we are talking about pretty big areas like cities. They prefer to think about the city as a point. So the city is where something happens, not a particular space in the city. And that was pretty difficult, to ask the people to start thinking about particular places, localities, not points. This is very challenging, even in a big city like Łódź.

GIZ: In Romania, no one talks about spatial injustice using this term; there's a conflation of other terms, terms like marginalisation, disadvantaged areas and so on. But no-one really uses this exact term.

PK: In the Finnish context, if you take the direct translation of "spatial justice", it actually does not really reflect "spatial justice" in the sense of the English concept. So I would never use it if I am talking with policymakers, or with decisionmakers. In the university world, I can use it, because then, people have a different kind of attitude towards it. But, outside academia, it would be better to speak about regional differences, or regional differentiation between the regions, and between people.

CB/EE/SN/LN: *What does the concept of spatial justice allow you to grasp that other concepts usually don't? Why use spatial justice as a concept in your research?*

TN: As I mentioned, the understanding of geography in Poland is very limited, e.g. in the consciousness of the people, and stakeholders, and in the data. For me as a geographer, it is just part of the daily difficulty which I have to face. The missing notion of “spatial justice” in the consciousness of the people and in the law is a confirmation that my job seems to be difficult. I need to emphasise that my perspective is that of a person engaged in a process of promoting geography in Polish society. I realised how much we need to improve the understanding of geography.

GIZ: Let’s use the term *territorial development*, that a lot of people use. Romania is highly polarised in terms of territorial development. And this process has sky-rocketed in the last 10 years or more, due to a couple of factors. One would be the de-industrialisation that took place at a later stage than in western Europe, along with mass migration. So you have these two processes colliding and you have areas like the north-eastern part of Romania, which is catalogued as the poorest in Europe. So it’s highly polarised and many people see this as a natural phenomenon that’s supposed to take place after we finally “got rid” of communism and its unnatural social levelling. If you were to ask the poor people, they would say that they want the state to act as a provider of remedies for whatever’s happening. The more well-off people are, the more they tend to favour decentralisation and local autonomy. So they would see spatial justice as this decentralisation coupled with anti-redistributive measures. In a way, it would be like gentrification is understood, like it’s supposed to happen, right? Most people would say that it’s natural to have these territorial inequalities because they reflect the “unequal reality”, so they see it as spatial justice.

EE: So, in this context, it’s not an injustice?

GIZ: Oh, it’s actually injustice. Because people who are not supposed to belong there will be pushed away. It’s very powerful, anti-poor propaganda in Romania that’s happening; it reaches a level of cruelty, genuine cruelty. So if you think about it, not even the specialists in urban studies, urbanists, architects, most of them, with a few notable exceptions, they’re not really pushing alternative explanations. Most of them believe that gentrification is normal and desirable. It’s expected to want the best people that your city can host. So you project policies in such a way that you would accommodate them. It’s how classic gentrification works, right. But that’s embedded in public policy, particularly in terms of local administrations in the larger cities. Most people, most local administrations, think like that. Even if they are not at the same level of economic development as Cluj and Bucharest, they would like to be, and they see that as one of the factors that will lead to it.

CB: *Do you think if you had used "sustainable development" in Germany, which is, like, a very much more well-known concept, do you think that it would have been simpler to address questions of regional disparity or inequalities of equity of living standards, or do think that with "spatial justice", you would be better able to see some different aspects of the problem?*

VK: I think an advantage of "spatial justice" could actually be that no-one knows it, so...

FM: There is no framing from the outset.

VK: Yes. Because when you think about sustainable development, everyone thinks about the environment, and trees. So it is more difficult to talk about sustainability in a non-environmental, long-term regional development sense, or something like that. So maybe the advantage we have is that we could just put it out there, and kind of make it our own.

EE: *For example in Portugal, why "spatial justice" and not "territorial cohesion" or "local development" or "inequality"?*

PM: But inequality itself does not have a spatial element, I guess. So it could be only social. But then, I guess that you cannot really separate the geographical element from other elements. They are all embedded in the space. I mean it's like territorial cohesion or like a place-based approach. It is not that we are saying that you need to have the interventions at the very localised level just because it is closer to the people, but rather that you involve and engage the various local people because they will have better knowledge of the local dynamics. So in a way, the spatial doesn't have to be limited only to the physical definition, I guess.

From my point of view, the limitation might actually be that it might focus too much on the physical element. Because the term is "spatial justice", it indicates a very direct focus on the space, on the geography, and that might actually hide other elements that are actually embedded with the spatial element but are not necessarily as visible in space. The interesting thing about them is not necessarily their spatial dimension.

AM: Well, to me, spatial justice is emphasising the distributive element of justice. Obviously, space is something that people have various interpretations of. But sometimes, the spatial and the social are so much intertwined for people that when you ask them what is "spatial", they answer: "It's the social." And of course anything has a social and a spatial dimension. In that sense, spatial justice is not distinguishable

from social justice. But if you say *spatial* in a very explicit way, what you are saying is often the distributive pattern of resources and opportunities *across space*. And in that case, we see a very clear emphasis on that spatial distributive element, which is not the case necessarily in social justice. Social justice, when people talk about it, is often *equalisation*, or an egalitarian concept of access to opportunities and resources; it is fine, that is a very broad and general principle. But when it comes to spatial patterns and distribution across space, spatial justice addresses that. Now, in a sense, spatial justice cannot stand on its own without the underlying concept of social justice being there, that sense of *equality*. But we are applying it to spatial organisation in the same way that, let's say, sustainability is *temporal* justice. It is justice across generations. I mean, the classic definition of sustainability is that resources are available to future generations. It is *temporal* justice; it is *justice to the future*. And now spatial justice is justice to everybody, *justice to your neighbour* in a way. So in that sense it emphasises that distributive element, which is distinctive.

CB: *In that case, where do you put procedural justice in this spatial/social/temporal context?*

AM: Procedural justice I put as the means and tools that are needed to *achieve* spatial justice or social justice. So, in a sense, procedural justice is having the right processes, regulations and rules *in place* that delivers fair outcomes.

CB: *So it is political justice?*

AM: Well, partly, it is political. And that is why political scientists are very much into procedural justice. On the other hand, you see geographers tend to be more distributive in their thinking, because they are talking about patterns across space. Some may think that if you have the right procedures in place, it is enough, which is not so much verified. I mean, of course, ultimately you have to have the right process in place to deliver, if you like, good quality of life. But what is good quality of life? One that is *just*. In that sense, procedural justice in *itself* is not an end. But procedural justice means having the right frameworks, institutions, and procedures as a means to an end.

SN: *I understand also that distributive patterns can also be seen as the foundations for having an opportunity to have good procedures. Can one say that to empower*

certain levels/scales, certain social conditions and capacities need to be in place, the local presence of which in turn, depends on distributive patterns?

AM: Yes, they are interrelated. They are very clearly related to each other; they cannot be separated. Because some of the things that are distributed are those capacities, and those capacities are procedural in nature. They are not, if you like, material; in a way, they are social assets. And social assets are part of those procedures. So, how to generate social assets, our capacities to achieve empowerment? Those are, in a way, one foot in each place. And they are obviously very clearly and closely related to each other. It is not to say that we need distributive justice by any means; we need to get it through just procedures. It is not that the ends justify the means. The means are as important as the end. And in this sense, they are very closely related.

PK: Going back to spatial justice, when you think about Finnish and Nordic municipalities, the main question is universalism. Universalism has been the main idea of the whole welfare society. So, people, it does not matter where they live, they have the right to get the services. And so far, universalism, as a principle for the welfare society in the Nordic countries, has been working rather well. Because of the steady rise in our welfare, and the economic growth, it was easy for the municipalities to build a social welfare system. They always had a 5% bigger budget, because the economy was growing until 1991. Then, there was a really deep stagnation and after that there has been more, so that the welfare society has been cutting costs and this kind of development stopped.

So now you come to this new talk about spatial justice, or spatial *injustice*. In a way, you are not only talking about the concrete issues. You are also talking about *values*. In Finland, and in Sweden, it is also very much a value-based discussion. And when you try to connect the value-based aspect *and* some very concrete issues, such as "OK, where is the health centre located?", well, you can easily put it on the map, calculate the accessibility along the roads, and say "Yeah, here is the perfect place for the healthcare centre, everybody can go there, let's go."

But how do you break this value-based discussion? It might be that spatial justice would be a new dimension to this discussion, and no longer using only universalism, you know. If I moved into the middle of the forest, 200 kilometres from the middle of nowhere, in the middle of nothing, and then you say: "Well, where is the day-care?" It's your choice [...] But so far it has not been like that. It has always been the case that if you have children, then the taxi comes to collect your children at the expense of society. But this is a sort of value-based discussion, and it has not taken place in Finland yet. So my sort of projection – I might be wrong – will be that it will come within a

couple of years. When this discussion hits Finland and all the Nordic countries, it will hit peripheral regions really hard.

CB: So the spatial justice concept in the context of Finland allows us to open this value-based discussion and, because of the particular nature of Nordic countries, being so big and so sparsely populated, this raises the question of accessibility?

SN: I think that spatial justice brings in these realities, the hard realities of spatiality. It is a pragmatic approach. And then you have to compromise with those values.

PK: And so far, health care, social services have been organised in the municipality. So of course, each of these municipalities has had their own health centres. Fine. Accessibility is pretty good today. But then when you come to the upper level, you start counting in a different way because you have a bigger region. It has its pros and cons, and one of the cons is spatial justice. Really. How will it evolve with the changing context? Because now, even the small municipal centres are slowly shrinking and there are not enough people. It is a demographic problem. One problem is *ageing*. But older people are not so much the problem; they will be taken care of, somehow, always. What is the real problem is that there are no young people. That is the problem. They are moving *out* and there are no young people coming *in*.

CB: So, of course it is more complicated than this but still, why don't you open your borders to high levels of migration?

SN: Actually, the funny thing is that stakeholders and city management, they are open to that, because they need workforce. Russians, most importantly, are employable. Fears of such immigration are not an issue in those local contexts. Things are changing, the world is changing. To be honest, what is more problematic is that not that many people choose this destination. You cannot compete with western Europe.

CB/EE/SN/LN: *What is the main message from the case studies when it comes to tackling spatial injustice?*

JT, KS and AR: Our case is situated in the north of the Netherlands, in the region of Groningen. There, natural gas extraction started in the 1960s, and natural gas extraction causes earthquakes, although that was denied for quite some time by the national government. But there was a really severe earthquake in 2012 and it changed everything. That was a turning point, absolutely, and after that, our old machinery came in, in the form of denial of the relation between extraction and earthquakes, and of solving the problem. They simply organised and funded another institution without

analysing why the previous institution hadn't worked – nobody knew if it had worked well or not – and the procedural process here aggravated the distribution of injustice, and whether that was coincidental or not. Some people say it is not, that is the way the government deals with it, because the government profited, benefited from all the money that was earned by it, and that is a lot of money; well, the estimate is about 400 billion euros now, since the 1960s. So, it is really about a lot of money.

CB: And very little goes back to the region?

JT, KS and AR: It goes back to the national state and the oil company, which are international stakeholders, so that's the particular context.

CB: And what I heard you saying before is that actually, the local, the citizens, the local authorities, the regional authorities are very much mobilising against this, but that this mobilisation does not change anything?

JT, KS and AR: No, their impact is quite limited. It might be quite beneficial but the national, or the local government, or the municipal government, does not even know which houses in its own area are damaged or not. And they are not allowed to know it, due to privacy regulations. Only in cases where houses are too dangerous to live in any more, that can collapse at any time, then the mayor receives a phone call from the minister: "Tear it down, because it is too dangerous." But otherwise, the local mayors are not supposed to know about it. And they have to know, because people from their villages come to them and complain to them. So what they do now is they are trying to find out where the damage is by means of facebook. What is particular in the Dutch context too is that this region is a poor peripheral region. It has already been the focus of the Dutch regional policy for its peripheral position since the 1970s. So, it's not that that area is deprived because all the industry went away; the story is more about access to information. It is strange, you have the Internet now, they should be aware of anything, you know, that they could do, but it is still too far off.

VK: One of the German cases is Görlitz, an east german town at the border with Poland. It is like a mid-sized town. And there is a youth initiative, association, that got the mandate to create a centre for youth and social culture, which actually is a really big thing in the municipality happening right now, and we have all kinds of activities, like low-threshold, open activities, workshops, with very professional management. And it is a very bottom-up approach, but they still work together very closely with the municipality, so it is basically a joint project, this centre.

This brings me to the point, that I think it is a great example of a municipality accepting some kind of informality. So they recognise that this can actually be really important

for the municipality, and be very beneficial, to allow these young people, basically, to take part in urban development. Not necessarily in formal ways, in the sense of being on the city council or anything like that, but also in informal ways, in the sense of just reviving vacant spaces, being in a public place, and holding events, and approaching people in the neighbourhood, doing activities and so on. So they really saw how this kind of informal approach to urban development, or a very *civil society* approach to urban development, can be very beneficial for the municipality.

VK and FM: One thing we could also discuss, which I want to add, is also a more general one, maybe coming from both case studies as well, also looking at higher levels of funding, EU funds, or EU policies, national policies and so on. We think or we would consider that *making mistakes* should be taken into account more often, in the sense of this whole process of *learning* how to get together, how to develop projects, how to develop your town or region; that mistakes are allowed, basically.

SN: You mean a learning process?

VK: Yes, and this is not only relevant for the actors on the *local* level, but this is especially also relevant for those who give out funds, because they also always want to have some kind of output there, they always want to succeed, and I think understanding that success can also be making a mistake, and then building on that, and learning from it. This is the whole point of organisational learning. In both cases we saw that these mistakes are always made, somehow, but you can also evolve on the basis of them, and yes, that should be taken into account more often.

AM: One of our case studies is the Northumberland local action group in a rural area at the north of England. The main message from that case in tackling spatial injustice is that it is putting in place a *procedure* which is the localisation of decision making and drawing on local knowledge to provide opportunities in a remote rural area, which otherwise may not have been possible. So, in that sense, it is, at least in theory, a contribution to more just outcomes. But there are also some, if you like, limiting factors here, such as limitations from the national government that set the strategy, rather than allowing the local group to decide. Or the clear emphasis on economic outcomes, which steers the outcome towards particular things that can be economically rewarding but not necessarily socially just. So you see that, for example, when something is ripe and ready for investment in your area, and it may generate employment for new people, but it is not necessarily addressing the problems that some *others* are having and the needs of some *more needy* people. What we see is that because it is economically geared, it contributes to economic development, but not necessarily to tackling social problems or needs.

CB: As in other cases that have been mentioned before?

LT and VC: Yes, because whatever you say regarding autonomy sounds good, but in practice, autonomy requires the maturity of local institutions to tackle it and to really include citizens. Two of our cases in Thessaloniki and in the Western Macedonia region proved that there is a weak culture of cooperation between the stakeholders, the different local and regional stakeholders. There is a lack of a joint vision of where they want to go. There is a fragmentation of strategies. It is also a consequence of a strong will of the national context to control the entire procedure (pretty centralised). But at the same time, on the national level in Greece they still look at all the local situations with a very top-down approach and are more concerned about the next election cycle. Very little regard is paid to what is going on at the local level in terms of substantive results and indicators of change.

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