



BOOK REVIEW: SPATIAL JUSTICE: THE BASICS

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'The just city is not a blueprint but a horizon. (...) it is something we walk toward, never fully reaching. It is made, unmade, and remade through everyday acts of care, resistance, design and dreaming.' This is one of the statements summarising the latest book by Roberto Rocco, which offers an attempt at a synthetic, problem-oriented account of the challenges associated with spatial justice. It is a book that deserves particular attention. On the one hand, it provides a solid and inspiring overview of existing approaches to issues related to spatial justice and enables the reader to gain a significantly better understanding of the theoretical context of this concept. On the other hand, an extraordinary strength of the book is the (infectious) passion of the author for promoting and implementing spatial justice as broadly as possible. As the author himself indicates in the sentence quoted above, this is an ongoing endeavour, requiring sustained attention, action, and responsiveness to newly emerging problems.

Approaches to spatial justice in the literature are highly diverse. The author considers it particularly important to distinguish three dimensions of spatial justice. Distributive justice concerns the equitable allocation of benefits and burdens among different users of space (including, for example, residents of a given city). Procedural justice is associated with maintaining fairness in decision-making processes (at the scale of the city, region, etc.). Finally, recognitional justice is intended to ensure that diverse identities, knowledges, and ways of life are acknowledged in space. Each of the identified dimensions is responsible for achieving specific objectives of spatial justice, and the omission of any of them risks exacerbating spatial injustice. In this latter context, Rocco – drawing on examples from different parts of the world – identifies very serious shortcomings and problems. In his view, many states and cities too readily succumb to a neoliberal narrative, focusing solely on short-term profit in spatial decision-making. Within this framework, they too easily accept proposals for large-scale commercial developments (and the anticipated profits associated with them), thereby neglecting the primary objective of distributive justice. At the same time, spatial justice cannot be reduced solely to the objective assigned to this latter dimension (i.e., ensuring equal access to benefits and burdens). Without taking procedural justice into account, attempts to achieve it may be doomed to failure from the outset. Conversely, the neglect of objectives associated with recognitional justice risks producing an excessively technocratic approach.

The author identifies a wide range of detailed challenges and dilemmas associated with the implementation of spatial justice across different spatial scales and in various parts of the world. He emphasises that there is no single, unified, and comprehensive vision of justice: such visions are identified and developed by individual communities, and even by segments within those communities. This was aptly illustrated by Ben Davy (a distinguished spatial planning specialist who died in 2025, dealing, among other things, with its legal context) in one of his lectures through the statement ‘my just city is not your just city.’ Spatial justice must, as far as possible, respect and accommodate all these perspectives and sensitivities. It is therefore by no means sufficient to base discussions of justice solely on formal frameworks. Similarly, it is not enough to ground spatial justice in the delineation of functional zones or to rely on the concept of spatial order. None of these approaches guarantees a comprehensive consideration of the broader spatial justice context, including the making of ‘just’ (also from a procedural perspective) spatial decisions.

Another noteworthy issue raised concerns responses to climate challenges. Without in any way questioning their legitimacy, Rocco warns against a one-sided approach that may involve both the discrimination of certain groups of residents in access to adaptation measures and an inequitable distribution of the costs of climate action. This is, however, a serious problem. In some cases, climate protection measures that are not necessarily spatially just may be the only feasible options available. This creates a significant dilemma as to what should be prioritised: spatial justice or any form of climate adaptation and mitigation (the absence of such measures will also significantly exacerbate spatial injustice). The indicated dilemma can be considered in a broader context. There is no doubt as to the necessity of responding to climate-related challenges. This very often requires radical measures. Such measures may, without doubt, reduce the long-term deepening of spatial injustice. The problem, however, is that this is not always apparent in the short-term perspective. A frequent challenge for public authorities is the implementation of any responses to climate change. In this situation, the pursuit of spatial justice may remain an additional, even more ambitious objective. Consequently, a highly difficult dilemma emerges: should spatial justice goals be prioritized in this context, even at the cost of limiting the implementation of responses to climate change (and thereby risking a further deepening of spatial injustice in the future), or should the opposite approach be taken – supporting any responses to climate change, sometimes at the expense of spatial justice?

These challenges can be fully related to diverse European countries and cities. The reflections presented in the reviewed book prompt consideration of whether zoning practices, prevalent in most European cities, may contain discriminatory mechanisms; whether the influence of different stakeholders on spatial decisions is indeed satisfactory; and whether it is appropriate that ‘spatial order’ constitutes the primary value and objective of certain European systems (for example, the Polish spatial planning system). Nevertheless, the book has a broader dimension. The author demonstrates a deep understanding of, and sensitivity to, the perspective of the Global South. This is perhaps a necessary condition for the ability to comprehensively define the objectives of spatial justice in the manner presented in the reviewed book. The key case study discussed concerns São Paulo. In this context, the author presents both an intriguing and moving case study: the favela of Paraisópolis. More than a century ago, this area was informally developed for residential purposes, primarily by migrants. After years of spatial transformation, it came to be located on land of high market value within São Paulo. On the one hand, it was perceived by wealthier residents as an ‘eyesore’ and a source of social unrest and criminality. Proposals for its complete removal emerged, while the city failed to provide infrastructure to these areas. In earlier maps of the area, the aforementioned favela did not exist – only uninhabited green spaces were shown. On the

other hand, the residents of Paraisópolis ‘forged resilient, self-sustaining networks that not only met their immediate needs but also laid the foundation for collective empowerment.’ According to Rocco, this example effectively illustrates the dilemmas and risks associated with spatial injustice.

The reflections of Roberto Rocco can also be related to discussions on spatial policy in European cities. In a significant proportion of these cities, social inequalities and problems are intensifying. At the same time, in many cases, the challenge lies in developing a comprehensive vision for the development of the entire city, grounded in spatial justice. The achievement of this objective is not guaranteed by spatial planning instruments. One example may be provided: in many planning systems, regulatory detailed spatial plans apply only to selected parts of a city. In the process of their adoption (and thus in determining the specific development possibilities for a given area), the broader spatial context of the entire city is often overlooked: the focus is placed on individual trees rather than on the forest as a whole. It is precisely in such cases that this wider context – linked to the pursuit of spatial justice for all residents and users of the city – can very easily disappear.

The reviewed book is one of the most important recent publications on spatial justice. It is difficult to imagine a more in-depth continuation of the scholarly debate without taking it into account. It must be emphasised once again that the author demonstrates not only expertise but also a strong commitment to the subject. For all these reasons, the book fully merits a strong recommendation.