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This is an accepted manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Spatial Justice in the City on 11 November 2019, available online:

<http://www.routledge.com/9780815394532>

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The inconclusive Spatial Justice

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In Sophie Watson (ed.), *Spatial Justice in the City*, London: Routledge, 2019

Disciplines

Spatial justice as a concept seems to be at home in many disciplines, such as geography, sociology, law, politics, philosophy and so on. Precisely because of this, its nature, definition, context and repercussions are yet to be worked out to a satisfactory degree. The contributions in this volume help advance the discussion, adding context and expanding the modes of defining and experiencing spatial justice. It is remarkable, for example, that spatial justice can inform contexts as varied as the gulf states, british self-defence manuals for women, water religious rituals, post-war housing reclamations, Instagram tags, waste transport and art practices – and likewise be informed by these new contexts. It attests to the richness but also potential vagueness of the concept.

What I am tasked to do here, in these brief concluding remarks, is to bring together some of the various strands of the concept and practice of spatial justice, both as they appear here and as they have informed my work so far, and move the concept in a direction that is both supradisciplinary and faithful to its legal and geographical origins; both theoretically-informed and immediately related to practice; and, finally, both as a quotidian occurrence and as a horizon of potential development.

Nature

Even before offering a definition, it is important to consider the nature of spatial justice. Some questions that might help situate it might be: is it a concept or an actual practice? Is it something already happening or something on the horizon, for which we need to wait? Can we talk about spatial justice as a right, an inalienable condition of the human being, an obligation even in terms of how to achieve it and preserve it? And consequently, can we talk about methods of achieving it, preserving it or even articulating it?

Despite the occasional wishful thinking, the chapters of this collection point to the opposite direction. Spatial justice is neither inalienable, nor easily achievable. Part of the difficulty (and the openness to new, fascinating challenges) is that it can no longer be thought of as just human. If it is a concept, no definition can be agreed upon. If it is a practice, its terrain might seem overly broad. A method of achieving it is not easily prescribed, its precise condition not articulable, its duration, consistency or eventual outcome not clearly sketched. Spatial justice seems to be dwelling in a grey area between impression, occasionally nebulous conceptual thinking, and an understanding that everyone kind of knows what spatial justice and for this reason a definitional engagement might not be worth pursuing.

The chapters of this collection converge, however, on some points. Perhaps the most important one is that spatial justice is an emergence. It arises from combinations of objects and bodies, human and nonhuman, spreading across embodied and material instances of space, but also across digital and ideological instances of space. Let us call these combinations, following Deleuze and Guattari, *assemblages*. Assemblages are the ground of spatial justice. They are the conditions of its possibility but also of its fragility: spatial justice emerges on an everyday basis, in an unfussed, unplanned even way, right next to us - but never to-order. Its emergence remains unpredictable. Likewise, if achieved, the whole situation is at risk of readily freezing and turning into something that feels much more unjust than just, an atmosphere of oppressive co-optation that from the inside feels comfortable and even rightful but is ontologically suspect. Spatial justice is a capricious thing, and one needs to be very careful in case it becomes yet another tool of co-optation or continuation of the status quo. It is our responsibility to sharpen the concept and its application, and set the steps for its achievement, to the extent possible.

Definition

There is a paucity of definitional attempts on spatial justice. The majority of the literature on spatial justice relies on the given approaches by Ed Soja and David Harvey.¹ These approaches, however important, rely on an anthropocentric, space-as-container, law-as-politics, justice-as-distribution or locality understanding of spatial justice.² It is clear that a different, more nuanced definition would have to convey the complexity and particularity of spatial justice in the epoch of the Anthropocene, by taking into consideration the posthuman, mediated nature of an assemblage as the ground of spatial justice; the fact that spatial justice is an emergence and not a prescribed action; that it is intimately connected with issues of excess and affect; and that it needs to be constantly revised and reconsidered rather than taken as a final destination.

Spatial justice is (or is also) a legal concept, to the extent that justice is administered by law and that legal resolutions of conflicts are often felt more like justice than any other resolution. But justice frequently comes down to an affective response, as most contributions amply show: just like its possibility of emergence, its reception is also excessive and not given to measurement.

For the above reasons, at different points in my work I have offered variations on the definition of spatial justice – partly to capture the performative aspect of the notion but also to reflect the waves of interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation that have been taking place in the past few years across law, geography, sociology and philosophy, in line with such developments as the corporeal turn, the spatial turn, the affective turn, the material turn and so on. The definition that seems more prominently used in this book is the agonistic take on space and corporeality I have attempted in my

¹ Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010; David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1973

² For my critical take on these, see A. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice: Body Lawscape Atmosphere*, London: Routledge, 2015

2015 book *Spatial Justice*. To put it simply, spatial justice is the question that arises when a body desires to move into the space of another body.

It is important that spatial justice remains a question. If it were an answer, namely an affirmative definition that would construct and suggest a specific situation, it would be tantamount to a situation of perfect emplacement of the various bodies along each other. It would be an ideal that would hark back to theological constructions of harmony and peace. It would finally capture time in eternity. It would, in short, be a utopia of unconvincing value, that would need to exclude conflict and for this reason also difference, and freeze time artificially thereby halting evolution or even mere change. But if it remains a question that keeps on being asked in search of an answer, every given answer would be precarious yet always bound to its context, short-lived yet also fluid, steeped in interrogation rather than safe in its affirmation. This might indeed be the only way in which spatial justice should be thought of. However convincing or necessary an answer to a spatial justice problem might appear, it must always be mediated by the changing conditions of the assemblage in order to avoid coagulating it into fixed positions.

This essentially means that spatial justice keeps on questioning the positionings that the various bodies take, and pushes them along new positions, constant readjustments, renewed considerations of other bodies. In short, spatial justice is movement.

Allow me now to look closer into the three elements of the definition of spatial justice I offered above, namely body, space and movement.

Body

A body is always collective. A body is always an assemblage. A body never moves as one, but always as a multiplicity. Francis Dodworth's chapter on the representation of women's self-defence in the past few decades, is the perfect example of how these assemblages emerge. When Dodworth writes that there has been a passage, from the 80s recommendation of jujitsu as self-defence to the later one about prevention of street crime against women, she presents us with a moving assemblage that keeps on incorporating different aspects of its environment. The assemblage here is not just the female bodies and the city, or the predatory male gaze. It is also the manuals that were urging different things according to the changing times and that "encouraged the reader to enfold particular forms of authority into the self". It is also society at large that was changing from a culture of fear to one of emancipation. The preventative development of the self-defence philosophy aimed at changing the wider society by encouraging women to be reading their environment, inserting their bodies in it and working it, rather than fearing it and positioning themselves at a defensive distance to it: an ever closer, ever moving assemblage of human and nonhuman bodies and objects. The assemblage is not just radiating outside but importantly, encloses its inside folds: in this case, it extends inside the individual human body, with clusters of bacteria and knots of neurons, always connected to the outside yet also maintaining their independence. Dodworth shows how the assemblage changes from within when

women were encouraged to manage the exterior manifestations of fear in the case of an assault: breathing to slow down the heart and prevent muscle spasms, or fist clenching and unclenching to keep the blood flowing and reduce trembling. Skin connects rather than separates. We are all part of an assemblage, our humanity mediated by other bodies, human and nonhuman, technological and 'natural', material and immaterial.

Is there a difference between bodies and objects? Although theory often uses either as inclusive of the other,³ and intents on clustering both human and nonhuman under the same rubric, I think it is important to acknowledge the often unconscious way these two seem to be differentiated. A body is often thought of as the animate version of a cluster of intensive (immaterial) and extensive (spatial and material) qualities. An object usually refers to the inanimate version of the same. Life breathes in and out of a body, but an object lies lifeless around until at best given life by a body. But what is the 'dirt' that is attached on the skin of the bodies observed by Sophie Watson in her aqueous chapter, all diligently queeuing up in in the various sites of religious purification? Is dirt a body or an object? Is it animate or inanimate?

It is necessary to go beyond this distinction. It is important to conceptualise life as a force of connection but also withdrawal.⁴ If one could depart slightly from the classic vitalist understandings, one would perhaps see that life is not just about connection (through breath, movement, skin) but also about *disconnection*, withdrawal from ontological transfer of meaning, withdrawal from access by and even to one's own self. The simultaneity of these two states, being connected and being withdrawn, is what can be thought of as life, anima, élan vital. Having life coursing through a body and indeed through an assemblage as a whole means that, under certain conditions, 'objects' become lively, carry agency and determine movement, just as traditional bodies. In Olga Sezneva's partly autoethnographic chapter on displacement and property repossession in postwar areas, her grandfather's clock becomes an object full of life, luminously appearing in its tactile surfaces, deliriously withdrawing from her when it came to the way it was brought over all the way from Germany. Likewise, in many chapters, objects appear as elemental and as extensive as any animate body: oil and its petropolitics, or air and its conditioning (Molotch and Ponzini), waste and its supposed movement away that, however, always returns to haunt the globe (Califate-Faria), or water and its extensive yet often opaque symbolism (Watson).

Bodies are also immaterial, as several chapters in this collection show. Digital bodies such as the Instagram-tagged bodies that appear in David Herbert's account of the trauma, or Gary Bridge's non-discursive and performative as well as aesthetic experiences that produce communicative excess, are all part of the moving assemblages that vie for the same place at the same time in terms of spatial justice.

³ Object-oriented Ontology and some strands of new materialism often use objects (e.g., Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2011; Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), whereas more vitalist and Spinozan strands often use bodies (e.g., Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

⁴ See extended argument in Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 'Lively Agency: Life and Law in the Anthropocene', in Irus Braverman (ed.), *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Legalities*, London: Routledge, 2016

Each assemblage emits affects that are part of its extension yet exceed even the movable, amoeba-like boundaries of the assemblage. This is the affective excess that cannot be controlled and that orders the space in and around the assemblage.

Space

Although it would seem obvious that one would need to emphasise the spatial when talking about spatial justice, this is not always easy. Space is an obstreperous entity and often in the literature ends up being thought of as mere container or in its various representations as regional political processes, community belonging, even simple localities. But as we know from Doreen Massey,⁵ space is both much more *and* much less than that. It is both a process and a material movement. Space is not the stage on which things happen. We can go further: bodies *are* themselves space, carry space in and around them, affect space and are affected by space when they move and when they rest. Space is both smooth and striated,⁶ both an ontological continuum (what is there outside space?) and full of ruptures (identities, properties, borders, temporal zones, death).

The chapters in this volume take to space in earnest. In its turn, space obligingly blossoms in its multiplicity of folds and surfaces. One encounters here the perhaps less surprising yet engrossingly observed spaces of homes, both abandoned and claimed, in Olga Sezneva's Kaliningrad; the contested spaces of post-apartheid South Africa as well as Roma France in Alison Rooke's observation of art practices as a way of both visibilising and erasing the specificity of spaces; and the digital spaces in David Herbert's account of how, eventually, physical and digital spaces converge in the way they both reinforce existing hierarchies of social preference and elevate the usual status-quo aesthetic preferences.

Something of added interest to me emerges in Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini's spaces of the Gulf states with their legal and illegal divisions across all layers of social and spatial organisation. In their chapter, they write how there are spaces of a legality, where the various laws are routinely ignored. They write "creating geographic zones of exception is so extensive in the Gulf that it becomes hard to think of laws and an administrative apparatus that is generally applicable to a given country or city, as opposed to specific districts (or a given check-out stand)." So, while the law is on the surface applied equally to all, in practice it is spatially and socially segregated. Is this however an alegal space, namely a space where there is no law? Or are these spaces where the law is otherwise, where state law applies less, and other kinds of laws, behavioural, social, postcolonial, oppressive, exploitative laws apply more? This is not just a theoretical point: if we accept that there are spaces without law, then we could even accept the greatest fallacy of law as an abstraction that applies universally. This is what I have tried to debunk with my theory of the *lawscape*, namely the tautology between law and space, and the

⁵ Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London: Sage, 2005

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, London: Athlone Press, 1988

impossibility of having one without the other. Lawscapes are grounds on which spatial justice routinely emerges, along or against the given law. It is important to understand that zones of exception are simply the confirmation of the lawscape – as we know after Agamben, only the sovereign can decide what is exempted. The exemption is the condition of possibility of the sovereign order – it is part of the lawscape, brimful with law.

Movement

All these bodies move with, through and against each other, generating lawscape (confirming existing and generating new spaces and new laws) with each movement. But the violence of space is that only one body (in its collectivity) can occupy the same space at the same time. Thus, the question of spatial justice emerges constantly when there is movement – do I have the right to be moving here, resting there, excluding this body from this space, inviting that body into my space? Did the residents of the new Kaliningrad have the ‘right’ to kick out the German residents from within their homes and occupy them anew? Does waste, in its movement from production to consumption (reuse, recycle, disposal) in Francisco Califate-Faria’s rollercoaster of political directionality of the most despised object of human existence, has priority over the rest of the planet?

These perhaps are not the right questions. Bodies move, and in their movement, they sometimes merge with other bodies but more often than not, they just displace other bodies. Waste displaces the already marginalised bodies of the globe, whether human or nonhuman, but also fuses with the planet into a catastrophic anthropocenic assemblage where humans and their waste are stifling everything else. The Russians displaced the ones who lost the war yet fused with the houses they left behind. There is a need to recognise (yet also fight against) the fact that violence is an inherent element of the movement of spatial justice. The point is of course reparation and reconciliation, but the better point would be prevention: have these bodies ask themselves whether they should be moving in the direction they seem to be moving in the first place? Have waste producers (every single one of us individually, but also all of us as part of a collectivity) seriously asked whether we should be producing so much waste?

And yet, perhaps the greatest movement of spatial justice is one of understanding. Olga Sezneva quotes from an interview of a new resident who took up possession of one of the German houses: “I was so happy, simply ecstatic. All I did was sit in my room looking out the window—my window! My room!” How can anyone judge this? How can anyone honestly, hand to heart, say that this is not a feeling one naturally identifies with? Part of the vicissitudes of property regimes no doubt, but also part of a deep desire to be living in a world where possessive pronouns can be freely used for at least some basic things like my home, my body, my life. These are ruptures in the continuum that are understandable, and we must be able to see them for what they are: deep ontological desires. Spatial justice, however, comes into this as a moderator of the desire to expand like a gas and take up all available space. Spatial justice questions the limits of our desires.

The greatest challenge, therefore, is to imagine a situation where different bodies co-exist. In Sophie Watson's chapter, co-presence of bodies and their movement is challenging when it comes to water rituals: "The chaplain at one university noted that Muslim colleagues are becoming better at articulating their needs to the institution, whereas previously they were 'over-grateful'; but others see special provision the privileging one group over another. Many of the problems in non-Islamic countries arise from a lack of understanding of the practice since people in Islamic countries are more used to seeing water on the floor." This simplest of things, water spilled on a toilet floor (where Muslim colleagues perform their purification ritual) calls upon two different spheres of legal acceptance: health and safety versus religious observance. "Co-presence", Watson carries on, "can thus be problematic." But this would be a moment of spatial justice: a short answer to the spilled water. A nod of the head and a smile, sure it is hard, how not to spill, sinks are so small. And that's it. For that quick moment, in the specific toilet, between those collective bodies of this and that, there will be a sprouting emergence of spatial justice.

And after this, what?

After this, the questioning continues. One needs to go back to the lawscape and question one's position. Acceptance is enough as a start, and might lead somewhere, but needs concerted efforts on all sides to go further and deeper. The lawscape needs to be re-oriented. Conflict will not disappear – and luckily, nor will difference. But the discourse might change, and the emerging register might become less sharp, more accommodating.