INCLUSIVE CITY BUILDING: URBAN JUSTICE THEORY

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Urban Justice Theory

Social justice is broadly defined as “the distribution of benefits and burdens in society” (Israel & Frenkel, 2018, p. 648). In applying social justice to space, the concept of ‘spatial justice’ emerges, and is defined as “the institutions, policies, discourse, and practices involved in formulating the organization of space, thus shaping human interactions that define (un)just geographies” (Israel & Frenkel, 2018, p. 650). Marcuse identifies two ‘cardinal forms of spatial injustice’: involuntary confinement and unequal allocation of resources across space (Marcuse et al., 2009b) with the latter being a key driver behind gentrification, economic precarity and cultural displacement.

Urban justice theory provides a framework for achieving socio-spatial justice at the scale of the neighbourhood and city. In her conception of what makes a just city, urban planner Susan Fainstein offers a theory of urban justice that seeks to address the challenge of applying concepts of justice to space, thereby fusing philosophy with economics, social sciences and geography.

According to Fainstein, the “just city is a city in which public investment and regulation… produce equitable outcomes rather than just support those already well off” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 3). Fainstein defines equity as “a distribution of both material and nonmaterial benefits derived from public policy that does not favour those who are already better off at the beginning. Further, it does not require that each person be treated the same but rather that treatment be appropriate” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 26). Fainstein seeks to move justice beyond a discussion of what’s “fair”, to one in which justice encompasses the principles of equity, democracy and diversity and is the first evaluative criterion used in urban planning policy (Fainstein, 2010). Within this theory, justice must be a universal principle that guides overall decision making rather than considered as a case-by-case negotiation, developed through ideals that arise out of discourse, and based on values that are socially constructed and communally held (Fainstein, 2010).

In order to direct spatial policy that advances sustainability and equality, metrics for measuring justice in relation to spatial processes and their social consequences are required (Israel & Frenkel, 2018). Marcuse advocates that urban policy must go beyond distributional equity, to support the full development of human capabilities for all (Marcuse et al., 2009a). Such metrics are challenging in this context for a variety of reasons, not the least is the difficulty of measuring the extent and impact of displacement, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in gentrifying neighbourhoods, despite displacement being well understood to impact unevenly on different raced and gendered working-class people (Gillespie et al., 2021; Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2006).

As a start, research studying displacement calls for mixing methods through qualitative approaches that allow for investigation at the spatial scale of the neighbourhood (Slater, 2006, 2009). Looking to philosopher Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, Israel and Fenkel identify a metric of socio-spatial justice as a "person's capabilities and his liberties to be and to do (opportunities or life chances) … and the extent to which these capabilities are equally distributed in space" (Israel & Frenkel, 2018, p. 648). Those living in neighborhoods experiencing both segregation and economic challenges have their liberties constrained, which in turn, limits their life-chances.

Acknowledging the difficulty of measuring social justice outcomes in their own right let alone differences in approaches to achieving them (i.e., measuring justice as part of democratic, inclusive engagement in the process of policy formulation vs. measuring justice as an equitable outcome of the process), Fainstein also identifies the challenge of urban justice policy formation given traditional debates about trade-offs between efficiency and equity. Here however, Fainstein states that pro-equity justice criterion "requires the policy maker to ask, efficiency or effectiveness to what end? If, instead of asking the overall benefit/cost ratio of a given project, we inquire as to the benefits and costs to those least well-off or those most directly and adversely affected, we are still concerned with efficiency" (Fainstein, 2010, p. 9). Further, Fainstein is clear that when a trade-off between efficiency and equity is to be made, the demands of justice should prevail.

Fainstein's theory of urban justice offers a counterideology that embeds the choice of justice as the normative governing framework for evaluating urban policy by providing a set of principles that planners can apply in their activities (Fainstein, 2010). She anticipates that the continued pressure for justice will lead to incremental improvements in the existing capitalist regime while simultaneously acknowledging David Harvey's criticism that her conception delimits its scope to acting within the existing capitalist regime of rights and freedoms.
To this, Fainstein counters that urban justice policies, "in isolation… would not be structurally transformative, but as a component of broader national and international movements, they would add to overall pressure for restructuring capitalism into a more humane system" (Fainstein, 2010, p. 6). Fainstein's theory of urban justice represents evolution over revolution, offering the potential to address the uneven spatial development and uneven power-spatial relations of capitalist modes of production while working within existing social and economic institutions.

As wealth disparity grows, integrating social justice into urban economic development may be an area of growing importance to cities as reflected in how they brand and market themselves. A 2015 bibliometric study examining the use and conceptual association of 12 different city labels used for place-based marketing during the years 1990-2019 pointed to the rise of a few new city labels during the 2010s including open city, safe city, inclusive city and the sharing city (Ma et al., 2019).

It would be premature to call the burgeoning of these labels as the rise of a new "social cluster," but it is tempting to consider them a sign of the new times, provided we see the evolution of these labels as a conceptual reflection of new societal needs in urban communities and a niche for both innovative policymakers, planners, and analysts to address. Can it be that the social dimensions reflected in the inclusive city become a more prominent aspect of the urban future than, say, economic or environmental ones, simply because current socio-economic situations in cities call for it (Anttiroiko & de Jong, 2020, pp. 15–16)?

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