13. Grounding justice and injustice

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Justice and injustice, equality and inequality, occur in places and only in places. Here are some ways to think about this reality.

Justice and injustice are produced through social practices in places and times, and are usefully explained with reference to those practices in those places, rather than solely with reference to formal, unsituated philosophical norms. This basic understanding about the nature of justice and injustice, drawn from developments in critical human geography over many decades (Harvey, 1973, 1996), is in sympathy with important recent writings from other disciplines (from economics, see Sen, 2009; from feminist political philosophy, see Young, 1990). In this contribution, several concepts are described that illuminate the ways in which justice and injustice are grounded in contexts and take on particular forms in different settings: the dispossession or displacement of nomadic peoples in China's Inner Mongolia, the absence of local people's views from planning responses to anticipated sea level rise in south-eastern Australia, and the material impediments to the right to the city in Cape Town, South Africa. In each of these examples, the stances taken by governments, at different levels and scales, are pivotal to local experiences of justice or injustice in places.

Grounded, justice-seeking, concepts: place, scale, environment, mobility, difference

For powerful thinking about the grounded production of justice and injustice, and of inequalities, the following five concepts provide a useful framework.

Locating justices and injustices in *places*. Place does more than describe variations in the lifestyles and landscapes of different locations. It includes a 'sense of place' that is basic to people's feelings of belonging and self-worth in a location of meaning to them. The idea of place also causes us to consider, as Harvey (1996) has it, 'the just production of just geographical differences', and how this might happen: how we might be different one from another and yet equal. It makes the matter of displacement a central question of justice and injustice: are conditions in some contexts separating people unjustly from their links to place?

Identifying the *scales* at which processes giving rise to justices and injustices in places occur and intersect. They are interrelated, too. We no longer refer to different 'scales' such as the global and the local uncritically. Rather, it is now recognized that the global is local and vice versa. But the concept of scale does cause us to investigate the production of processes that shift power from actors and institutions at one scale, to those at another – and how just or unjust this shifting of control over economies and people might be. In the example of the dispossession of nomadic people, the shift in the scale at which control over herders' lives exists is evident.

Taking up questions of *environment* as a way to make us conscious that the human world links with the non-human world and must respect it. In this, there are major issues of injustice and justice. Recognizing that what we see as 'nature' and 'the environment' is socially produced, critical social science now understands that markets have caused natural resources to be used in ways that give rise to hunger and poverty in certain places. Climate change is posing new questions about the distribution of justice and injustice: what new global inequalities will be associated with the Anthropocene?

The concept of *mobility* gives a different view of the production of justice and injustice, one that treats places as origins and destinations. Justice and injustice can be present in multiple ways as we think about mobility in places, including the institutional settings that give opportunities for mobility or deprive people of them. Mobility can be a justice-creating force and can prevent fixity in communities and places from being restrictive and unjust. A very visible mobility now is that of migrant and refugee movements from certain disadvantaged places to certain more advantaged ones. The implications of these mobilities are profound.

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Finally, *difference* is central to a grounded imagining of justice and injustice. It involves the recognition that any society contains different social groups whose varied interests need to be considered, and the understanding that difference can create a politics for unjustly segregating people. Power relations thread through and between these groups, as they exist in places, and may or may not assess people of different characteristics as equals. In each of the three examples discussed below, the views and lives of some groups of people are given priority over others. An awareness of the need to recognize difference helps us see that the favouring of certain interests over others may be unjust.

Key examples in grounding justice and injustice

Dispossession/displacement of nomadic people

To see the importance of place and also scale in the production of injustice and in the possibilities for justice, consider the dispossession and displacement of nomadic people. Such dispossession renders them sedentary and fixed in certain locations that are more limited than those on which their lives had previously been built. Examples of this practice abound – for example in attempts to close down services in tiny Indigenous communities in northern Australia, requiring people to obtain services from designated major towns and so to relocate there. There is the example of the Israeli government's attempts to 'settle' Bedouin people in the Negev desert region, by declaring small Bedouin settlements 'unrecognized' and requiring people to obtain services from centrally recognized townships. I focus below on analyses of the Chinese northern steppes of Inner Mongolia, conducted by the economic geographer Michael Webber (2012), that reveal the situated complexity of finding injustice and justice in the changes in this place.

Since 1998, forced ecological migration has occurred in northern China including Inner Mongolia, in light of the central government's view that land use practices by herders have resulted in degraded grasslands and increased desertification. Bans on grazing have meant that herders, almost all of them Mongols, have had to relinquish traditional ways and migrate to central towns, where they are encouraged to develop non-agricultural work such as animal processing and tourism. Those forced to migrate do not know whether they will ever be permitted to return to their old ways of life and places. Most were unhappy about the programme of migration, regretting the ensuing reduction in their self-sufficiency. Decision-making over their lives has been moved from the scale of their local group to that of government at a range of higher levels. Officials claim that people are richer than they were before they were moved, now that their livelihoods are more oriented to commercial markets. Presumably this constitutes 'justice' in the official view. The goals of conservationists wanting to protect the grasslands are also served. A goal of national ethnic unification has also been served by longstanding migration of Han Chinese into Mongol cultural zones. Yet many dispute the logics of justice and injustice at play here – the logic that good outcomes always derive from entering the market more thoroughly, and that ending traditional grazing practices is the way to protect the grasslands. Mongol critics observe that land degradation now exists because of crop farming introduced to the grasslands. They can no longer make their own decisions and live their lives self-sufficiently through mobility.

Climate change adaptation strategies in the times of places

Climate change and the scales of the processes contributing to it are tremendously significant in current discussions of environmental justice and injustice. The scales of relevance here are temporal as well as spatial. Global atmospheric processes affect everyone everywhere, but global warming has been caused by the actions of some people in some places whose economic development has benefited from these actions, and the negative outcomes are not falling solely on them in spatial terms. Nor is the harm of global warming falling justly in generational terms. Future generations are likely to face the consequences of the actions of their predecessors.

To these global and local dilemmas have come social scientific discussions of climate change adaptation, in which the focus is on resilient action rather than solely on mitigation. Of course that action must be taken in places, locally. In those local places, forms of science and policy usually made at different scales need to be considered.

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One study (Barnett et al., 2014) of tiny, disadvantaged coastal communities in south-eastern Australia that are subject to sea-level rise in a future of global warming has made suggestions about responding to this situation in a fair or just way. Its proposal is to align official policies for planning for climate change with local knowledge and practices for dealing with extreme environmental events that already exist in those places. Local knowledge, as expressed in everyday practices, often diverges from expert scientific opinion formed at larger scales (often the national and planetary) and the adaptation actions it suggests.

Residents of these small settlements build their environmental knowledge on the basis of known family and community histories, and make clear their understanding of the similarities between these experiences in the past, present and anticipated future. In this context, popular messages of permanent, climate-driven catastrophe that draw on 'the science' are incommensurable with residents' local time-spaces. The urgency that many decision-makers express for taking action now that will be appropriate for a future of higher sea levels and more frequent flooding is not shared by local residents. The official future-makers in senior levels of governments do not seem at present to be hearing the stories that local people are telling about what their futures could and should include. This is not to suggest that local people should be the sole arbiters of knowledge, or overly privileged in decision-making, but it is to say that effective planning for adaptation requires the inclusion of the varied perspectives of local people. Justice for local people is in part the way in which their everyday practices and understandings of time are included in adaptation to climate change

The 'right to the city'

As the urbanization and mobility of the world's population increases, we see people clamouring for access to the services and opportunities of the city, and especially to those parts of cities that are well provided with public services, public spaces and the civilities of community development. The right to the city is a notion (drawn from the writings of French philosopher and urbanist Henri Lefebvre) that is strongly held in discussions of the injustices and justices associated with urbanization. It means the right of all to the benefits that an adequately resourced urban life can have, and that they have a collective role in determining.

Life in the good city also recognizes difference and inequalities, where there will be a commitment to creating cosmopolitanism as well as providing infrastructure and employment.

Since 2001, when a world charter of the right to the city was developed at the first World Social Forum in Brazil, international meetings of urbanists and urban planners have been underpinned by the notion of the right to the city, amid concerns that privatization policies are reducing the public realm of cities (Harvey, 2008). The idea of the right to the city applies to existing inhabitants of urban areas, and to those who are part of national and international population movements, whose search for a better life is usually a search for a better life under modern urban conditions.

In their analysis of the urban injustices of the contemporary South African city, Parnell and Pieterse (2010) take up 'the issue of the universal right to the city as the moral platform from which the developmental role of the state should be defined' (Parnell and Pieterse, 2010, p. 147). They take the example of Cape Town, a large and well-resourced city which nevertheless has a considerable, spatially concentrated group of residents in poverty. They stress sensitivity to local scale and locational context in achieving poverty reduction as an expression of the right to the city. Local levels of the state are significant players here, not just national governments, as they have the close knowledge needed to improve the conditions of households and neighbourhoods.

Despite good intentions politically, the complex material conditions of Cape Town limit governmental capacity to deliver services to poor households and areas. In the past ten years, barriers to providing subsidies for services to poor households have been administrative. Many households are not present on the city's billing system for household infrastructural services because they are in areas never serviced, or in locations where bulk delivery of services had been made rather than delivery to households. Many households had no postal addresses and were thus invisible to agencies trying to get service subsidies to them. Things are gradually improving, but of course, 'the issue of informality lies at the core of this unspoken discussion of an alternative governance framework' (Parnell and Pieterse, 2010, p. 155).

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This example highlights the point that governmental bodies with the potential to be helpful and enabling may have limited capacity to be so. All states are not equal in their capacity. But a focus on the right to the city leads us to consider the complex situation in which governmental practices occur, at the scale of the lived everyday in a place. The mitigation of injustice relies on small steps as well as on large pronouncements to do with national policies and constitutions.

Conclusion

New forms of injustice and justice are being made all the time, in places, and old forms can persist just as inequalities can persist. Knowing how this happens requires us to ground our thinking and analysis of justice and injustice in situated contexts that are often local and multi-scaled, rather than relying solely on overarching understandings that are only vaguely related to the actual places in which people live and interact. As Harvey put it, 'the question of justice falls squarely into the middle of the tension between particularity and universalism' (Harvey, 1996, p. 332). We can have universal notions of justice, but these need to be situated in space and time, and grounded in contexts. A conceptual strategy that highlights place, scale, environment, mobility and difference can go a long way towards revealing not only what is happening and why, but what interventions might usefully enhance just outcomes there and reduce inequalities.

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