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Regions and the search for spatial justice: a question of capacity?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines scholarly and policy debates concerning the notion of spatial justice through reference to the idea of capacity. Our empirical material, drawn from a Horizon 2020 project, highlights a concern with three different yet overlapping aspects of capacity in relation to spatial justice, namely the capacity of regional actors: to make decisions concerning the distribution of resources and services; to create or enact appropriate formal and informal institutional structures to realise policy goals; and to develop spatially just policies in ways that recognise the geographical contexts in which they operate. Our study illustrates the need for additional clarity when viewing spatial justice as a matter of capacity. It also highlights the fact that enhanced capacity, alone, while an important precursor of spatial justice, does not guarantee spatial justice within specific regional settings.

KEYWORDS

spatial justice; regional capacity; European Union Cohesion Policy; Europe; regional agency

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in academic circles in the notion of spatial justice. Spatial justice has been defined as a slippery concept (Iveson, 2011), but, in essence, it refers to attempts to understand and overcome the spatial inequalities that affect individuals and groups. As such, it reflects a 'democratic process of equitably distributing social and environmental benefits and burdens within and between groups, territories, and generations' (Madanipour et al., 2022, p. 813). Originally propounded as a way of understanding urban inequalities (e.g., Davies, 1968; Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1970; Soja, 2010), recent academic work has begun to examine the potential of spatial justice as a way of rectifying territorial or regional (e.g., Kearns et al., 2014; Lang & Görmar, 2019), and rural (e.g., Mahon et al., 2023) inequalities. There is also evidence of an increased appetite in understanding the policy potential afforded by the concept of spatial justice. For instance, a growing disenchantment with the effectiveness of territorial cohesion policies as a means of addressing regional inequalities in Europe has led to questions being asked about the conceptual and applied utility of an alternative spatial justice approach (e.g., Demeterova, 2023;

European Commission, 2018, p. 3; Evrard & Schmitt, 2023; Franco & Marques da Costa, 2023). Such an approach, *inter alia*, places an emphasis on regions defining their own ideas of development and broadening the scope of public policy interventions beyond purely economic concerns (e.g., Jones et al., 2020).

A central concern of academic and policy engagements with spatial justice relates to issues of capacity or capabilities (and the related concept of autonomy) (Demeterova, 2023). Since the late 1960s, key authors have maintained that spatial justice should be based on the capacity of actors to contribute to urban transformation (Davies, 1968; Lefebvre, 1970), leading to an 'active participation in the political life, management, and the administration of the city' (Dikeç, 2001, p. 1790). Similarly, Sen's (2009) capabilities approach has been used by Israel and Frenkel (2017, p. 2) to develop a notion of urban spatial justice, based on the capabilities and liberties of individuals and groups to shape urban space. Such arguments apply equally to the search for spatial justice at the regional scale (Grange et al., 2024). Various authors have emphasised the need to view spatial justice as something that derives from the capacity of regional stakeholders to shape political and economic agendas in place-specific ways (e.g., Jones, 2019; Jones et al., 2020).

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Other authors have been more wary of the potential contribution that capacity or autonomy might make to the promotion of spatial justice within localities or regions. For instance, while Bulkeley et al. (2018, p. 703) claim that the ‘capacities of ... cities to foster wellbeing, sustainability and justice are intimately related to ways of understanding and practising autonomy’, they also maintain that there is a need to examine the influence of the geographical context within which such autonomy is exercised on the development of just policies. Alternative issues are raised by Blondel and Evrard (2019, p. 2) who argue that while ‘[m]ore local autonomy would ... be synonymous with more distributive justice for the benefit of local territories and their populations’, and while such autonomy might produce a ‘patina of a new, or at least stronger, equalising purpose’, there is no guarantee that an enhanced capacity or autonomy will lead to greater justice for different places or groups of people. Even more seriously, authors such as Cox (2019) claim that enhanced capacity and autonomy can actually hamper the promotion of spatial justice. Cox draws on the examples of the autonomy exercised by North American cities to show that a greater capacity can undermine attempts to promote solidarity and justice in inter-territorial contexts.

Such work points to the need for additional research on important conceptual and policy questions about the relationship between capacity (and autonomy) and spatial justice:

- To what extent does an enhanced capacity lead to greater spatial justice?
- More specifically, what is the relationship between local and regional capacity and procedural forms of justice (the fairness of institutions and decision-making processes), as well as distributive justice (the fairness in the distribution of rights or resources)?
- How do geographical contexts help or hinder the achievement of spatially just policy goals?
- What are the implications of regional capacity for the creation and maintenance of links with other localities and regions?

As a way of answering these questions, we interrogate empirical material collected over the past four years as part of a Horizon 2020 project on territorial cohesion and spatial justice in Europe. Throughout the project, our respondents were keen to emphasise the principle of capacity as a means of achieving spatially justice within their regions.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the conceptual literature associated with spatial justice and, particularly, the work that has examined the link between capacity/capability (and autonomy), and local and regional forms of justice. Section 3 elaborates on the project design that has informed our empirical work. Section 4 discusses our empirical material, which illuminates our respondents’ concern with notions of capacity in different contexts. Section 5 concludes by reflecting on the limits to capacity, and the broader implications of these limits for the utility of spatial justice as a way of addressing regional inequalities.

2. SPATIAL JUSTICE, CAPACITY AND AUTONOMY

The notion of spatial justice has a long history in the social sciences, particularly as a way of understanding and countering inequalities that exist at the urban scale. Davies (1968) sought to understand how local services were distributed with respect to the needs of designated service areas within cities, and Lefebvre (1970) conceptualised the fundamental socio-political changes needed to secure a just urban society. Harvey (1973, p. 306), too, viewed the city not only as the product of the spatial injustices of capitalism but also as the source of their abolition. More recently, Fainstein (2010) has described a just city in which resources and opportunities are redistributed, and diversity and democracy are celebrated. Similarly, Soja (2010) has used a study of the struggle over metropolitan transport in Los Angeles to develop a general argument about spatial rights and the processes that create injustice in cities.

A number of themes infuse the literature on spatial justice. First, scholars have emphasised the need to examine the nature of the relationship between space and justice. Instead of seeing space as merely a static container for justice or viewing spatial justice as ‘shorthand for social justice in space’ (Dabinett, 2011, p. 2391), there is a need to consider how spaces of governance may either reinforce injustices of different kinds or allow for new approaches to justice to be imagined (Fainstein, 2001). Second, authors have begun to consider how the relationship between justice and space might be articulated in contexts other than the urban. Merrifield and Swyngedouw (1997, p. 3) state that justice should take spatial, temporal and scalar differences into account, while Soja (2010, p. 20) maintains that ‘justice and injustice are infused into the multi-scalar geographies in which we live’. Various authors have begun to examine how spatial justice can be applied in different regional or territorial (Jones, 2019; Kearns et al., 2014; Lang & Görmar, 2019; Roberts & Green, 2013), and rural contexts (e.g., Mahon et al., 2023; Shucksmith et al., 2021; Woods, 2023).

Third – and most significant for the present discussion – research has stressed the importance of thinking through spatial justice in relation to issues of capacity and/or autonomy. Capacity and autonomy have been viewed as essential prerequisites for achieving spatial justice, witnessed most clearly in Lefebvre’s (1970) notion of the ‘right to the city’. In this conceptualisation of spatial justice, attention is drawn to issues of individual capacities, the right to space and place, and the ability to contribute to processes of urban transformation. These viewpoints have been affirmed more recently by a range of authors interested in urban spatial justice. For instance, for Blondel and Evrard (2020, p. 23, original emphasis), ‘autonomy is ... about *people’s and a locality’s enablement as a means to spatial justice*’ (also Dikeç, 2001, p. 1790). Similarly, Israel and Frenkel (2017, p. 648) maintain that the extent to which ‘capabilities are equally distributed in space will define

whether a given spatial arrangement is (un)just'. Capacity, capability and autonomy are viewed as inherent and essential elements in spatial justice, according to these conceptualisations. Such ideas also echo the significance that has been placed on notions of capabilities in relation to broader notions of justice (e.g., Rawls, 2009; Sen, 2009), whether in the context of material, discursive and experienced dimensions of social life (Moisio & Rossi, 2024).

The positive potential associated with an increased capacity has also been championed in geographical contexts beyond cities. Barca (2019, p. 86), for instance, has called for a more place-based approach to development in a European context, by which he means:

giving people in places stuck in an under-development trap the power and the knowledge to expand their 'sustainable freedom' by improving their access to, and the quality of, essential services, and by promoting the opportunity to innovate, thus reducing economic, social and recognition inequalities.

Jones et al. (2020, p. 898; see also Goodwin et al., 2012) echo such sentiments when they call for an explicit rescaling of spatial justice from the urban to the regional scale, that is, an interrogation of spatial justice as something that reflects 'a particular region's capabilities and liberties to shape its own future'. Similar claims have been made in rural contexts. For instance, Shucksmith et al. (2021, p. 322) argue that 'spatial justice should be pursued through a place-based approach which enables people to assert their own capacity to act and to pursue their own positive visions, specific to their diverse localities'. Taken together, such work illustrates the existence of an overwhelmingly positive and normative relationship between capacity and spatial justice. Capacity is viewed as an essential prerequisite of spatial justice.

Others, however, have attempted to question the existence of a necessary and normative connection between spatial justice and capacity or autonomy. Four issues emerge in the academic and policy literature. First, it has been claimed that a focus on capacity and autonomy can lead to an unhelpful emphasis on disaggregation and competition between localities and/or regions. For instance, Cox (2019, p. 16) views this as an unwanted and more radical version of autonomy that is prevalent in the US. He argues that:

for local autonomy to do serious damage to spatial justice it has to be of a more radical sort. ... It is radical ... because not only do local governments have the powers to compete; given their reliance on their own revenue raising, they have the desire.

An enhanced capacity to act or autonomy for localities or regions, in this sense, according to Cox, can undermine an idea of interregional solidarity, which is a key component of spatial justice. It is precisely for these reasons that Pickerrill and Chatterton (2006, p. 732) refer to autonomy as a 'dangerously fuzzy concept'. Moreover, they are

'concerned with movements that seek freedom and connection beyond nation states'. There are plentiful examples of regions that have used a discourse of increased capacity and autonomy as a means of ceding from broader political structures, such as the nation-state, and the political and economic responsibilities that derive from such an association. This is especially apparent in the context of economically successful regions, such as Catalonia (Dalle Mulle, 2017, p. 41), Bavaria (Sturm, 2018) and Lombardy (Agnew, 1995). While these regions might draw on a language of spatial justice as a means of justifying a greater autonomy for their own regions, there are clear concerns about the implications of such autonomy – or 'nationalism of the rich' (Dalle Mulle, 2017) – for ideas of spatial justice within the nation-state of which they are a part. As Blondel and Evrard (2020, p. 6) claim, 'marginal and peripheral territories cannot simply be abandoned, as their very situation does not allow them to face their problems alone and requires distributive justice at a larger scale'.

Second, there is a need to appreciate how notions of capacity and autonomy become entangled with distributive and procedural aspects of (spatial) justice. Conventionally, conceptualisations of the relationship between capacity and justice have tended to focus on distributive aspects, such as the distribution of resources and services. Young (1990, p. 18; see also Fraser, 2009), for instance, highlights the way in which ideas of capacity reflect a so-called 'distributive paradigm':

Most theorists take it as given, then, that justice is about distributions. The paradigm assumes a single model for all analyses of justice: all situations in which justice is at issue are analogous to the situation of persons dividing a stock of goods and comparing the size of the portions individuals have. Such a model implicitly assumes that individuals or other agents lie as nodes, points in the social field, among whom larger or smaller bundles of social goods are assigned.

Young (1990, pp. 21–22) maintains that framing justice in distributive terms is problematic since it can 'obscure the institutional context within which those distributions take place', as well as the 'decision making structures' (p. 23) associated with such institutions. Accordingly, for Young, 'the just organization of government institutions, and just methods of political decision-making, rarely get raised' (p. 22).

Others, however, contend that recent years have witnessed a shift in focus from distributive to more procedural aspects of justice or, in other words, to an examination of 'the processes which create unjust outcomes, notably relations of power' (Shucksmith et al., 2021, p. 323). In policy contexts, for instance, Madanipour et al. (2022, pp. 817–818); the European Commission (2004, p. iii) notes how there has been a growing emphasis within the European Union's (EU) territorial cohesion policies, at least since 2007, on 'devolving an increasing amount of responsibility for public to the regional and local level'. Academic contributions have also highlighted the need to focus attention on procedural aspects of justice.

Blondel and Evrard (2019, p. 7), as part of an introduction to a recent special issue on the theme of spatial justice and autonomy, have argued for the need to examine the ‘organisational and democratic adaptations that [an] increased autonomy may entail at local level’ and the effects that this increased autonomy might have on spatial justice. Conversely, it has been suggested that there is a need to move beyond a false dichotomy between distributive and procedural aspects of justice, and that a focus on spatial justice inevitably ‘combines procedural and distributive aspects’ (Madanipour et al., 2022, p. 35). In this paper, we view spatial justice as something that enables one to examine the interplay between the distribution of resources and the procedural aspects – the institutional contexts and decision-making structures – that allow that distribution to occur in the first place.

Third, recent research has demonstrated the significance of geographical context for understanding capacity and autonomy. Pickerill and Chatterton (2006, p. 731) have claimed that ‘autonomy is a contextual and situated tendency which has many trajectories’. It can encompass a wide range of political projects from secession and extreme forms of nationalism, through to extreme forms of neoliberalism and anti-globalisation movements. There is clearly a need to consider whether or not such demands for enhanced capacities and autonomy are being used to promote spatial justice. Furthermore, one must also be sensitive to the question of spatial justice for whom (Blondel & Evrard, 2019, p. 7). In addition, the geographical context within which autonomy is sought or promoted is also important. Bulkeley et al. (2018, p. 715) state that ‘[w]hilst ideas of autonomy travel easily from site to site and country to country, the specific environment where such autonomy is to be realised plays a key role in determining what it can really achieve’. Kovacs et al. (2024, p. 263) list some of these contextual factors, including: the ‘social, psychological and financial disposition’ of the society or community in the locality or region in question; the resourcefulness of the area, whether in terms of money, human capital or expertise; the national-level rules governing politics within the locality or region; the existence of path dependencies; and physical infrastructures (see also Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Jonas & Moisio, 2018).

Fourth, there is a need to consider capacity and autonomy in relational ways. Autonomy and, by extension, capacity are not distributed in zero-sum ways (Bulkeley et al., 2018, p. 705), with an increase in the capacity of certain localities or regions corresponding with a decrease in the capacity of either other stakeholders within the localities or regions in question, or the nation-states of which these localities or regions are a part. There is a need to consider how relations can facilitate or hamper the achievement of spatial justice in different contexts. To what extent do relationships facilitate spatial justice *within* the localities or regions in question. For instance, Bulkeley et al. (2018, p. 706) claim that ‘enhanced autonomy may be found ... through collaboration with communities or businesses within the city’. Another question

arises around the more relational – or extra-territorial – connections *between* localities and regions. Localities and regions, as such, can enhance their autonomy through exploiting relational, topological and ‘rhizomatic’ connections with other localities and regions (Bulkeley et al., 2018). There are clear parallels here with work of Amin (2004), who has called for a shift away from a stultifying ‘politics of propinquity’ or, in other words, the conventional forms of politics that take place within territorially defined jurisdictions. Instead, he demands an increased engagement with a ‘politics of connectivity’ or a re-imagined relational and topological form of politics in which localities and regions seek out connections with other like-minded and progressive localities and regions. Amin can be criticised for overstating the differences between a politics of propinquity and a politics of connectivity. As we show below in the empirical sections of this paper, the territorial forms of politics that exist within regions – and the capacities that derive from them – are intimately connected with efforts to define new and progressive connections with other regions.

Viewed as a whole, this valuable literature on spatial justice, capacity and autonomy highlights several significant questions, namely:

- How do regional-level stakeholders view the link between an enhanced capacity and ideas of spatial justice, understood in both distributive and procedural terms?
- How does the geographical context of a region influence its capacity to promote spatial justice?
- How do regional-level stakeholders navigate and act upon the relationship between enhanced capacities, spatial justice and relational links, particularly with other regions?

Our main goal in this paper is to address the first of these conceptual concerns. We do so for two reasons. The first is for practical reasons, namely a lack of space to engage thoroughly will all three. The second is more substantive and relates to the empirical realities of our case study. Our respondents, when discussing issues of capacity and spatial justice, were far more concerned with the principle of increasing capacity and, to a certain extent, autonomy as a means of delivering more just policies in distributive and, primarily, procedural contexts. Admittedly, they did refer, at times, both to the role that geographical context played in enabling or hindering spatial justice, and to the need to maintain and create relationships with other like-minded regions. However, these were very much secondary concerns for our respondents and, as such, we seek to reflect that relative lack of emphasis on those themes in our empirical discussion.

3. CASE STUDY AND METHODS

Our paper draws on a Horizon 2020 project, entitled Integrative Mechanism for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities, 2017–2021 (IMAJINE),

which has brought together 16 partners from 13 European states. This network sought to develop new integrative policy mechanisms to enable European, national and regional government agencies more effectively to address territorial inequalities within the EU. Importantly, it also sought to imagine a future for Europe in which the distribution of resources is consistent not only with the concept of territorial cohesion but also with principles of spatial justice. The project, thus, sought to rethink the ways in which a transformation from a macro-economic regional disparities paradigm to a more micro-level spatial justice paradigm might open up new modalities of European policymaking.

Our project focused on a number of different European regions and states. We strategically sampled a range of regions on the basis of several criteria, including: geographical location and history of accession into the EU; gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as a percentage of the EU mean; unemployment rates and current trends; the current economic and fiscal situation; the internal socio-economic inequalities; the degree of regional autonomy; and the existence of political movements. On the basis of securing a spread of regions with different characteristics, we focused our data collection on the member states of Ireland, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Poland and Romania. In this article we draw on empirical evidence from several regions within these states to provide illustrative examples of the various conceptual themes we highlight in relation to spatial justice and capacity (cf. Orum et al., 2016, pp. 5–7).

We draw on two kinds of research material as a way of examining differing engagements with spatial justice in this article. First, we use secondary data to trace the shifts in the ways in which the EU's territorial cohesion policies have become embedded in different regions and states over the past decade or so. We also draw on relevant policy statements and strategies from these regions and states, which engaged either explicitly or implicitly with notions of spatial justice. Some of these documents focused on regional policy and development issues, while others addressed other policy sectors that were implicitly connected to notions of spatial justice. These documents were subject to textual analysis, using codes that reflected the three main themes that structure our analysis.

A second source of evidence is the interview data that have been collected as part of the IMAJINE project. Through this material, we address the different viewpoints of regional policy experts, focusing on how they perceived their own state's approach to addressing territorial inequalities. This material discloses the ways in which the ideas of spatial justice – and particularly notions of capacity – were articulated by policymakers. In total, we draw on 68 recorded expert interviews conducted in the period 2017–18 in Germany, Ireland, Wales (UK), Finland and Greece. Due to the differences of territorial governance within these states, the data collection was not premised on a comparative framework. Instead, the aim was to produce a multifaceted dataset on the ways in

which regional inequalities, spatial justice, and notions of capacity were articulated and problematised in different geographical contexts. A total of 25 additional interviews were conducted in the period 2020–22 in northern and eastern Finland on similar kinds of issues. As the interviews were primarily aimed at policymakers, we deemed that theoretical concepts such as justice, well-being and fairness were too abstract and vague. In our semi-structured interviews, our focus was hence on the issue of territorial inequality (as translated to national languages) and the (in)ability of actors and institutions to respond to those inequalities. Interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were subject to textual analysis, using the same three codes.

4. IMPLEMENTING SPATIAL JUSTICE IN EUROPE

Our analysis in this empirical section discloses the different ways in which our respondents approached the link between capacity and spatial justice. We begin by discussing the evidence we collected on distributive dimensions of spatial justice, before proceeding to more procedural themes. However, it is evident that for many of our respondents, the distinction between more distributive and more procedural aspects of justice was not always clear. Finally, we discuss the evidence that highlights considerations around geographical context and relationality.

4.1. Making decisions concerning the distribution of resources and services

In general, the respondents were keen to emphasise distributive aspects of spatial justice, particularly in the context of the capacity of regional actors to make decisions about the distribution of goods and services both within their region and in a wider national setting (see also Jones, 2019, p. 99). Our respondents highlighted the need to consider, for instance, the range of voices included in decision-making and the extent to which efforts are made to increase the capacity of different stakeholders to contribute to such decisions (cf. Shucksmith et al., 2021, p. 326). They also emphasised the need to create just policies and related policy mechanisms for pinning down global processes or even counteracting political-economic conditions, which are unfavourable to the region in question in terms of distributing resources and services (Dalle Mulle, 2017, p. 41; Johnson & Koyama, 2017).

For our respondents, regional spatial justice derived from a *capacity to pursue a region's goals, and to have the fiscal, functional and organisational wherewithal to promote such goals*. A number of key themes emerged in this respect. First, structural factors were said to play a significant – and for many of our regions, a limiting – role in relation to accessing resources and services, and more broadly for the pursuit of spatial justice (cf. Rodríguez-Pose & Vidal-Bover, 2022). These structural kinds of argument were especially apparent in the context of some of the more disadvantaged regions of the EU we studied, including parts of Wales, Romania, Poland and

Greece. Respondents maintained that the disadvantaged positions of their respective regions within European and global economies made it far more challenging to make meaningful decisions about the distribution of resources and services. According to our interviewees, the launch of austerity policies across geographical contexts in Europe since 2009 made the situation in regions more challenging. The Greek interviewees noted that the economic recession and related austerity policies implemented in Greece since 2009 intensified existing regional inequalities, while the central state regained control of all policy interventions related to the distribution of resources and services in order to ensure the success of the EU's adjustment programme. One of our interviewees summarised this issue as follows:

The crisis reduced public spending and subsequently this caused serious problems in the public services such as schools, hospitals, police departments. Various services were shut down. The crisis also affected the private sector. [... All these] intensified spatial inequalities, and more particularly those among urban and rural areas.

(Civil servant from the Ministry of Rural Development and Food)

Fundamental structural inequalities, thus, were said to limit the capacity of regions to create positive policy outcomes. A respondent in Wales made a similar point. Despite large-scale investment by the EU through its first round of structural programmes, the interviewee reflected that 'our GDP per capita in [West Wales and the Valleys] hadn't really changed and we were still ... below the European threshold'. Fundamentally, for this respondent, despite billions of euros of European investment in Wales, the region's weak economic performance meant it still possessed limited capacity to make effective decisions about services and resources (Jones et al., 2020).

Second, many of our respondents stated that the achievement of spatial justice was hampered by a lack of human capacity within regions to attract economic resources. Certain regions within the EU, according to our data, lacked a capacity to attract, utilise, and distribute available regional and extra-regional assets in effective ways (cf. Shucksmith et al., 2021). For instance, some of our respondents in Finland argued that regional councils (the main regional agency in the context of EU funding) lacked 'wide shoulders' to mobilise EU funding in their regions in ways that would have a long-term impact. Accordingly, they faced difficulties in coping with the 'world' of EU project applications and vocabularies, and especially Finnish national laws that constrain the usage of EU funds in a national context. Similarly, a lack of competence and power was highlighted in the context of attracting private investments into regions. One Finnish interviewee argued that existing regional authorities are too 'lean' to attract and negotiate private investments. Our arguments above demonstrate that one dimension of regional capacity boils down to the capability of local and regional actors to 'couple' (MacKinnon, 2012)

their regions with different spaces of public and private investments. As such, regional capacity pertains to the ways in which relations between regions and their out-sides, as well as related forms of dependence and dominance, are constituted in a particular historical conjuncture (Moisio, 2024).

A third set of regional incapacities relate to the ability of regions to make decisions about resources and services within the contexts of the broader state bureaucracies within which they are embedded (Bache, 1999). Positioning oneself effectively in relation to state bureaucracies was deemed by certain respondents to be crucial if their regions were successfully able to access funds and other kinds of governmental support to enable the creation of just futures. Such issues came to the fore in particular in Finland. One interviewed municipal mayor argued that the Ministry of Finance in Finland limited the agency of regions and municipalities, choosing instead to view them as 'colonies'. This notion is important in many respects, not least because it discloses some of the ways in which the distribution-related aspects of spatial justice are deeply intertwined with the issue of political recognition.

Our respondents reflected whether they were treated as valuable and equal partners in the regional development processes, or if they were treated as 'second class' stakeholders. Despite protestations from the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Affairs that they were supporting municipalities and regions to become responsible for finding their own competitive advantages and niches of specialisation in order to make their territory successful and sustainable, our interviewees in those municipalities and regions suggested that the opposite was, in fact, the case (Moisio, 2008). Our respondents in municipalities and regions perceived that central state bureaucracies not only had poor knowledge of regional specificities but also that state bureaucracies were actually limiting municipalities' and regions' capacity to develop creative solutions to the allocation of resources and services. One creative solution to this problem was for regional actors to bypass national-level governance agencies and engage directly with EU actors. For instance, an interviewee from the Regional Council of Lapland maintained that it is strategically important to keep on eye on the conceptual and ideological developments of the EU regional policies. They stated that '[w]e follow the speeches and agendas set by [EU regional] commissioners carefully in order to detect certain words', we 'include these in our regional strategies', with the upshot that 'the [EU] commission then sees that these guys know their business'.

A fourth set of considerations in relation to distributive aspects of justice emerged in our research, namely that the only effective way of enabling regions to address both material and institutional limits to the promotion of spatial was to pursue greater autonomy, even independence from their respective states. Our research showed that the very existence of a high number of secessionist parties across Europe is predicated on the belief that the territorial status

quo acts as a fundamental limiter of the capacity of regions to make fundamental decisions about the allocation of resources and services (De Winter, 1998). For some regional actors, independence is viewed as something that is entwined with notions of spatial justice. An independent region was viewed by some as an important product of spatially just policies. Conversely, independence was viewed as a prerequisite of more spatially just policies, ones that would be free from the stultifying influence of the nation-state. Such arguments were clearly evidenced in the Spanish context. Arguments about the failings of the Spanish state, and their implications for the delivery of regionally just policies, have been a consistent theme for both Catalan and Galician regionalist movements (Elias & Lewis, 2021). Regionalist parties in these two regions have increasingly moved away from demands for more self-rule within Spain to more radical calls of fundamental territorial reform and ‘another state model’ (p. 144). Such territorial reform, in this sense, becomes a marker of a region’s ability to make more equitable decisions about resources and services.

4.2. Distributive justice: creating institutional structures to realise policy goals

Our empirical material also demonstrated an additional concern with procedural aspects of spatial justice. An emphasis was placed both on the role that institutions could play in sustaining inequalities and on the positive potential of institutions to facilitate spatial justice. An important set of considerations, according to our respondents, hence revolved around the capacity of regions to *create regional institutions and spaces of governance* to promote spatial justice.

Clearly, for some of our respondents, inherited institutions and territories of governance could create negative consequences for the delivery of spatially just policies. Some of the more obvious challenges arose in the context of territorial and scalar tensions between regions and the nation-states within which they are located. For example, Greek interviewees representing the central state apparatus argued that policies aiming to reduce territorial inequality should be planned at the national level by the relevant ministries, while the implementation of these policies required the cooperation of regional authorities who ‘have better knowledge of the spatial deficits or disadvantages’. And yet, such organisational and scalar cooperation was not always forthcoming in Greece. Similarly, some of the Italian interviewees stated that regions should be the key actors in addressing territorial inequalities, but that their work should be placed within a clear framework of principles, and guidelines defined by the central state. Taken together, such examples demonstrate the view that spatial justice can only be achieved through an effective dialogue between institutions and territories (cf. Brenner, 1999). The examples also suggest that working with pre-existing territories and institutions of governance can actually hamper the achievement of such policy goals.

As a result, some of our respondents contended that the pursuit of spatially just policies should be facilitated

through the creation of new institutions and territories of governance. This view was particularly significant in Wales, specifically in relation to the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, which was passed in 2015 as a marker of the Welsh Government’s commitment towards sustainable development, societal well-being and, implicitly, spatial justice (Jones et al., 2020). The creation of new organisations and territories of governance was deemed to form one important step in this direction. A part of the Act, the role of a Commissioner for the Well-being of Future Generations has been created in order to champion Wales’s commitment to sustainable development, well-being and justice. The Commissioner’s Office sets annual priorities for well-being and plays a role in evaluating the contributions made by various public bodies in Wales in seeking to promote well-being within their operations (Welsh Government, 2015). The office also advises on the implementation of well-being at a more local level in Wales. As part of the Well-being Act, a series of public services boards have been created in Wales, which are largely based on local authority boundaries, and which have been tasked with producing local well-being assessments and setting localised objectives towards the national well-being goals (Jones, 2019, p. 906). Our respondents stated that Wales’s capacity to create this new organisational and territorial structure was necessary to its overall ambition to deliver well-being and spatial justice within the region.

It is as yet too early to tell whether the new organisations and territories of governance created as part of the Well-being Act have, indeed, led to the implementation of more just policies. However, the early signs are relatively hopeful. First, the Act was developed on the basis of an extensive consultation with a wide range of sectoral and place-based stakeholders in Wales. As such, there was clear effort to include a wide range of voices into a national deliberation about ‘The Wales We Want’ (Jones & Ross, 2016). Second, there is evidence to suggest that this process of consultation enabled Wales to create its own interpretation of development. Our interviewees described the Act as something that would enable Wales to develop its own, tailored and regionally specific vision of regional development, with its emphasis on social justice and the Welsh language being particularly distinctive (Jones et al., 2020). Again, it is too early to tell whether the Act has, in fact, led to more social justice and a greater support for the Welsh language, but we contend that the fact that it even emphasises these policy goals should be viewed as a positive sign of the ability of these organisations and territories of governance to promote new forms of spatial justice.

4.3. Geographical context and relational connections

In the final empirical section, we discuss briefly a secondary set of concerns for our respondents, which reflected some of the other themes discussed above in section 2. First, our interviewees on a number of occasions

highlighted the need to take geographical context into account when seeking to grapple with territorial inequalities and means of promoting spatial justice. *Geographical context, in particular, was viewed as something that often hindered the ability of regions to achieve spatial justice.* Second, our interviewees were also conscious of *the interplay between additional capacity and the need to either create or sustain relational connections with other regions.*

First, the issue of geographical context was primarily viewed as something that made more difficult the achievement of spatial justice. Unsurprisingly, aspects of the physical geography of regions and territories were deemed to be significant contributors to territorial inequalities, thus inhibiting the achievement of more spatially just policy goals. For those living on some of the Greek islands, for example, insularity (understood in a literal sense), peripherality and lack of spatial connectivity with the key urban centres in Greece were deemed to be important markers of economic underperformance. Even more significantly, such physical challenges did not feature in any generic measures of economic development and ‘success’, such as GDP and gross value added (GVA). As such, our respondents argued for a more nuanced approach to spatial justice, which could take heed of the specific challenges facing the Greek islands. A similar set of issues was raised in Lapland in Finland. Here, the physical distance separating the region from the capital, Helsinki, was deemed to create additional difficulties for the economic development of the region, particularly in terms of transport, logistics and skills deficits. It is noteworthy that these difficulties were articulated with reference to the overall discourse of the ‘biased national regional policy’. For instance, when we asked about the hopes of regional authorities concerning public funding in transport and logistics, one respondent argued as follows:

We hope to receive enabling investments in infrastructure. And we hope to have another kind of public discourse on regional policy. For example, governments could do a lot to promote investment if, for example, the Prime Minister announced that it was worth investing in remote areas and that the state would encourage such activities in the long term. This would be easy to implement and would significantly change expectations, instead of keeping the issue completely silent or just talking about the development of the largest urban areas.

(regional developer, Lapland, 2020)

Another set of geographical challenges for spatial justice revolved around imagined – and, indeed, more topological – distances between localities in different regions. A particularly striking example was to be found in Wales. As a means of accessing EU Structural Funds, Wales was subdivided into two NUTS-2 (EU designated) regions: a more prosperous East Wales and a more deprived West Wales and the Valleys (Gripaios & Bishop, 2006, p. 939). Unfortunately, neither East Wales nor West Wales and the Valleys are coherent regions functionally, geographically or historically. A number of our

respondents in Wales drew attention to the fact that the newly created funding boundaries had created an artificial dislocation between contiguous areas. For instance, an important functional region extends from the relatively prosperous Welsh capital, Cardiff, to some of the most deprived local authorities in the South Wales valleys. However, these connections had been severed by the artificial assignment of these places to separate regions. The upshot of this separation was the creation of a series of imagined – topologically extensive – distances between areas that are physically adjacent to each other, with fundamental implications for the promotion of a coherent approach to spatial justice in Wales. For example, an advisor working with local government explained the difficulties of developing coherent funded programmes and interventions that crossed these NUTS-2 boundaries. Two separate applications would be required for the same project (one for each region), different levels of funding would be given to each region, and this differential level of funding would need to be meticulously accounted for (Jones et al., 2020). It was for this reason that several of our respondents saw the UK’s departure from the EU as an opportunity to develop a more geographically coherent approach to promoting spatial justice throughout the whole of Wales. As the Welsh Government (2017, p. 14) recently noted:

A potential benefit of being outside of the EU will be the opportunity to work more systematically with functional regional areas that reflect the economic reality in each part of Wales, rather than being constrained by the current geographical and fund-specific limitations. We will no longer need to separate parts of West and East Wales artificially, or address the needs of rural areas, people, and businesses entirely separately.

However, geographical context was not always viewed as an inhibitor of spatial justice. We witnessed this most clearly in relation to the way in which regional respondents in many settings emphasised a need for a capacity to tailor developmental goals to the specific geographical contexts of the regions within which they were operating. Emphasising the geographical distinctiveness of developmental goals was said to help the promotion of the goals in question. There are strong connections here with the theoretical literature on spatial justice. Many authors have contended that one key facet of spatial justice is the way in which it emphasises a value in articulating well-being, progress and the ‘good life’ in ways that reflect the priorities of specific groups of people or places (Israel & Frenkel, 2017; Storper, 2011, p. 19). It was noticeable that our interviewees outlined distinctive conceptions of progress and development for their regions, and that a capacity to articulate such visions was deemed to be important for the promotion of spatial justice (Weckroth & Moisio, 2020).

For instance, our interviewees in Wales viewed the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 as something that would give stakeholders in Wales the

opportunity to develop a tailored and geographically specific vision of regional development. Our research on secessionist movements in other European regions showed a desire to tailor policies so that they addressed the specific concerns of regions. For instance, regional movements in Galicia argued strongly in favour of the need for greater devolution of power to the region, thus making it possible for it more effectively to develop a suite of policy programmes that would be – as shown in the following quotation – reflective of Galicia’s ‘specificities’:

Any change in Galicia’s institutional status must be guided by the objective of securing the capacity of our nation to take political decisions, departing from the following principles: deciding for ourselves on Galicia’s economic and productive structures in order to promote economic growth and adequate jobs according to our potential and capacity; an exclusive right to plan, direct and manage those public services linked with welfare in order to provide services that are adequate for our specificities.

(Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG), 2016, p. 9)

The quotation articulates a need to create a specific vision of economic development, which reflected the geographical distinctiveness of Galicia as a region. Other regional movements – such as Kashubia and Szeklerland – approached notions of capacity and justice in more cultural terms, arguing for the need for a greater capacity to support regional or minority cultures and languages (Elias et al., 2020, p. 67).

Finally, we want to consider briefly evidence that shows the extent to which regional actors reflected on the need to reconcile a greater capacity to act with a need to forge relations with other regions. As noted above, some have voiced concerns that a focus on increasing local and regional capacity can potentially lead to a situation in which locations and regions – particularly successful ones – can divorce themselves from the nation-states within which they are located, with negative consequences for the promotion of spatial justice at national scales (Cox, 2019). There is evidence to suggest that such trends are operating in European regions. Our work in Bavaria, for instance, showed that certain stakeholders within the region were questioning their ongoing financial commitment to other, less successful, regions within the federal state (Sturm, 2018). Differing discourses of spatial justice were articulated here, with the perceived ‘subsidy’ of other German regions by Bavaria being viewed as a form of structural and spatial injustice. An increased capacity and independence was demanded for Bavaria through a reduction in its financial relationships with other German regions. Spatial justice at a German national scale was deemed to be of marginal importance.

In other regions, however, there was a strong view that spatial justice could be promoted more effectively through making connections with other, like-minded, regions. This tendency has been particularly prevalent in the UK. Evidence suggests that the UK’s departure from the EU

has encouraged regions such as Wales to promote stronger connections with other regions across Europe. For instance, the Welsh and Irish governments published a shared statement and joint action plan in 2021 as a means of signalling each other’s commitment to joint working following Brexit, particularly around the themes of: climate and sustainability; trade and tourism; education and research; culture, language and heritage; communities, diaspora and sport (Government of Ireland & Welsh Government, 2021). The Welsh Government has also supported the formation of an Irish Sea Framework bringing together a range of territories bordering the Irish Sea, including Ireland, Scotland, Northern Ireland, North West England, South West England and the Isle of Man.¹ It has also sought to forge stronger links with similar, ‘Celtic’, regions. A newly formed Celtic Forum, bringing together high-level representatives from the Scottish, Irish, Welsh and Breton governments, met in Brittany in August 2023.

The advent of these new relational, ‘para-diplomatic’ (Wyn Jones & Royles, 2012) connections have assumed a new urgency post-Brexit as Wales has sought to carve out relationships with new regional partners, independently of the UK state. Our respondents have suggested that one key reason for these developments has been a perceived need by the Welsh Government to withdraw – to the extent that it can – from the allegedly more populist and unjust policies being pursued by the then UK-based Conservative government and to engage in more productive connections with other like-minded regions. The evidence is not clear-cut – at least at present – but the new connections being forged are suggestive of attempts by the Welsh Government to use the capacity that it has to create regional coalitions around themes of spatial justice.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have identified different ways of approaching spatial justice, specifically within regional contexts, as a matter of capacity. We have argued that regional disparities are reproduced not only by the selective distribution of economic resources but also by political institutions and misrecognition (Grange et al., 2024). For this reason, we have examined factors of capacity and relationality that potentially contribute to the political production of spatially just regional futures. Our empirical material illustrated the significance of capacity in relation to two interrelated issues, namely the distribution of resources and the creation of new institutional structures. While some respondents highlight one of these above the others, in other cases they were viewed as being interdependent. There is a need for further research on the contingent links between these distributive and procedural aspects of spatial justice. Another set of issues, while significant in the academic literature, were less apparent in our data, namely the importance of geographical context and issues of relationality. Again, the impact of such issues on the achievement or otherwise of spatial should be the

focus of further academic and policy analysis, particularly with respect to the tensions between regional autonomy and solidarity.

Taken together, our work demonstrates that notions of capacity should remain at the heart of debates around regional forms of spatial justice. However, capacity should not be viewed as an unproblematic solution to different kinds of spatial inequality. In addition to the issues noted above, a number of key considerations are deserving of further research. First, and most starkly, an additional capacity does not necessarily equal justice. There is a need to interrogate how an additional capacity for regions leads to particular kinds of ‘filling in’ of institutions and policies (cf. Goodwin et al., 2012). While an increased capacity within a region might be viewed as one precursor of an increased spatial justice – and this was indeed the case for some of our respondents – there is an additional need to examine the use that is made of this additional capacity. An additional capacity to shape institutions and policies at a regional scale may well lead to more spatially just approaches and more equality for individuals, groups and places, but there is no guarantee that this will happen. There is a need to interrogate the impact of regional capacity on justice for different groups of people and for different places (Blondel & Evrard, 2019, p. 7).

Second, there is a need to distinguish between regional capacity and regional autonomy. We have perhaps been guilty of conflating the conceptual literatures on capacity and autonomy in this article but there is a need to differentiate between the two concepts. Blondel and Evrard (2020, p. 5), drawing on Clark (1984), define autonomy as something that combines two powers: ‘initiation and immunity’. Autonomy, in this sense, represents an enhanced form of capacity. Increased capacity allows – in our case – regions proactively to initiate actions and to respond to opportunities in more effective ways but autonomy reflects an ability to initiate such actions, while also being immune from the potential implications of those actions. There is a need to think through, more fully, the links between initiation, immunity and spatial justice. While there is a justice associated with a regional capacity to initiate actions, the idea that regions could also be immune from the consequences of those actions paints a more problematic picture. Should autonomous regions be immune from challenge, either from their citizens or the nation-states of which they are a part (cf. Cox, 2019)? Such statements are suggestive of the need for us to support an additional capacity as a precursor to spatial justice, while potentially being more suspicious of demands for regional autonomy.

The above discussion leads us on to a third important theme, namely the need to recognise the limits to regional capacity. Regions, no matter how enhanced their capacity – indeed, no matter how autonomous they are – are never immune from consequences. Rarely are they ever truly wholly able to initiate actions on their own. We have shown how regions struggle to combat structural inequalities and to access state bureaucracies in effective ways. In all of this, we should realise that regional capacities to

promote spatial justice are imbricated with uneven power and politics. In that sense, it is striking that the majority of the empirical examples discussed in this article refer to a *lack* of regional capacity or autonomy. Viewed as a whole, such arguments point to a fundamental conclusion to this article; one policy-related and another more conceptual. While an enhanced regional capacity might be viewed as an important precondition of spatial justice, it is not necessarily the case that an enhanced capacity will lead automatically to an enhanced spatial justice for the region in question. The key policy questions that arise are:

- What is to be done with that additional regional capacity and to what extent can the potentialities of that additional regional capacity be realised?
And in more conceptual contexts, we perhaps should focus more attention on understanding the realities of a *lack* of regional autonomy or capacity to act.
- What are the conceptual implications arising from examining more fully a relative absence of capacity or autonomy?
- To what extent can spatial justice be achieved in such ‘strained’ circumstances?

There is clearly work for regional scholars of all kinds to undertake on those important conceptual questions.

Finally, the question of regional capacity is likely to become an even thornier issue in the contemporary context, not least because of the polymorphous geopolitical reordering of global capitalism and the changing role of the state as a promoter, supervisor and owner of capital (Alami, 2023). As a result of the coronavirus crisis, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and increasing geoeconomic tensions between China and the United States, globalisation has undergone a qualitative shift, as interdependencies are eradicated and security and geopolitics are located within reconfigured production and value chains. In Europe, the construction of a new phase of globalisation is likely to lead to a change in the spatial development debate, including the EU’s cohesion policies, and the possible use of new EU funds in the process of strengthening EU’s ‘strategic autonomy’. The ongoing qualitative reworking of globalisation is hence closely connected to the issues of spatial justice and regional capacity in Europe. The capacity of regions to shape the new spaces of capital and geopolitics is both an opportunity and challenge in such an age of geopolitical turbulence.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper uses expert interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021. During these interviews, the interviewees were informed that we may use quotations from this material anonymously in our academic publications. Hence, we confirm that all subjects have provided appropriate informed consent on the use of the interviews in our research.

NOTE

1. See <https://www.gov.wales/irish-sea-framework-guidance> (accessed on 9 January 2024).

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