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The concept of spatial justice and the European Union’s territorial cohesion

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Abstract

Regional disparities and inequalities have been a key concern in the EU. This paper develops a concept of spatial justice to examine the European Union policy of territorial cohesion and its reforms. It identifies three key dimensions of spatial justice that distinguish it from social justice: spatiality, which draws attention to spatial aspects of justice; integration of distributive and procedural justice, which goes beyond this controversial dichotomy in social justice; and inclusion, which crosses the boundaries and addresses both inter-regional and intra-regional inequality. This concept of spatial justice is then used to analyse the EU’s territorial cohesion approach, a turning point in cohesion policy focusing on spatial imbalances in an enlarged EU. Critical analysis of the seven treaties since 1951 and seven cohesion reports since 1996 shows that this spatial emphasis has been added to, rather than integrated with, social and economic cohesion. It moves from inter-regional redistribution to intra-regional development and from distributive to procedural concerns. Rather than integrating society and space, distributive and procedural justice, and inter-regional and intra-regional cohesion, it moves from one pole to the other. Therefore, its contribution to spatial justice has been limited, providing necessary but insufficient responses to spatial imbalances and social inequalities.

Keywords

Social justice; regional inequality; spatial justice; European Union; territorial cohesion

The unification of the European space, through the Single Market’s four freedoms, which are considered by many as its greatest achievement, has contributed to the continent’s economic growth (Enderlein and Fritz-Vannahme 2017). However, the free movement of goods, people, services and capital across widely different regions has also intensified the challenges of uneven development. As the State of European Cities report shows, jobs and people are moving to high income cities; and while metropolitan regions grow, peripheral and remote regions dwindle and decline (European Commission 2016). Regional disparity in economic output and income in the EU is more extreme than the US and Japan, and exposure to the challenges of globalization and changes in demography, energy and climate is unequal (European Commission 2008a), further exacerbated by global economic and health crises.
The main instrument of addressing regional inequalities in the European Union has been the cohesion policy, focusing on economic and social cohesion and contributing to the European Social Model (Official Journal 2006; Vaughan-Whitehead 2015). The addition of a territorial dimension to the cohesion policy was part of a process of ongoing reforms, in response to the EU’s enlargement and the global financial crisis (European Commission 2008b). These reforms and the territorial cohesion policy have been widely analysed and discussed by researchers and policy makers from various perspectives (Davoudi 2005; Faludi 2007; Van Well 2012; Nosek 2017; Sá Marques et al. 2018). As territorial cohesion targets spatial imbalances (EC 2001), we have adopted spatial justice as the framework with which to investigate the policy, its transformation and its implications. The notion of spatial justice has been used by scholars to analyse urban processes (Soja 2010a; Marcuse 2010; Fainstein 2011) and the cohesion policy (Dabinett 2010; Jones, Goodwin-Hawkins, and Woods 2020). In this paper, we develop a concept of spatial justice by a critical engagement with this work and with the concept of social justice, to examine territorial cohesion and its implications for regional inequality.

The aims of this paper, therefore, are twofold: first, articulating a concept of spatial justice that can be used in analysing policy processes, and second, analysing a key EU policy through this conceptual framework. The paper is, correspondingly, organized into two parts. The first part develops a concept of spatial justice, identifying three dimensions that differentiate it from social justice: attention to the inherent spatiality of social processes, capability of overcoming the distributive-procedural dichotomy, and potential for crossing national boundaries. The second part analyses territorial cohesion through these three dimensions. By analysing the seven treaties that have constituted the European Union since 1951 and the seven cohesion reports that have outlined its key ideas and achievements since 1996, we critically examine the territorial cohesion policy and its transformations through the lens of spatial justice and its three dimensions.

Spatial justice

We start by asking whether we need spatial justice at all, whether it adds anything to the debate or is merely an empty phrase, and whether a new conceptualization is needed. In response, we have identified three problems about space, justice and society that structure our inquiry and lead to a conceptualization of spatial justice. First, inequality and injustice have a spatial dimension, which requires attention and sensitivity. As a concept, spatial justice has been around since the 1970s (Soja 2010a), but it remains ill-defined, contested and wrongly contrasted with social justice (Iveson 2011; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010). Second, approaches to justice tend to fall into the trap of a false opposition between process and outcome, between procedural justice and distributive justice (Soja 2011; Marcuse 2010; Young 1990; Rawls 1971). Third, the concept of social justice has often been limited to national territories, and spatial justice, with its overlaps with the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996), has tended to focus on urban processes (Fainstein 2014; Marcuse 2010), whereas the EU is also facing disparities and inequalities across regions and countries. We discuss these points to develop our concept in the following three sections.
**Spatiality of (in)justice**

A major line of debate in spatial justice revolves around the meaning of space and its relationship with society. Social researchers have long noticed the spatial dimension of social processes (e.g. Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925), but as separate dimensions, sometimes even dichotomizing society and space, social justice and spatial justice. Moreover, there is no common agreement on whether spatial justice is a meaningful or well-defined term.

For some scholars, spatiality is significant in social relations, but does not share an equal footing: the goal is social justice, and spatiality is cast as the geographical dimension of social processes. Harvey (1988 [1973]) drew attention to the relationship between society and space in capitalism, how the patterns of investment in the built environment lead to social injustice, and how spatiality plays a role in social injustice. Harvey (2008, 33) sheds light on the dark sides of ‘Surplus absorption through urban transformation’, arguing that injustice is so integral to capitalism and its neoliberal manifestation that justice is not achievable within this system and can only be possible by its structural transformation. Marcuse (2010, 84) argues for ‘Putting space in its place’, as spatial injustice is derivative of social injustice and cannot be addressed by spatial or even social remedies. He identifies two primary forms of spatial injustice as the ‘involuntary confinement of any group to a limited space’, as in segregation and ghettoization, and the unfair and unequal allocation of resources over space (ibid). These are the spatial aspects of social injustice, and spatial remedies are necessary but not sufficient. The US and EU policies of limited spatial improvement, Marcuse argues, are ‘gilding the ghetto’ and do not deal with what caused injustice in the first place (ibid:90). Spatial justice can contribute to social justice, but only to a limited extent.

An overlapping but different view does not accept that the spatial is a mere derivative of the social, rejecting the one-sided primacy of social processes as social historicism (Soja 2011; Iveson 2011). Following Lefebvre (1991), Soja emphasizes the ontological spatiality of being, the social production of spatiality, and the socio-spatial dialectic, which give ‘equal force and mutual causality to social and spatial processes’ (Soja 2010b; 2011, 261). This means paying attention to the geographies in which we live, which can have positive or negative consequences for us. Soja (2011, 262) tries to reassure the first group that, ‘Seeking spatial justice takes nothing away from the search for social justice. It adds to it’. Spatial (in)justice, therefore, is ‘an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice’ (Soja 2010b, 62), which would enrich theoretical and practical aspects of how to take ‘more effective actions to achieve greater justice and democracy’ (ibid:58). In other words, spatial justice is ‘a struggle over geography’ (Soja 2010a, 2). It is argued, therefore, that there is a dialectical relationship between spatiality and (in)justice, as spatialisation plays a direct role in the production and reproduction of domination and repression; it follows that the politics of spatiality can be the site of struggle for justice (Dikeç 2001). Spatial action as the pathway to social justice is also adopted by Fainstein’s just city (Fainstein 2011; 2014), although Soja (2010b, 56) keeps his distance from the idea of just city as too generic. Nevertheless, Fainstein (2014) shares Soja’s optimism in the effectiveness of spatial remedies in arriving at a just city, a term that she uses interchangeably with, but in preference to, spatial justice.
These two perspectives, therefore, differ over the extent of significance of spatiality in social processes and the effectiveness of spatial remedies in addressing inequalities. These two overlapping approaches have made important contributions to understanding the significance of spatiality, and their similarities may be more than their differences (Iveson 2011). The difficulty, however, is implying a false, essentialist competition between society and space. The two approaches argue over a conceptual dichotomy between society and space, seeing them as separate entities that relate to each other either as a derivative to an original or as two equals.

A third perspective rejects the social emphasis as anthropocentric, moralizing and the source of many problems, dismissing the other perspectives for being social, under-theorised, utopian attempts that remain ‘a geographically informed version of social justice’ (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010, 201). By linking law, politics and space, this perspective revolves around competing claims over corporeal space. Spatial justice, therefore, becomes ‘the ultimate expression of the claim to one’s unique spatial position which by necessity excludes all others’, putting forward an ethical demand: ‘to withdraw before the claim of the other’ (ibid:202). The problem with this asocial perspective is that it loses the context in which the claims over space are made, investing its hopes in the equally utopian demand for a voluntary withdrawal from aggression towards others. It reduces the problem of justice to a transactional act of aggression, which needs to be reversed voluntarily by the aggressor, that is, an ethical demand to stay within your limits. In doing so, the social and historical factors, and the complexities of the processes leading to injustice, seem to disappear. However, withdrawal from another’s space is a social act, which can only make sense in a context; access to a pure spatiality of justice that avoids its sociality makes no sense.

Dichotomizing space and society has its roots in the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, which is now widely rejected. Rather than being detached, abstract and neutral, space and time are integral parts of human experience, finding meaning through social relations. A relational understanding of space means that space is not a passive container, but social processes are inherently spatial, and spatial processes are necessarily social (Lefebvre 1991). The ‘abstract spatial form in itself can guarantee nothing about the social, political or ethical content of the relations which construct that form’ (Massey 2005, 101). Space is intertwined with society and is significant in ‘any form of communal life’ and ‘any exercise of power’ (Foucault 1993, 168). No conceptualization of the social can avoid its spatiality, as is increasingly recognized in a variety of social sciences, transforming some of their established paradigms (e.g. Low 2017; Fujita, Venables, and Krugman 1999; Tally 2013). In this sense, if the concept of spatial justice is emptied of its social content, it loses its meaning and turns into an empty abstraction.

Spatial justice sheds light on aspects of (in)justice that are hidden from a nonspatial understanding of social justice. For our purpose in this paper, the inherent spatiality of the processes that (re)produce social inequalities within and across regions need to be recognized as intrinsic to public policies of resource allocation, market investment decisions, and individual and group life trajectories. The patterns of (dis)advantage become concentrated in some areas, which in turn cause further inequality and marginality. Spatial justice, therefore, stresses the relational spatiality of (in)justice in society.
Integration: transcending a dichotomy

Two major tensions are identifiable within the concept of social justice. The first tension, which we cover in this section, is between distributive and procedural aspects of social justice. The common form of justice is corrective justice: the remedial work set by judicial systems in response to the unlawful interference of one party into another’s circumstances (Miller 2017). This definition is implied in the idea of law-based spatial justice that we discussed above (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2010). However, justice finds a different meaning in social affairs, such as regional inequalities, which are the concern of this paper. Justice has been defined in widely different ways. Miller (2017) argues that a common meaning may be found in a sixth century codification of the Roman Law, which defines justice as ‘the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due’. Social justice applies the idea of justice as a virtue to society. It refers to ‘the relative distribution of rights, opportunities and resources within a given society’ (Cramme and Diamond 2009, 3).

Social justice, therefore, is a quest for social equity, or more precisely, it is the negation of social inequality. Its egalitarian and distributive character, therefore, has made it the target of severe criticism by conservatives and neoliberals alike, who see it as a preoccupation of the left and a licence for undue state intervention. For a conservative thinker, social justice is not seeking equality before the law or equal rights of citizenship, but aiming at ‘a comprehensive rearrangement of society, so that privileges, hierarchies, and even the unequal distribution of goods are either overcome or challenged’ (Scruton 2016, 4). For a prophet of neoliberalism, social justice is meaningless as a measure of distribution, and no more than a mirage (Hayek 1982, 31).

A widespread ideal of social justice links it to the redistribution of resources and opportunities to those who have been disadvantaged by the market, a redistribution based on need and delivered by the state, rather than by charities (Jackson 2005, 358; Raphael 2001). Many political theorists tend to use the term ‘social justice’ and the older term ‘distributive justice’ as interchangeable or closely linked terms (Jackson 2005, 371). One of the best-known theories of social justice in the twentieth century was indeed primarily about distributive justice (Rawls 1971; 1999). Rawls defined justice as fairness and expressed his general conception of justice as: ‘All social values – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage’ (Rawls 1999, 54). Although this definition appears to justify some forms of inequality, it has nevertheless been influential in the justification of redistributive policies. Soja’s definition of spatial justice is an explicit attempt at spatializing Rawls, adding a geographical dimension to distributive justice: ‘the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them’ (Soja 2010b, 62).

A competing approach to social justice sees it as primarily procedural. Protesting against the limitations of distributive concepts, Young (1990, 15) drew attention to decision-making power and procedures, the division of labour, and culture, arguing that ‘social justice means the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression’. The fight against inequalities ingrained in gender, ethnicity, age and ability is not limited to the distribution of resources, but also includes the recognition of difference
and overcoming injustice in social status (Honneth 1996). Therefore, social justice is also procedural, concerned with the conditions and processes by which benefits and burdens are determined and distributed (Clayton and Williams 2004, 1). The emphasis on the process is a critique of the means with which some desired ends are achieved, as these processes include assumptions and prejudices that should be opened to democratic scrutiny. However, while a focus on procedures may unmask the power relations in society, it is not sufficient on its own, as it may leave the problems of poverty and unequal access to resources and opportunities untouched. Apparently fair procedures may lead to unequal outcomes: a libertarian argued that if the voluntary acquisition or transfer of resources is not unjust, the resulting unequal pattern of distribution could not be called unjust (Nozick 1974, 220), thereby emphasizing the process and rejecting the Rawlsian concern with the outcome.

Proponents of social justice, therefore, define it in oppositional and mutually exclusive terms. The dichotomy between distributive and procedural justice, however, is false, as they describe different, mutually reinforcing aspects of the same processes that lead to (in)equity and (in)justice. Ignoring the process misses various forms of injustice (Young 1990), while disregarding distribution may ignore or even try to justify resource inequality (Hayek 1982; Nozick 1974). Spatial justice offers the possibility of an integrated understanding, going beyond this dichotomy between distributive and procedural justice. Overcoming the dichotomy is made possible by drawing on a relational concept of space, which does not separate the spatial arrangements from the processes that produce them (Lefebvre 1991). Rather than a static pattern of distribution of resources and opportunities, spatial justice is a continuous, democratic process of demanding fairer, more equal conditions. Spatial justice is a struggle towards equity in social space, a search for a just process that aims at a just outcome, in a combination of the distributive and procedural aspects of social justice.

**Inclusion: crossing boundaries**

Spatial justice is also inclusive and expansive, going beyond social justice by crossing national boundaries. The modern idea of social justice, as the possibility and necessity of poverty alleviation and the creation of an egalitarian society, emerged in the late eighteenth century, and was developed by nineteenth century socialist and utilitarian thinking (Fleischacker 2004). As a term, ‘social justice’ came into existence at the end of the nineteenth century, when the idea of a bounded society with powerful institutions had emerged, and progressive forces demanded distributive justice to be delivered by nation states (Miller 1999). Eventually, social justice became for some ‘the defining political ideal of the twentieth century’ (Jackson 2005, 368), and ‘the moral standard par excellence’ (Pirie 1983, 467). In this shift, the role of the state in the delivery of justice, and accordingly the concept of distributive justice, was fundamentally shaped (Fleischacker 2004).

Social justice became closely intertwined with the nation state and its intervention in society, as reflected later in the development of the welfare state. The model of striving towards equality delivered by the nation state within the national borders, however, has come under pressure by two interrelated challenges of neoliberalism and globalization. Neoliberal ideologies have cut back the nation state’s welfare role, curtailing its
ability and willingness to reduce inequality. From conservative and neoliberal perspectives, history or the market are the appropriate mechanisms for distributing resources, and the state should not intervene in the name of ensuring social justice (Scruton 2016; Hayek 1982). Meanwhile, globalization has drawn attention to global inequality and injustice, demanding global justice, which has created new challenges to the model of nation-bound social justice (Young 2002). The global age has demanded rethinking and extending concerns for social justice beyond national borders (Cramme and Diamond 2009; Pogge 2004). This challenge is particularly reflected in the context of the European Union, where the demand for spatial justice is expressed across national borders (Ferrera 2009). The problem has become more acute with the rise of populist and nationalist politics that work against the idea of solidarity beyond the narrow ethnic and national boundaries.

Whereas social justice is explicitly linked to the nation state and the national territory, and global justice refers to inequality across the national boundaries, the concept of spatial justice goes beyond both, referring to the demand for justice both within and across bounded territories. Meanwhile, many advocates of social justice have limited their efforts to urban areas. Social (in)justice, however, is inter-local as well as intra-local. Spatial justice, therefore, is a concern at all spatial scales and territorial levels, including the questions of regional inequality as well as social inequality and exclusion within localities and regions.

The notion of inclusion refers to time as well as space. Spatial justice is also temporal, thereby going beyond social justice by crossing temporal boundaries. Spatial processes may solidify social relations in formations which survive for generations, reproducing advantages and disadvantages for social groups. In its long-term perspective, spatial justice overlaps with the notions of sustainability and intergenerational justice. The concept of sustainable development has been interpreted in widely different ways, and it has been subject to shifts in political and economic conditions of the recent decades. All models of sustainable development have insisted on the integration of social, economic and environmental objectives (Hopwood, Mellor, and O’Brien 2005). The central feature of its definition in the seminal report of Bruntlandt (1987) points to the necessity of ensuring equity across generations. Commentators and policy makers have since puzzled over how to achieve a balance between economic development, environmental care, and social protection, as especially challenged by the global crises and unprecedented levels of ecological degradation and climate change. While the concept of sustainable development inherently includes a reference to social justice across generations, social equity and spatial justice have not necessarily been placed at its centre. At the same time, the concepts of social and spatial justice cannot be separated from environmental justice, closely linked to global processes (Rees 2018). This concern for environmental justice is embedded in the social processes of spatial production, where the challenge is the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, as well as the lower levels of natural capital consumption in any future economic and political rearrangement.

On the basis of these three primary characteristics of spatiality, integration and inclusion, our concept of spatial justice may be described as the democratic process of equitably distributing social and environmental benefits and burdens within and between groups, territories, and generations. This concept avoids the dichotomy of
space versus society that has characterized some spatial justice concepts, and overlaps with social justice, but goes beyond its dichotomy of process versus outcome, and crosses the limitations that are set by local, national, and temporal boundaries.

**Territorial cohesion and spatial justice**

On the basis of these three dimensions of spatiality, integration and inclusion, we analyse the idea of territorial cohesion, as presented in the primary documents of the European Union (7 treaties and 7 cohesion reports), to see how far it can be considered spatially just.

**From social to spatial**

The creation of the European Union, since the establishment of the common market, has been a spatial process, aimed at unifying and enlarging the space of the European community. The 1951 treaty of the European Coal and Steel Community laid the foundations of a unified economic space, establishing a common market and several institutions to manage and safeguard it. The direction of travel towards spatial unification was reinforced by the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community. It announced the desire for ‘an ever closer union’ that would deliver social and economic progress through taking the ‘common action in eliminating the barriers which divide Europe’ (European Communities 1987, 217). This action involved the removal of obstacles to the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital throughout the member states (ibid:223). The gradual enlargement of the community from 6 members in 1951–28 in 2013 extended this space throughout the continent, and a series of major treaties aimed at integrating separate territories into a united whole.

Territory is a spatial term, indicating a relationship between power and space. It is commonly understood as a claim over space for controlling it, as well as responsibility for that space, by a person, a group, a local authority or a state (Oxford English Dictionary). The power in European countries has historically been vested in the nation state, which itself has been an attempt at the unification of different regions into a whole under the control of a unitary power (Hobsbawm 1992). The challenge for the EU has been the addition of a new layer of higher power that would potentially interfere into and dilute the nation states’ power within their territories, and the establishment of a common territory as a unified continental space. From the beginning, it has been a process of merging the parts into a whole, regulating the relationships between the whole and its parts, and between these different parts.

The term territory is used in 1951 and 1957 treaties for referring to the national and overseas areas under the control of the member states, and to other countries and territories with which the community has an association. The term is not mentioned in the Single European Act (European Communities 1987). When it reappears in the Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon treaties, it is repeatedly used with the meaning of a state jurisdiction, but it also refers to the ‘Community territory’ as a whole (Official Journal 1992, 91; European Communities 1997, 36; Official Journal 2001, 17).

Territorial cohesion is first mentioned in the Article 7d of the Amsterdam treaty, referring to the place of ‘services of general economic interest in the shared values of
the Union as well as their role in promoting social and territorial cohesion’ (European Communities 1997, 26). Within the framework of the treaty and their respective powers, the community and the member states are required to ensure that these services operate to fulfil their missions. The second cohesion report identifies territorial cohesion as a possible response to spatial imbalances in the enlarged Union (EC 2001, VIII). In the context of the unprecedented expansion, it asks if the cohesion policy should be modified to include ‘territorial cohesion in order to take better account of the major spatial imbalances in the Union’ (ibid, XLI). High concentration of wealth and population in Europe is compared to the more dispersed, ‘polycentric’ pattern in the US, which has more ‘territorial cohesion’, as expressed in ‘its less pronounced regional disparities in income and employment and, perhaps, in its competitiveness’ (ibid, VIII). Therefore, territorial cohesion aims at reducing spatial imbalances and disparities within the EU’s territory.

The introduction of territorial cohesion signifies a turning point in cohesion policy, when enlargement has triggered a search for reform. The third cohesion report recommends a clearer reference to the territorial dimension of cohesion policy in its reform, arguing that reducing disparities would ‘ensure that all regions and social groups can contribute to, and benefit from, the overall economic development’ (EC 2004, xxvi). The recommended future priorities are: convergence, regional competitiveness and employment, and territorial cooperation (ibid, xxvii). Territorial cohesion ‘implies that people should not be disadvantaged by wherever they happen to live or work in the Union’, recognizing that ‘citizens should have access to essential services, basic infrastructure and knowledge’ (ibid, 27). Territorial cohesion strives for ‘a more balanced development by reducing existing disparities, avoiding territorial imbalances and by making both sectoral policies which have a spatial impact and regional policy more coherent’, as well as improving territorial integration and encouraging cooperation between regions (ibid:27). This desire for spatial balance, however, appears to lessen the earlier emphasis on income inequality.

The Lisbon treaty formally replaces the words ‘economic and social cohesion’ with ‘economic, social and territorial cohesion’ (Official Journal 2007, 85). The EU ‘shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States’ (Official Journal 2007, 13), through shared competence between the community and the member states (ibid, 49). The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (EC 2008b, 3) suggests that ‘the concept of territorial cohesion builds bridges between economic effectiveness, social cohesion and ecological balance, putting sustainable development at the heart of policy design’. The problems are no longer defined in social and economic terms but also in spatial terms and the approach shifts towards technocratic and territorial management: reducing overconcentration, connecting territories, and overcoming divisions (ibid). The significance of spatial arrangements is acknowledged, but not as an inherent part of the social processes. Geography is added as a separate element.

The spatiality of the entire European project is, therefore, evident from an early stage, whereby space and power are closely intertwined at regional, national and continental levels, where spatial unification and regional inequality are two sides of the same coin. The introduction of territorial cohesion signifies a reform of the cohesion policy, acknowledging spatial imbalances as a problem and an obstacle to harmonious economic development. It is given a central role, simultaneously added to and separated from social
and economic cohesion. While territorial cohesion brings into focus important questions of spatiality, they are not intertwined with the questions of social justice. Political processes and institutions, economic frameworks of the common and single markets, and the urge for economic, social and territorial cohesion are all at once social and spatial processes. This separation of the spatial from the social provides a platform for a technocratic and managerial approach to the spatial diversity of the enlarged Union, coinciding with the emphasis on governance and procedure.

**From distributive to procedural**

The Treaty of Rome is written in the welfare-state period, which aimed at managing capitalism through redistribution, boosting economic growth while reducing social inequalities. The Single European Act of 1987 endorses this redistributive ethos, adding a separate new chapter on ‘Economic and social cohesion’ (Title V) to the Treaty of Rome, declaring that the harmonious development of the community requires ‘the strengthening of its economic and social cohesion’, particularly by ‘reducing disparities between the various regions and the backwardness of the least-favoured regions’ (European Communities 1987, 333). To do so, it deploys the structural funds, which include the new European Regional Development Fund, ‘intended to help redress the principal regional imbalances in the Community through participating in the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind and in the conversion of declining industrial regions’ (European Communities 1987, 333).

Spatial unification through the removal of internal barriers went hand in hand with the aim of reducing regional disparities. The Maastricht treaty of 1992 aimed at promoting ‘balanced and sustainable’ economic and social progress ‘through the creation of an area without internal frontiers, through the strengthening of economic and social cohesion and through the establishment of economic and monetary union’ (Official Journal 1992, 4). It annexed a protocol on social and economic cohesion, which reaffirmed that ‘the promotion of economic and social cohesion is vital to the full development and enduring success of the Community’ (Official Journal 1992, 93). It reported that the structural funds, which played ‘a considerable part in the achievement of Community objectives in the field of cohesion’, had doubled since 1987 (ibid). A Cohesion Fund was now set up for supporting projects in the fields of environment and trans-European transport infrastructure network (Official Journal 1992, 27). The specific link between cohesion and transport infrastructure reveals the idea of cohesion as an engine for spatial unification and integration, a precursor to the appearance of territorial cohesion in the Amsterdam treaty of 1997.

The first cohesion report in 1996 starts by defining cohesion, alongside solidarity and mutual support, as the ‘Union’s political goals’, which are to be ‘pursued through largely economic means’ (EC 1996, 14). Economic development, however, is not an end, but a means to improving the quality of life; cohesion’s ‘sole aim is to achieve greater equality in economic and social opportunities’ (ibid, 15). Social cohesion required the reduction of employment and income inequality (ibid: 14). The geographical dimension of cohesion, i.e. the reduction of national and regional disparities, meant ‘convergence of basic incomes through higher GDP growth, of competitiveness and of employment’
(EC 1996, 13). As a result, the structural funds had ‘significantly increased their redistributive effect in favour of the less prosperous Member States and regions’ (EC 1996, 8).

The drive for cohesion was based on a social democratic vision of society and an implied notion of distributive justice. European countries reflect the ‘values of the social market economy’: an economy ‘based on market forces, freedom of opportunity and enterprise’, as well as ‘a commitment to the values of internal solidarity and mutual support which ensures open access for all members of society to services of general benefit and protection’ (EC 1996, 13). This European Social Model has been described as ‘the soul of the European Union’ (Vaughan-Whitehead 2015, 9), a ‘vision’ (Official Journal 2006, 120), and an aspiration (Delors 2016). It was ‘the most appropriate framework for confronting’ the challenges that the EU faced (EC 1996, 10).

All European Union treaties use the word justice in its legal meaning, particularly in reference to the European Court of Justice. The Single European Act of 1987 mentioned social justice for the first time and only once, confirming the EU’s goals as promoting ‘democracy on the basis of the fundamental rights … notably freedom, equality and social justice’ (European Communities 1987, 1009). Social justice, however, disappears from the Amsterdam treaty, which is now seeking to establish ‘an area of freedom, security and justice’, a phrase that it repeatedly uses (European Communities 1997, 7) and this becomes a standard phrase in Lisbon treaty. Social justice reappears in the Lisbon treaty, again only once, confirming the EU’s commitment to promoting it (Official Journal 2007, 11). Meanwhile, seven cohesion reports mention social justice only once (EC 2007, 170).

By the turn of the century, regional inequalities among the EU15 have narrowed, but enlargement to EU27 brings major new challenges as inequalities grow deeper: the income per head of 16% of the population would be only 40% of the EU27 average; so an agenda is set for the cohesion policy’s reform (EC 2001, V). The territorial imbalances of the enlarged EU now become more noticeable: in the high concentration of wealth and population in a core area, which needs to be dispersed through polycentric development of urban centres, which remain with high degrees of wealth and inequality; and the challenges of rural areas, special areas, and border regions, which are now shifting east. The European Spatial Development Perspective (SPDP) is set up to understand these spatial disparities and imbalances, which are not merely a reflection of regional differences in income and employment, but of their differential ‘potential for development’ (EC 2001, VII). This is a turning point for the European Union, as its space has doubled but its capacity for social and economic cohesion has not grown in tandem, resulting in deeper inequalities.

Partnership, decentralization, and a new form of governance are encouraged as part of a new approach to structural policies (EC 2001, 153). This is confirmed in the third cohesion report, which proposes a simplified and decentralized method of management based on partnership between the EU, member states and regions, and by mobilizing the resources of the regions and citizens (EC 2004). Regional disparity and inequality are interpreted as spatial imbalances, and the distributive agenda shows signs of a shift towards a procedural agenda. Multi-level governance and subsidiarity become the tools of managing the relationship between the Union, member states, and regions.

In what is a clear expression of the shift from distribution to procedure, the fourth cohesion report stresses that, ‘regional development and convergence is best driven through multi-level governance’ and ‘by devolving an increasing amount of
responsibility for public investment to the regional and local level’ (EC 2007, iii). The emphasis on geography followed the EU’s spatial enlargement and increased diversity, turning the EU into a coordinator and enabler, where partnership and governance are prime considerations, as suggested by the sixth cohesion report’s subtitle (EC 2014). Territoriality plays a significant role in governance, confronting the fragmentary sectoral policies, and in managing economic, social and ecological concerns. The spatial turn is meant to play an integrative role; it also signals a shift away from redistribution. Instead, what is needed is ‘cooperation between the various authorities and stakeholders’ so as to ‘turn diversity into strength’ (EC 2008b, 3). However, while multi-level governance is necessary, it is not sufficient, as it cannot compensate for the loss of resources and opportunities that distributive justice offers. While spatiality can provide a framework for coordinating fragmented local actions and sectoral policies, if such actions are subject to free market considerations, their effectiveness to deliver social justice would be limited.

The spatial framework offers the possibility of integrating different forces and concerns within a common framework. The emphasis on good governance draws attention to the significance of appropriate procedures. However, it coincides with stepping back from distributive efforts. One imbalance is replaced with another; the lack of attention to procedure, which may have characterized previous cohesion policies, has turned into a lack of focus on redistribution, which is highlighted after the enlargement and the global financial crisis.

**From inter-regional to intra-regional**

The 1951 treaty shows little sensitivity to regional disparities. It declared that, ‘Europe can be built only through practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity, and through the establishment of common bases for economic development’ (European Communities 1987, 25). Its social provisions primarily involved the improvement of working and living conditions through economic development, and while it was aware of the possible impacts on ‘workers made redundant by market developments or technical changes’ (ibid, 62), it warned that social security schemes should not ‘inhibit labour mobility’ (ibid, 91) or ‘distort conditions of competition’ (ibid, 172). The Treaty of Rome, however, shows a new sensitivity to regional inequalities and the need to reduce them. The signatories were ‘ANXIOUS to strengthen the unity of their economies and to ensure their harmonious development by reducing the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions’ (European Communities 1987, 217). The reduction of regional inequalities was based on net transfers from higher income countries to cohesion countries (EC 1996, 8). Inter-regional redistribution, however, came under pressure in the cohesion policy’s reforms.

The fifth cohesion report, which adds a territorial dimension to the twin goals of economic and social cohesion, declares that cohesion policy is now place-based (EC 2010b, xi), signalling a shift from inter-regional to intra-regional focus. The enlargement had revealed the vast diversity of European regions in terms of their characteristics, opportunities and needs, which could not be treated in the same way (ibid). It was argued that, ‘competitiveness and prosperity [of regions] depend on the capacity of the people and businesses located there to make the best use of all of territorial assets’ (EC 2008b, 3). Responsibility for public investment is devolved to the regional and local levels (EC
as the principle of subsidiarity prevents the EU level intervention in localities. Meanwhile, public investment is not necessarily concentrated in less developed regions and private investment tends to concentrate in wealthier areas (EC 2010b, 158–162). The shift to intra-regional emphasis is reconfirmed by the seventh cohesion report (EC 2017).

The EU2020 strategy, with its goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, laments that the global financial crisis of 2008 ‘wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in Europe’s economy’ (EC 2010a, 3). In response, the earlier goal of harmonious development gives way to competitiveness (EC 2014). The seventh cohesion report does not mention harmonious development at all, but repeatedly refers to competitiveness (EC 2017). The idea of inequality, from the initial focus on unemployment, industrial reconversion and the modernization of agriculture, was broadened to include disparities in innovation, education levels, environmental quality and poverty (EC 2014, 200).

The influential Barca (2009, vii) report argues that the EU should ‘allocate a large share of its budget to the provision of European public goods through a place-based development strategy’, which ‘aimed at tackling persistent underutilisation of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places’. It argues that ‘the issue is whether there is a rationale for inequality to be tackled by a place-based development policy rather than by financial transfers to people independently of where they live’ (Barca 2009, 28). Place-based policies are ‘aimed at fuller capacity utilisation and a reduction of inequalities between individuals rather than between regions’ (ibid:39). Building on the strategy of stimulating localities towards economic competitiveness, the idea of smart specialization is proposed, which relies on recognizing the diversity of European regions, looking for ways of mobilizing each region’s specific assets and capacities (McCann 2015). It is a strategy for the reform of cohesion policy, based on creating scale advantages by building on regional assets and capacities, enabling different EU regions to develop their own different strategies. It is place-based, drawing on partnership and multi-level governance, bottom-up initiatives and community-based schemes, and a host of other initiatives, all aimed at empowering the regions.

Place-based strategies introduce another dimension of spatiality, suggesting a shift of focus from a comprehensive, inter-regional redistributive approach to a strategic, intra-regional, selective, localist and competitive approach. A ‘paradigm shift’ takes place in cohesion policy, from a ‘mainly redistributive logic … to development logic’ (Camagni and Capello 2015, 27), with the latter premised on the notion of ‘unleashing territorial potential’ (EC 2011) rather than simply reducing regional inequalities. For some analysts, these changes reflect a ‘neoliberal restructuring’ in the EU (Farago and Varro 2016). If the relationship between regions is based on competition, core areas and metropolitan regions are already well ahead of the rest, perpetuating regional inequality (EC 2016). Meanwhile, growing agglomerations face the intra-regional challenges of social inequality and exclusion, and the demand for the right to the city (UNESCO 2008).

In the 2014–2020 period, cohesion policy’s budget was one third of the overall EU budget, attempting to ameliorate the effects of the 2008 economic crisis. However, the Regional Policy Commissioner flagged in speeches in 2015 and 2016 that there will be a fundamental review of cohesion policy. It was announced that ‘the current CP
The paradigm has run most of its course and it needs to confront the alternative, critical narratives from the EU institutions and governments’ (Pazos-Vidal 2016, 293). The seventh cohesion report outlined the need for structural reforms and improvement in government (EC 2017). For the 2021–27 period, the cohesion policy remains as ‘the EU’s main investment policy and one of its most concrete expressions of solidarity’ (EC 2020). The Commission confirms its commitments to continue investing in all regions, based as before on GDP per capita and with the addition of some new criteria, while supporting the locally led development strategies, particularly in urban areas.

However, not all representatives of European Regions are sanguine about the reforms, campaigning against cohesion policy’s ‘dismantling’ (Molica and Lampropoulos 2016), and concerned about budget cuts and the future effectiveness of the policy (Lampropoulos 2018). Jacque Delors (2016, 7) warned the European institutions that ‘if European policy-making jeopardises cohesion and sacrifices social standards, there is no chance for the European project to gather support from European citizens’. In February 2020, 15 cohesion countries, the beneficiaries of the cohesion policy from southern and eastern Europe, met to demand a stronger EU budget and the maintenance of the previous levels of investment (Rodrigues, Fonseca, and Ranhola 2020). The enlargement, the Eurozone crisis that followed the global economic crisis in 2008, and the refugee crisis of 2015 severely tested the solidarity between regions and member states, further eroded by Brexit and right-wing, populist nationalism in different countries (Marton 2020). Spatial unification and solidarity came under further pressure in the global pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020, when nation states temporarily re-erected internal barriers.

Our third characteristic of spatial justice is to be inclusive, addressing both inter-regional and intra-regional, as well as intergenerational inequalities, crossing the spatial and administrative boundaries and integrating the quest for equality across and within regions and nations. Territorial cohesion was developed to address inter-regional disparities, but it was less concerned with income inequality across regions or social disparities within regions, which the subsidiarity principle envisaged as national and regional competencies. In its reforms, it has moved away from inter-regional redistribution either to a market-based distribution that accentuates inequality within and between regions, or to a place-based approach that focuses on intra-regional development at the expense of inter-regional equality. The addition of a place-based approach to cohesion policy is meant to provide a platform for policy integration. However, by diluting inter-regional redistribution, it opens new fragmentations, undermining its potential for spatial justice.

**Conclusion**

The formation of the European Union has been an inherently spatial project from the start, unifying the space of the continent while attempting to reduce regional inequalities through seeking social and economic cohesion, rooted as they were in a welfare-state framework that started to unravel with the arrival of neoliberal globalization. A series of global crises helped in expanding this space and yet exposed its limited capacity for cohesion and equalization. Territorial cohesion signifies a turning point, interpreting this limitation in terms of spatial imbalances, which can be overcome by spatial connectivity,
stimulating intra-regional, place-based development and competitiveness. Territorial cohesion enriches the understanding of these major changes by adopting a spatial perspective, but spatiality is treated separately rather than being integrated with social and economic cohesion, with an emphasis on technocratic and managerial solutions for spatial imbalances. It moves from inter-regional redistribution to regional competitiveness and intra-regional development, from distributive to procedural concerns within a framework of multi-level governance and subsidiarity, thereby becoming more limited in its ability and interest in addressing regional inequalities. Rather than integrating society and space, distributive and procedural justice, and inter-regional and intra-regional cohesion, it moves from one pole to the other. Therefore, on the basis of our definition of spatial justice, through the criteria of spatiality, integration and inclusion, the contribution of territorial cohesion to spatial justice has been one-sided and therefore limited, by providing measures to address spatial imbalances and social inequalities that while necessary, have not been sufficient.

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