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Rural Spatial Justice

Michael Woods

Do rural regions get fair treatment from governments? Are the voices of rural people being heard in contemporary politics? How do rural communities get spatial justice?

These are important and timely questions in an era when disruptive political events are refocusing attention on a perceived rural-urban divide. From the election of Donald Trump in the United States, to the Brexit vote in the UK, to recent elections in France, Poland, the Netherlands, Austria and several other countries, the rise of support for insurgent populist parties and candidates has frequently been associated with rural voters who feel disconnected from a metropolitan liberal political mainstream.[1]

Whilst the explanations for populist and insurgent politics are likely to be much more complex that this crude characterization suggests, analyses of the evolving electoral geographies of several countries point to the greater tendency of rural and peripheral areas to vote for populist and insurgent candidates.[2] This apparent metropolitan versus non-metropolitan electoral cleavage is produced by the combination of many different factors – including the uneven geographical impacts of globalization and economic restructuring, limited direct rural experience of immigration and multiculturalism (at least until the recent mass arrival of refugees and/or migrant workers in some rural areas), and the profile of rural residents as older and more religious than their urban counterparts. However, the translation of these variables into support for insurgent parties also reflects the successful articulation by populist politicians of the idea that rural communities and the cultures and values that they adhere to have been systematically marginalized by an urban liberal elite.[3]

Analyses of recent political developments along these lines have brought the issue of relations and differences between rural and urban regions back to prominence. If perceived rural disadvantage is a factor in insurgent politics, then further questions arise about whether perceptions are supported by objective evidence, about the drivers of observed inequalities, about the rights of rural citizens to fair treatment, and about potential responses to real or perceived injustices. In this article, I draw on the concept of 'spatial justice' to explore these questions and outline a framework for engaging with 'rural spatial justice'.

Spatial Justice

Like many ideas in social science, the term 'spatial justice' has been deployed in several ways, with slightly different meanings and emphases, and as such defies easy definition. In its most descriptive uses, spatial justice is employed to refer to the geographical distribution of wealth and resources, or

[1] Andrés Rodriguéz-Pose, "The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11 (2018): 189-209; (2017): 227-236.
[2] Shannon M. Monnat and David L. Brown, "More than a rural revolt: landscapes of despair and the 2016 Presidential election", *Journal of Rural Studies* 55.
[3] Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment* (Chicago, 2016); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York, 2016).

to territorial dimensions of social justice – in other words, whether inequalities of ethnicity or class or other social categories have a particular spatial pattern. It is also applied in social science research, however, as a theoretical concept that not only seeks to describe geographical patterns of inequality, but also to understand how they are created and perpetuated, and to explore how more 'just' outcomes can be achieved.

This approach is commonly traced back to the work of Henri Lefebvre, whose book *La production de l'espace* revolutionized social science thinking by considering space and spatial relations as the products of politics, and introduced the notion of 'the right to the city'.[4] For Lefebvre, the right to the city encapsulated the rights of people to access, occupy and use space, and the denial or restriction of such rights – by government policies and regulations, or as the result of uneven economic resources or social discrimination – represented spatial injustice.

The concept was subsequently developed by American geographer Ed Soja, who defined spatial (in)justice as „an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice",[5] continuing that, „as a starting point, this involves the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them".[6] For Soja, spatial justice includes the geographical distribution of wealth and resources, but is not restricted to this dimension, also involving questions of the distribution of space and of access to space, and investigation of how the production and management of space produces inequalities and injustices.[7]

Soja's work, and that of geographers, sociologists and planners that he has influenced, has continued to emphasize *urban* spatial justice, following Lefebvre's original focus on the right to the city. By contrast, there has been relatively little attention paid to date on rural spatial justice, in spite of evidence that issues of the geographical distribution of resources and of access to space (or land) are at least as significant in rural contexts as in cities, if not more so. Accordingly, this article discusses the potential for 'rural spatial justice' to be adopted as a framework for research on the social, economic and political dimensions of the contemporary countryside, both in relation to internal questions of power and resources within rural societies, and in relation to the distribution of power and resources between rural and urban spaces. These potential areas of inquiry may be distilled into five themes, which are discussed in the remainder of this article: rural spatial justice as the mapping of territorial inequalities; rural spatial justice and access to rural space(s); rural spatial justice and the production of inequalities; rural spatial justice and the perception of injustices; and rural spatial justice as a normative model.

Rural Spatial Justice as the Mapping of Territorial Inequalities

The most basic application of spatial justice as a term is to refer to uneven patterns in the geographical distribution of wealth and resources, and as such the concept of 'rural spatial justice' may be employed as a lens through which to examine the relative distribution of resources between rural and urban regions, and within rural regions. As a normative ideal, spatial justice would suggest that wealth and resources are evenly distributed – relative to population – across rural and urban areas, yet, spatial analysis of indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, or average household income, show considerable regional disparities, some of which may reflect an urban/rural divide. For example, a fairly crude reading of regional GDP per capita figures in Europe suggests that many of the wealthiest regions are focused on major cities (London, Hamburg, Oslo, Paris, Bratislava, Prague,

[4] Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris, 1974).
[5] Edward W. Soja, "The City and Spatial Justice", *Justice Spatiale/Spatial Justice* 1 (2009): 2.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis, 2010).

Stockholm, Vienna, Darmstadt and Bremen), whilst the poorest regions tend to found in more peripheral rural areas of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland and Greece, as well as rural parts of southern Italy, Spain and Portugal. However, closer examination reveals more complex patterns, with some significantly rural regions with high GDP per capita in areas of Germany, the Netherlands, south-east England and Scotland; and low GDPs per capita in largely urbanized deindustrializing regions.[8]

Scale is also a complicating factor, as regional statistics conflate urban and rural districts within the region. In an attempt to generate a more nuanced picture, the Horizon 2020 IMAJINE project is employing econometric techniques to estimate local-scale data for household income, with initial results indicating a tendency for rural municipalities to have lower household incomes than urban areas, but by no means in a uniform way.[9] At the same time, it is well established that the greater residential polarization of social classes in cities compared with rural communities means that rural poverty tends to get under-represented in statistics collected for local territorial units, with consequences for the targeting of state assistance.[10]

As such, whilst analysis of regional economic statistics reveals territorial inequalities that exhibit a slight tendency for the wealthiest regions to be urban and the poorest regions to be rural, there is no robust evidence of a systematic rural disadvantage independent of other factors.

Analysis of access to public services, however, demonstrates a stronger relationship. On average, rural residents have to travel further to access services and facilities such as schools, hospitals, post offices, banks and supermarkets than urban residents, and do so with less extensive and less frequent public transport.[11] Access to infrastructure may also be more limited, with gaps in mobile phone coverage and slower internet speeds, the so-called 'digital divide'.[12] Such inequalities are linked directly to characteristics of the rural context, with lower population densities meaning fewer regular customers and higher costs for providing services. Yet, they also reflect decisions made in government departments or corporate offices that may perceived as unfair treatment of rural residents, even as other measures may reveal a higher spend per resident for any given area of territory in rural areas compared with urban areas.

Rural Spatial Justice and the Right to Rural Space

The uneven access to services and facilities in rural localities is also important as it impacts on another dimension of rural spatial justice, the right to access, live in, work in, own and enjoy rural space. In Europe, and other parts of the developed world, at least, citizens have in principle the right to live anywhere in their country, and the right to access the same universal public services wherever they live. In practice, the capacity of certain groups – families with young children, the elderly and those with severe health problems – to live in rural locations may be compromised by difficulties accessing services such as schools, hospitals and health centres. Smaller rural communities without schools may

[8] Eurostat, GDP at Regional Level, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/GDP_at_regional_level (2017) (Accessed 2 September 2018).
[9] "Integrated Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe (IMAJINE)", EU Horizon 2020 RIA project 726950 (2017-2021). For more information see www.imajine-project.eu
[10] Paul Milbourne, *Rural Poverty* (London, 2004)
[11] Rural England, *State of Rural Services 2016* (London, 2017); Wales Rural Observatory, *Coping with Access to Services* (Cardiff, 2007)
[12] Lorna Phillip, Caitlin Cottrill, John Farrington, Fiona Williams and Fiona Ashmore, "The Digital Divide: Patterns, policy and scenarios for connecting the 'final few' in rural communities across Great Britain", *Journal of Rural Studies* 54 (2017): 386-398.

be denuded of young families, whilst the migration of very elderly residents from rural locations to towns is an under-reported demographic trend.[13]

As such, a rural spatial justice perspective should be asking questions about how the unequal distribution of wealth and resources affects the ability of individuals to access, inhabit and use rural spaces; about who is excluded from living in rural spaces by inequalities in housing availability and affordability; who is excluded from rural spaces by limited appropriate employment and education opportunities; and who is excluded from rural spaces in health and care provision?

These questions connect spatial justice and social justice, recognizing that the right to rural space is experienced differently by different people in ways that are structured by other dynamics of social and economic inequality and injustice. Some of these follow from the policies and conventions imposed from outside rural space by external actors such as the state, but others are the product of power dynamics occurring within rural localities, and in some cases the intentional actions of some rural groups to exclude others from participating in the same right to rural space.

Rights to access, inhabit and use rural spaces are also compromised by prejudice, ignorance and discrimination directed towards particular groups that are perceived to be outside the cultural mainstream of the rural population, including ethnic and religious minorities, non-heterosexual sexualities, and individuals pursuing other 'alternative' lifestyles. In extreme cases, outright hostility may make living in a rural community impossible, but more commonly, members of such 'othered' groups find their de jure rights as citizens to live, worship, eat, express affection and so on as they choose constrained by the disapproving surveillance of fellow rural residents or by a lack of supporting facilities and services. These factors may restrict not only the right to live in rural space, but also the right to enjoy rural space as a visitor. For example, studies have shown ethnic minority visitors to feel uncomfortable in rural spaces that are perceived as predominantly white.[14] In other cases, the right to enjoy rural space may be restricted by physical impediments (or rather the absence of facilities to mitigate physical impediments), for instance for people with disabilities, or elderly visitors.

More broadly, the right to access and enjoy rural space is commonly restricted by private landownership and the legal capacity of landowners to exclude others from their property. As such, access to substantial areas of rural space is in effect privatized. Some countries have attempted to challenge this position, for example through legislation in England and Wales that introduced a 'right to roam' across open countryside in 2000, and which was fiercely opposed by landowners who considered it to undermine their right to *own* rural space.[15]

Indeed, some of the most difficult questions for rural spatial justice concern the 'traditional' rights of rural people, and the extent to which they should be protected. Do rural people have the right to live and work in the community in which they were born, and does the enforcement of their right justify the exclusion of migrants from housing or labour markets, including immigrants? Do rural people have the right to continue to practice historic traditions and customs, such as hunting, even where these may raise animal welfare concerns and violate 'animal rights'? Is there a right to farm, and should it be guaranteed by the state through subsidy payments to enable uneconomic farms to survive in a neoliberal globalized market?

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[13] Nigel Walford, "Connecting rural and urban places: enduring migration between small areas in England and Wales', in *The Next Rural Economies*, ed. Greg Halseth et al. (Wallingford, 2010): 59-74.
[14] Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland eds, *Rural Racism* (Cullompton, 2004).
[15] Gavin Parker, "Countryside access and the 'right to roam' under New Labour: nothing to CRoW about?", in *New Labour's Countryside*, ed. Michael Woods (Bristol, 2008): 135-148.

Rural Spatial Justice and the Production of Inequalities

Questions about rights inevitable lead to questions about power and politics. A core tenet of the spatial justice approach is that geographical inequalities are not natural or pre-given, but rather are the products of state policies and mechanisms of governance.

It would be a foolish government in a modern democracy that explicitly set out to disadvantage or discriminate against rural populations; yet, the differential treatment of rural and urban spaces (often to the disadvantage of the rural) is implicit in much of the way in which the state works. Classifications of rural and urban spaces, for instance, function as an ordering device that produces spatial inequalities by making differentiated assumptions about the needs and priorities of rural and urban spaces. These are in turn connected to models for calculating cost-effectiveness that set break-even thresholds beyond the reach of smaller rural localities and assume that lower standards of service provision are acceptable in rural areas. Furthermore, political interpretations of such models are informed by engrained discourses rural resilience and self-reliance and of what 'belongs' in rural space and what does not.

Rural-urban inequalities are also produced by economic development policies that are focused on cities as the drivers of economic growth, such as city-region models, or which favour economic sectors that tend to be located in urban areas, such as banking and finance, over more rural activities, such as agriculture. Similarly, the contribution of trade policies to rural-urban inequalities stretches back to nineteenth century debates between urban-manufacturing-favouring free trade and rural-agriculture-supporting protectionism. More recently, the application of austerity policies and cuts to public services may have further exacerbated rural-urban inequalities, with some arguments that the rationalization of small and inefficient public facilities has disproportionately affected rural areas (although in contexts of extreme austerity, such as Greece, rural regions have been presented as more resilient to austerity than cities).

Rural-urban inequalities are therefore produced, at least in part, by state policies imposed from outside the countryside, but intra-rural inequalities and differentiated rights to the rural can also be produced by power dynamics within rural societies. Privileged social groups can exert influence through rural local government to shape rural space and control access in their own interest. Spending decisions by rural local governments that deprioritize areas such as social housing, public transport and social programmes may be made with the objective of lowering taxes and on the assumption that there is limited demand, but serve to reproduce a structural environment that excludes less affluent residents, or restricts their capacity to act. Similarly, work by Jonathan Murdoch and Terry Marsden twenty years ago documented how local elites in the rural south-east of England influenced local government policies to enforce strict development controls in selected villages that prevented new house-building, restricted the supply of housing, and inflated property prices beyond the reach of lower-income households, reinforcing the middle-class character of the community.[16]

The adoption of 'bottom-up' models of rural development with funding distributed through competitive schemes has been shown to favour more affluent middle class communities that have the professional skills to write effective proposals and manage projects over objectively more deprived localities. Meanwhile, the creation of working-class jobs in rural localities may be confounded by local campaigns against new developments such as mines, quarries, tourist sites, shopping centres and factories, commonly led by middle class residents defending their investment in the rural idyll, but

[16] Jonathan Murdoch and Terry Marsden, *Reconstituting Rurality* (London, 1994).

with the effect of further restricting the ability of less affluent households to exert their right to live and work in rural space.[17]

Rural Spatial Justice and the Perception of Injustice

The preceding sections have outlined some of the material territorial inequalities that can be observed within rural areas, and between rural and urban regions, and employed rural spatial justice as a concept to explore how these inequalities are produced through the state and power dynamics. However, deploying spatial justice as a concept to analyze these inequalities goes further than either describing their manifestation or investigating their production. It implies the assertion of a value judgement, and with it invites a political response. This is one of the critical differences between talking about (in)equality and talking about (in)justice. Inequality is quantitative, it can be objectively measured. Justice and injustice are qualitative, they are subjectively perceived. As such, a rural spatial justice perspective requires attention not just to observed inequalities, but also to such inequalities are perceived, and to the actions that follow.

Perceptions of spatial (in)justice are further informed by geographical and temporal context. There is no straight linear correlation between measured spatial inequality and perceived spatial injustice. For an inequality to be perceived as an injustice it must be considered to be the product of an 'unfair' decision, and notions of what is and is not fair are shaped by political viewpoints, informed by media representations and influenced by experience and the aggregation of events. This can help to explain why rural voters have moved behind populist politicians in recent years (when the material inequalities they cite have a longer history); why rural populism has been more pronounced in some regions and countries than others; and why (perceived) rural-urban inequalities have attracted more political attention than intra-rural inequalities.

Thus feelings of rural spatial injustice combine perceptions of relative material deprivation, perceptions of neglect or unfair treatment in government policy and spending, and perceptions of marginalization of political power. It is a disconnect that was articulated by an opponent of windfarm development in southern England interviewed a decade ago, who told us:

> „There is a hell of a lot of distrust about the political decision-making process, a lot of people are quite disturbed about that and a lot of people feel that government, central government particularly, has little understanding of rural communities. A lot of them display very little understanding about how rural communities are being changed. A lot of people think rural communities are just forgotten about."[18]

The same sentiment towards government and politicians can be found in Katherine Cramer's and Arlie Russell Hochschild's ethnographic studies of disaffected rural communities in the United States, and in investigations of the roots of populist politics in countries from Australia to France to the Netherlands.[19]

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[17] Michael Woods, "Deconstructing rural protest: the emergence of a new social movement", *Journal of Rural Studies* 19 (2003): 309-325.

[18] Interview conducted for 'Grassroots Rural Protest and Political Activity' project, ESRC Grant RES-000-23-1317 (2006-08).

[19] See Cramer op cit., Hochschild op cit., Dirk Strijker, Gerrit Voerman and Ida Terluin eds, *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties* (Wageningen, 2015).

Injustice demands redress, and so perceptions of rural spatial injustice have fed new political mobilisations. In some cases this has been channeled through insurgent political candidates such as Donald Trump, Pauline Hanson or the Le Pens; in other contexts it has attached to radical constitutional changes, such as Britain's exit from the European Union; whilst in yet others it has been manifested in local and national protests and demonstrations. The sense of injustice is a powerful emotion that help to turn previously apolitical, conservative-leaning rural residents into militant activists, participating in mass marches or engaging in direct action.[20]

Rural Spatial Justice as a Normative Model

Rural spatial justice helps to join the dots between material territorial inequalities and the politics of Trump and Brexit. However, it does not necessarily follow that populism and protest are the inevitable outcomes of awareness of spatial inequalities and perceived injustice. In urban studies, spatial justice is more readily associated with progressive politics, as a normative ideal that guides work to challenge inequalities and advocate a more inclusive right to the city. Accordingly, the final challenge of rural spatial justice is to imagine what a spatially just countryside, or a spatially just set of rural-urban relations, might look like and to develop and promote ideas and actions that work towards these visions in progressive and inclusive ways, as a counter to divisive populism.

Such an approach might involve rethinking the way in which we formulate and deliver policies for territorial development and cohesion, in the EU and elsewhere. This is one of the aims of the IMAJINE project, which explicitly draws on the concept of spatial justice in reappraising mechanisms for tackling territorial inequalities. It is too early to present results, but possible avenues might include devolving more decision-making to regions and localities; including a greater range of factors in resource distribution models; more participatory and inclusive political dialogue; and 'rural proofing' of policies to assess and mitigate negative impacts on rural communities.

A normative model of rural spatial justice would also need to engage with spatial inequalities within rural societies and advance an inclusive right to rural space. This might involve exposing and challenging sites of entrenched power and privilege in rural societies, contesting discriminatory and exclusionary discourses of rurality, and backing existing grassroots initiatives that support rural minorities and work towards a more inclusive countryside.

[20] Michael Woods, Jon Anderson, Stephen Guilbert and Suzie Watkin, "The country(side) is angry: emotion and explanation in protest mobilization", *Social and Cultural Geography* 13 (2012): 567-587.

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