

Spatial justice, European spatial policy and the case of polycentric development

Stephen Connelly, Department of Town and Regional Planning, Sheffield University &

Karin Bradley (presenting author), Nordregio – Nordic Centre for Spatial Development

Nordregio

Box 1658

111 86 Stockholm, Sweden

E-mail: Karin.Bradley@nordregio.se

Tel: +46 (0) 8 463 54 06

Fax: +46 (0) 8 463 54 01

Paper for the ECPR Workshop on “European Spatial Politics or Spatial Policy for Europe?”

13-18 April 2004, Uppsala, Sweden

Abstract

Polycentric development is being promoted as one of the core concept of European spatial policy and planning. It can appear attractive in its efforts to balance the quests for competitiveness, territorial cohesion and sustainable development. In this paper, however, polycentricity is analysed from a spatial justice perspective, meaning exploring the spatial distribution of qualities resulting from policies promoting a polycentric development, as well as analysing whether there are elements of (in)justice inherent in the concept. Based on a theoretical discussion on spatial justice, arguments are made both in favour of and against the justice of polycentricity. Whatever the concrete territorial effects of polycentric development might be they are likely to have different impacts on the diverse socio-economic and cultural groups within as well as outside the EU.

Keywords

Spatial justice, polycentric development, European spatial policy, ESPON, core-periphery, sprawl

Introduction

Among the goals of European spatial policy are territorial cohesion, ‘balanced’ growth and sustainable development, including management and protection of natural and cultural heritage. But seldom questions are asked as: Growth for whom? Preservation of whose history and whose cultural heritage? Protection of whose landscapes? And development, in whose understanding?

In one way Europe is becoming more united; a common market, a single currency and common goals and perspectives for spatial development are being constructed within the EU. In line with this EU-unifying perspective you could respond to the questions above that it is growth for the “(EU)ropeans” that should be fostered, it is the history and cultural heritage of the “Europeans” that should be protected and it is the “European” understanding of development that should prevail. However, such replies could be deemed problematic: for being Eurocentric, for assuming there is some common European identity and culture and particularly problematic given that Europe is becoming more fragmented through increasing migration, diverse ways of organising family life, travel patterns and socio-economic disparities. From this perspective, the above questions raise awkward issues, since it becomes possible, even likely, that the results of European spatial policy will have uneven impacts across the groups making up this diverse Europe.

Changes in temporal and spatial relations entail social, cultural, and economic changes. These may be positive and constructive or negative, causing ‘not only the destruction of ways of life and social practices built around preceding time-space systems, but the “creative destruction” of a wide range of physical assets embedded in the landscape’ (Harvey, 1996: 241). Whichever is the case, there are clearly issues of justice implicit in such changes, both within the boundaries of the Union itself, and also beyond its boundaries – we cannot remain oblivious to the possibility that policies which ostensibly and perhaps in fact have good (just) outcomes for European citizens do so at the cost of others, distant and unseen (see Harvey, 1996: 233).

This paper is therefore concerned with justice, and we take this opportunity to explore the potential of the concept of ‘spatial justice’ as a tool for interrogating and critiquing the taken-for-granted benefits of the new European spatial agenda. The paper thus aims to:

- explore what such a spatial justice perspective might mean and
- analyse the concept of polycentric development using a spatial justice perspective.

Polycentricity has been chosen for particular attention since it is one of the principle ideas embodied and promoted in the European spatial policy (see ESDP and ESPON).

Two dimensions of spatial justice will be used:

- the spatial distribution of qualities (asking who wins and who loses from the policies), i.e. the ‘spatiality of (in)justice’
- the extent to which elements of (in)justice are inherent in the spatial ideas being promoted, recognising the impact that space as a social product can have on social/economic/political processes, i.e. the ‘(in)justice of spatiality’ (Dikec, 2001: see below for further elaboration of this idea).

An exploration of spatial justice is not just interesting from an analytical point of view. It has much stronger implications – that if the creation of a more just Europe is part of the European project, then the diverse identities, ethnicities, classes, gender, sexualities and ages of the Europeans (and non-

Europeans) makes it important to use a spatial justice perspective in EU spatial policymaking as well as policy research.

From sustainable development to spatial justice

Some might question why the concept of spatial justice should be used as a normative guiding principle when we already have the widely established concept of sustainable development. Since the work of the Brundtland commission (WCED 1987), the Rio Summit in 1992 and the succeeding UN-conferences, sustainable development has certainly become accepted as a moral guiding principle for policymaking, corporate activities and spatial planning. Sustainable development is also set as an overriding goal for the European Union and a strategy for sustainable development has been agreed upon (CEC, 2001). In the ESDP (CEC, 1999), sustainable development is also said to be one of the three core guiding principles for European spatial development.

The notion of sustainable development is in many ways a radical concept envisioning good and equal living standards for future generations, fostering planning with wide public participation, ‘bottom-up’ approaches, cross-sectoral integration for an improved global environment, solidarity and justice (Lafferty & Eckerberg, 1998). However, often the concept of sustainable development has been boiled down to an image of the three circles of environmental, social and economical aspects (or the ESDP triangle) saying that spatial planning should ‘balance’ these three aspects of development. Often this means fostering ‘good’ development, which is not too different from the ‘business-as-usual’. While sustainable development is arguably a radical concept, it is also deeply ambiguous, and in the process of interpreting and contesting different interpretations the term has become somewhat over-used – from some perspectives *mis*-used – and much of its radical content has been rather watered down.

In particular, it is worth noting that the Brundtland definition of sustainable development *does* contain a commitment to social justice (Lafferty and Langhelle, 1999; ; Langhelle, 2000), this interpretation is not salient in the European sustainability discourse. Still less apparent is a consideration of the spatial aspects of justice. The focus in the sustainable development discourse has primarily been on the inter-generational justice and in some instances on justice between the global North and South.¹ Seldom, however, intra-generational or intra-regional aspects of justice are being considered in the name of sustainable development, meaning highlighting social, economical and cultural differences amongst groups of people here and now, for example within a European urban region.

However, the intention is not to argue that the concept of sustainable development is useless and should be abandoned. Indeed, it has been useful, not least for problematising the idea of development. Also, the fact that it is now set as an objective for policies ranging from the EU level to the municipal level, in public as well as private institutions, can be seen as a great accomplishment, forcing policy makers to take more account than previously of environmental and social issues and their interrelationship. But, this accomplishment also entails a problem, that is a risk that sustainable development is viewed as *the* guiding principle. Given the reservations about it noted above, other guiding principles need to be explored and used. With spatial justice, the intention is to highlight

¹ The inter-generational aspect is emphasised in the often-quoted Brundtland definition: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

critical perspectives, particularly valuable for the diverse, multi-cultural and globally inter-linked Europe of today, which is increasingly different from the pre-1990s globalisation society in which the Brundtland commission coined the principle of sustainable development.

Meanings and conceptual problems for 'justice'

In order to establish spatial justice as a workable analytical principle, two problems have to be addressed. Firstly, for all its intuitive attractiveness, social justice is far from a singular concept with a settled meaning – not only ambiguous and contested, but 'essentially contested' in the sense that competing interpretations are incompatible and each is claimed by its proponents as *the* correct interpretation (Gallie, 1955). Thus justice can be defined on criteria drawing from libertarian, utilitarian, contractarian, egalitarian and other philosophies (Harvey, 1996: 398), and conceptions may be promoted and defended from differing political standpoints. For example, a thorough-going neo-liberal would defend the outcomes of market transactions as fair, and deride as unjust any state intervention to support those who were structurally disadvantaged in the open market – see, for example, Hayek (1976). We are thus apparently in a situation where, before we can go any further, it is necessary to determine 'which theory of social justice is most socially just' (Harvey, 1996: 342), or at least to establish grounds for selecting one theory over another – the alternative being to recognise that in any given situation different justice claims or analyses can be made, with no rational way of adjudicating between them.

Further, even within a single conception, operationalising it in any real, and particularly spatial, context is fraught with difficulty. If, say, we were interested in equitable distribution of environmental quality as our a criterion of justice, how could we assess this? Which environmental qualities? Equitable distribution amongst whom? How much is equitable – enough for basic needs? Or a literally equal distribution? (See Lafferty and Langhelle (1999) and Langhelle (2000) for a discussion of this in the context of the social justice aspects of sustainable development in Brundtland.)

These complexities potentially have the same disabling result as the second problem, the postmodern critique of any universal principles. Thus Harvey writes:

The effect of the postmodern critique of universalism has been to render any application of the concept of social justice problematic (1996: 342).

Is it possible ever to talk about justice as anything other than a contested effect of power within a particular place at a given time? (1996: 329)

Any judgement about justice is suspect: not only do we have no grounds for selecting between different approaches to justice, but from this perspective whichever we do select is simply part of a potentially oppressive discourse, and certainly cannot be elevated into a universal standard of justice *without* being oppressive. This is problematic because we *do* want to make such judgements about the justice of policies and not to be backed into the situation where 'postmodern reflection ... seems to deny itself just the sort of normative argument capable of conducting a successful fight' (White, 1991: 116; quoted in Harvey, 1996: 343).

Conceptualising spatial justice for policy analysis

Radical scholars (Young, 1990: ; Sandercock, 1998) have attempted to resolve these problems by attempting to build a general theory of justice with a respect for difference at its heart. Recognising the problems inherent in this, Dikec offers a further development, embracing the principle of the right to difference, and giving it the necessary normative direction by further adopting a principle ('égalité') that justice must embody a striving for freedom and equality, intrinsically imbued with the notion that this is for all, not for a particular group that might invoke arguments about justice in support of its own, narrow, freedom at a price for others (Dikec, 2001).

Still, it would seem that the principle problem remains: how can we justify the selection of this particular normative principle, however attractive it might be? These debates are not going to be solved here, and may in any case not be soluble.

However, as argued by Flyvbjerg, (1998: ; 2001) we recognise that we have to situate ourselves – that as researchers we have to take up a position, as we cannot sit outside the processes we study and appeal to some universal standard to judge them. Rather, in analysing and evaluating we will have to 'take sides'. Or as others would argue, as researchers we inevitably 'take sides', it is more a question of how aware you are of it and how explicit you want to be with the sides you are taking. In the following section we briefly set aside this thorny issue to explore the notion of spatial justice, before using this to derive a position on how we understand spatial justice.

SPATIAL INJUSTICE AND THE INJUSTICE OF SPACE

In conceptualising spatial justice, a key question is whether our concern is simply about the spatial distribution of social justice, or is there something more to it than that? Can we actually consider aspects of space itself to be (un)just? For example, are we to evaluate the socio-economic or environmental outcomes of the diffusion of the idea of polycentricity across European spatial planning, or can we say something more that is meaningful in this context about a constructed, polycentric space itself?

Pirie first raised this question in 1983 (Pirie, 1983), and concluded that, given a conception of space as absolute, as a container in which things happen, 'spatial justice' is simply a 'shorthand' for 'social justice in space' (471). Such a conception would point us towards simply looking at distributional aspects of justice, and so encountering Young's (1990) critique that such a focus is partial and misses broader, more important aspects. However, Pirie recognised – but did not pursue – the possibility that space could be conceptualised as something itself constructed, rather than given, and that this might be the only distinctive 'occasion there might be for requiring and constructing a concept of spatial justice' (Pirie, 1983: 471). This is the route subsequently taken by Harvey and other geographers, who see space as a social construct, so widening the debate to allow the question of whether certain aspects of such space are in themselves (un)just. Dikec emphasises the dialectical relationship that such an approach suggests, developing a focus on both

the spatiality of injustice – from physical or locational aspects to more abstract spaces of social and economic relationships that sustain the production of injustice – and the injustice of spatiality – the elimination of the possibilities for the formation of political responses (Dikec, 2001: 1792).

This is to reconcile the tension between overvalorizing and overlooking distributional issues. The focus, therefore, is not merely on how spatialization affects distribution, but also on how it stabilizes distributional patterns (Dikec, 2001: 1799).

This is a similar line of thought encompassed and promoted by the 1970s Italian architecture group Superstudio (Rowe & Koetter, 1978). They emphasised how architecture and planning inevitably imposes ways of moving and living on other people for years to come. This applies for buildings – imposing how big steps one is to take, where to enter a room, what light to see etc – to railway tracks or roads – ultimately deciding on what narrow lines people should be able to move. Urban planners, laying out a street pattern, are likely to influence the lives, movements and access of people for several hundred years, in some instances even thousands of years, as street patterns tend to be extremely stable, surviving earthquakes as well as wars. In other words, however ‘good’ these spatial structures are, there is a risk that they will perpetuate patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

However, the stabilising, ‘conservative’, influence of space should not be overemphasised. Harvey among others recognises the potentially revolutionary nature of changes in spatial practices. It is important to recognise that constructed space has both characteristics – that changes in the way that space is constructed can have radical implications, just and unjust, through disrupting and shifting existing relations, and can also tend to stabilise patterns once they are in place. In Dikec’s words

If the problems of inequality, exclusion, segregation and social devalorization enter the socio-political agenda as concerns of justice, it is important to consider the ways in which: first, such problems are manifested spatially; and second...such problems are produced and reproduced spatially, through the very production of space. Injustice and its persistence, in this sense, is the product of spatial dynamics. (Dikec, 2001: 1798)

We are thus drawn to examine spatially mediated processes, as well as outcomes. (An analogy can be drawn with the field of race: one can evaluate the racial (in)equity of the outcomes of a particular policy, but one can, and should, also examine the policy itself to assess it whether it embodies assumptions about race which affect the impacts, or whether the uneven racial outcomes are, as it were, accidental.)

This approach is compatible with Young’s insistence that ‘instead of focusing on distribution, a concept of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression’ (Young, 1990: 3). For her, domination arises from ‘structural or systematic phenomena which exclude people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions’ (ibid.: 31), whereas oppression is ‘structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group’ (ibid. : 42). As Smith neatly paraphrases it, ‘oppression constrains self-development; domination constrains self-determination’ (Smith, 1994: 104). Each of these involves elements relating to both outcomes and processes, which are intimately, dialectically linked: outcomes are both the result of processes and constitute the structures through which the processes operate. In our context, these structures are those of constructed space.

DIMENSIONS OF JUSTICE

In order to make these rather abstract issues around space and justice sufficiently concrete to act as criteria through which policy developments can be interrogated, we link Young’s conception of justice with the idea of uneven spatial distribution of access in a very broad sense, and so to the idea of social exclusion. We focus on exclusion as resulting from structures and processes, rather than being primarily a characteristic of excluded groups, specifically ‘the processes and actions of agencies

and institutions which have the effect of excluding individuals, or groups, or communities from many of the benefits of society that are expected' (Murray, 1998: p. ??). Exclusion is thus seen as one possible impact of the spatialisation of European policy. (Or, more accurately, as a possible outcome of particular spatialisations of European policy – see below.) Following Murray, who defines exclusion in terms of access to four different aspects or 'systems' in society, criteria for evaluating spatial unevenness can be access to the democratic/legal, labour market, welfare state, and family/community systems. Further, we can add to this exclusion from other 'systems' which are fundamental to 'quality of life' – notably transportation and housing – and differential access to a range environmental goods and exposure to environmental 'bads'. Which are of importance is situation dependent, but we can envisage these encompassing environmental quality in terms of its cultural meaning, effects on health, beauty, and perhaps more.

SCALES OF SPATIAL JUSTICE

Spatial justice or injustice can be observed at different geographical scales. Thus, for example, dependency theorists like Samir Amin (1976: ; 1977) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1984) have analysed power relations and issues of justice amongst different regions, countries or continents. They are primarily concerned with the patterns of dependency, domination and oppression between regions of different economic or cultural strengths, most clearly manifested between 'first world regions' on the one hand and 'third world regions' on the other. Considering the relative strengths and development trajectories of regions is also at the core of EU regional policy and Structural Funds. However, operating at a continental scale, as the European, often means that you are dealing with entities like regions expressed in maps, figures and statistics and discussing what the policies and development would mean for these different territories rather than discussing the implications on everyday life of people 'on the ground'. However, zooming into the territories and beyond what can be captured in statistics, it is clear that the territories are not homogenous entities at all. They are populated with people living very different lives and having very different ideas of what development is and what constitutes good and bad environments. It is at this scale that the justice aspects with regards to different social groups become evident. While this has been the scale at which the concept of 'spatial justice' has principally been developed (by, *inter alia*, Soja (2000), Dikec and Sandercock) it is clearly applicable at other scales and, crucially, between scales – apparently just situations at one scale may be unjust at others. (As, for instance, in the displacement of environmentally damaging industries to locations peripheral to or outside the EU.) In our understanding, an elaborated spatial justice perspective would mean being aware and analyse international, inter-regional and intra-regional justice relations simultaneously.

RIVAL SPATIALISATIONS

It is finally important to recognise that there are alternative, potentially rival and conflicting, conceptions of a space. A new conception of European space is being defined and promoted by the officials in the EU, which implies that there is one, or more, old spaces which are to be superseded. In this sense the issue of spatial justice will concern the 'battle for Europe' in terms of contested spatial practices and symbols, and need to consider counter movements and spatial imaginations based on other and different notions of Europe and ways of relating to the territory (Böhme et al, 2003). This is partly an issue of how actors at different levels of governance construct, or attempt to construct, their local and the European space – whether through attempting to subvert or resist dominant policies

which are perceived as being economically disadvantaging, or (more imaginatively!) through supporting initiatives such as Slow Cities, based on a different tradition of civic values. This is clearly linked to the issue of how civil society organises and how it engages in dialogues and counter vision within the public spheres in Europe – the nature of its institutionalisation and its engagement with governance processes. (Thus we can see NGOs and local government coming together in some areas to promote local economies, and elsewhere citizen groups mobilising resistance to the European spatial project, as in the direct action taken in defence of local services and against the TEN-component motorway in the French Tarn gorge.²

To conclude this discussion, then, we have a conception of spatial justice that is concerned not simply with the (uneven) spatial distribution of welfare, but also with the qualities of the constructed space through which processes affecting welfare are mediated. Spatial (in)justice is thus understood in terms of oppression and domination: expressed principally in terms of access and exclusion in very broad terms that can be seen to have an inherently spatial aspect (as mentioned previously, for example access to or exclusion from labour markets, recreational areas, educational facilities, public services, infrastructure, housing, environmental goods and bads).

Spatial justice of polycentricity

DEFINING POLYCENTRIC DEVELOPMENT

We turn now to one of the salient policy ideas, a major component of the thrust for the spatialisation of EU policies and so for reorganisation of the EU space. This is ‘polycentricity’, defined as “a spatial organisation of cities characterised by a functional division of labour, economic and institutional co-ordination, and political co-operation” (ESPON 1.1.1, 2003: 3). This has two complementary aspects, the morphological (relating to the distribution of urban areas in a territory) and relational (i.e. the co-operation and flows between the urban areas) (ibid.).

In the ESDP, “development of a balanced and polycentric urban system” is being promoted. The idea is that polycentric urban systems stimulate economic growth, are more environmentally friendly and support territorial cohesion better than monocentric urban systems as well as dispersed settlements. The notion of polycentric development has certainly gained momentum and is currently promoted in national regional policies (for example in Finland) as well as in regional planning strategies (as in the Stockholm region). In the ESPON programme (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) one of the core projects – “The role, specific situation and potentials of urban areas as nodes in a polycentric development” – is devoted to research on polycentric development. This includes defining the concept, mapping territorial structures and networks with regards to the degree of polycentricity, analysing national and regional policy documents and finally providing policy recommendations promoting a polycentric and balanced urban system across the ESPON territory.³

Following from the ESPON definition, to analyse polycentricity means not only to study the individual urban areas and their functions, but also to study the links and relations amongst the urban

² Article in The Guardian, Oct 29, 2003: *Angry French halt bridge to save hospital.*

³ The countries included in the ESPON are the current EU member states, Norway, Switzerland, Poland, Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania.

areas. This applies to hard infrastructure (like road networks) as well as soft infrastructure (like university co-operation, INTERREG co-operation etc). In figure 1 the benefits of a polycentric development is illustrated relating to two different regions. In Region 1, the two cities have similar functions; for example they both have a university, a hospital and a cinema complex. If these two cities start to co-operate to form one larger region, the functional rank of the region will not increase. However, if the two cities (A and B) have different and complementary functions, a regional enlargement would bring the added value of a higher functional rank. In other words, the potential benefits of polycentricity are larger in Region 2 compared to Region 1 (ESPON 1.1.1, 2002: 19).

Urban Functions	Region 1			Region 2		
	City 1	City 2	City 1+2	City A	City B	City A+B
function 1	x	x	x	x	x	x
function 2	x	x	x		x	x
function 3	x	x	x	x		x
function 4					x	x
function 5				x		x
Functional rank	3	3	3	3	3	5

Figure 1: Benefits of polycentric development

Polycentric development can be observed at different geographical scales, at a European level, national levels and regional levels. At the European level, the urban system can be judged as monocentric in the sense that people, power and capital are concentrated to the Pentagon formed by London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg. Fostering a polycentric development at the European level thus means strengthening urban systems outside the Pentagon. At the national level, in countries dominated by one metropolis, for example Sweden or Finland, a polycentric development can be fostered through strengthening the second tier of cities, i.e. promoting a functional division of labour and co-operation amongst these. Similarly, at the regional level, unwanted effects of monocentric urbanisation as well as sprawl can be counteracted through the creation of a polycentric structure, i.e. multiple centres that have different functions and are connected by good hard as well as soft infrastructure.

SPATIAL JUSTICE OF POLYCENTRICITY

So, can a polycentric structure be deemed more spatially just than other spatial structures? Of course, there is no simple answer to this question – any answer is necessarily dependent on the specific context and the scale of analysis. In general terms though, arguments could be forwarded both saying that a polycentric structure is spatially just as well as saying that it is unjust. Worth noting, however, is that the justice issue is not explicitly addressed in the ESPON project on polycentric development. In the project, polycentric development is seen as something positive, following the line of the ESDP, and is not critically analysed.

A fundamental idea of polycentricity is to counteract a core-periphery relation, where the core is the prosperous strong and dominant area and the periphery is weak, marginalised and dependent on the core (Waterhout, 2002). According to this perspective, fostering a polycentric development means

improving the situation for the weaker territory, i.e. favouring spatial justice. However, the idea of polycentric development is that you are not to strengthen “the whole periphery” (resulting in sprawl); instead selected urban nodes are to be developed, which in turn can bring about a positive development in the ultra-periphery.

If we take the concrete example of Finland: during the last decade, the Finnish regional policy has shifted from being primarily focused on support to lagging and sparsely populated areas to strengthening of urban areas or growth poles. The policy is based on the idea that urban areas function as nodes and motors for development, a development that can then be diffused to other areas. The current policies are devoted to fostering specialisation of different urban areas and networking between these areas, for example health care technology in Tampere, chamber music in Kuhmo, food technology in Seinäjoki etc (see figure 2).⁴

From a spatial justice point of view, such a national polycentric development might mean that you will be worse off if you live in the periphery compared to before. Since these policies aim to develop a selected set of urban areas, thus attracting people and investment to these, it is likely that the level of service in the periphery will deteriorate.⁵ However, you could also argue that the polycentric policies promote spatial justice since without them people, development and prosperity would be concentrated to the Helsinki region and the level of service would deteriorate in the rest of the country. In other words, polycentric development could be seen as a bridging concept between the quests for growth and territorial balance.

(It should be noted though that neither the ESPON 1.1.1 project nor the Finnish polycentric policy is primarily driven by spatial justice concerns. Rather, the policy recommendations aim to foster overall economic growth (which in turn can be more or less justly distributed).⁶ The assumption is that the market forces that on a European or national level tend to spatially concentrate development (in these instances to the Pentagon of Europe and in Finland to the capital region) – are destructive in the long run, an assumption gaining credence from analysis saying that economically strong areas like the East Coast of the US, Kansai in Japan or the Rhine-Ruhr-area are of polycentric character.)

One aspect of polycentricity that could clearly be used as an argument for the spatial justice of the concept is the attention given to the *relations* between the nodes. As the concept is being defined, the relations between the urban nodes are as important as the nodes themselves. At a national scale, this can for example mean that a smaller urban area, say with locational or climatic handicaps, can through well established links and co-operation with other areas become an important player in the larger system. Strength acquired through such networking might be an option to pursue for the marginalised nodes that cannot compete with ‘traditional’ criteria of strength as population, GRP or centrality.

⁴ The regional policy programmes “Centres of Expertise” and “Regional Centre Programme” are part of this strategy, where regional specialisation, clusters and network co-operation are supported.

⁵ It should be noted though that there are still national policies in Finland particularly directed to improve conditions in the peripheral areas.

⁶ The objectives of the Finnish state policy are declared in Statsrådets kansli (2003) *Regeringens strategidokument 2003 – Regeringens tvärsadministrativa politikprogram och politikområden*, Publikation 15/2003, Helsingfors.

The Centres of Expertise and the fields of expertise in Finland

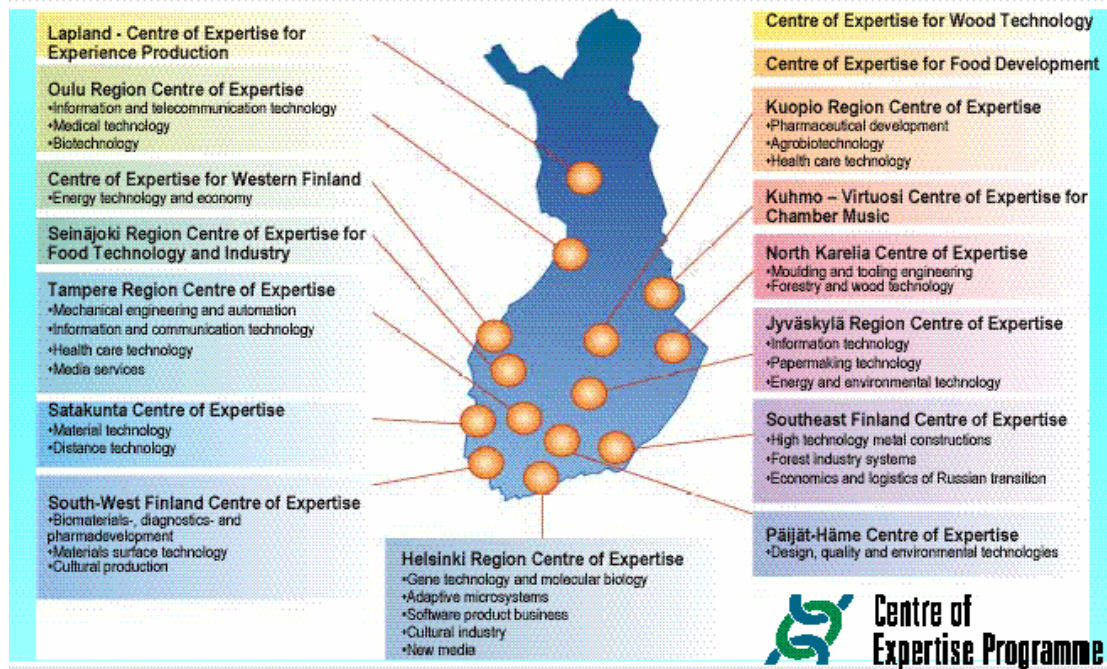


Figure 2: The Centres of Expertise programme, part of the regional policy

However, when you discuss core-periphery relations, the entities are territories and the power relations between these. The focus is of course indirectly on the people inhabiting these areas, but seldom it is highlighted that the population is not monolithic, that people belong to various groups having different amounts of power, needs and views. If we would zoom in from the national level to a hypothetical region and see what a polycentric development might mean in relation to spatial justice: at this scale, a shift from several (more or less autonomous) smaller urban areas to a larger polycentric region is illustrated in figure 3. Again, the polycentric development is supposed to entail increased competitiveness and economic robustness compared to smaller settlements. However, at the regional scale (and to a certain extent also at a national scale), a polycentric development relies on increased mobility. It is assumed that people are mobile – willing and able to work in one town, dwell in another and participate in cultural activities in a third. Here, it is important to point out that all social groups are not equally mobile. Young, highly educated and economically well-off groups tend to be more mobile than others. Men tend to be more mobile than women, and women of certain ethnic cultures tend to be less mobile than other women. As an example, Södertälje in the southern Stockholm region has a large population of Assyrians and when a university branch opened in Södertälje, the number of Assyrian women attaining a university education increased dramatically. Before, the dwellers of Södertälje had to commute 40 minutes to the universities located in central Stockholm. For some groups, this was not a problem, but for a large part of the Assyrian women it was unthinkable.

Thus, for the less mobile groups, having a moderately good theatre, hospital or university branch nearby is likely better than living in a town specialised in a super cinema complex and having to commute to go to university. In this respect, polycentric development has a bias towards the more mobile people and could be said to have spatially unjust implications.

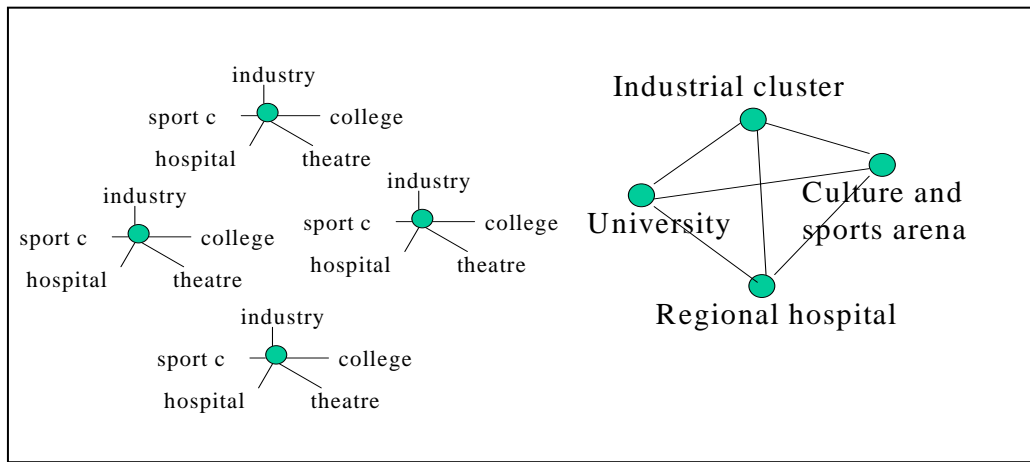


Figure 3: From several small urban centres to regional polycentricity

But, again, you can object and say that if this specialisation, division of labour and increased mobility would not be encouraged by policy, the smaller towns would not survive and all would be worse off, perhaps primarily the disenfranchised groups.

Lars Mikael Raattamaa (2003) advocates sprawl arguing that such structures are more spatially just compared to monocentric as well as polycentric urban structures. Both of the latter structures imply that a core dominates over other settlements. In a Swedish context, this core is likely to be a historic core, having all the major business, cultural and administrative functions and populated with affluent groups. According to Raattamaa, the spatial planning focused on developing the cores or urban areas as nodes primarily benefits the affluent groups (in spite of the intention that it will bring about positive changes for the hinterland as well). In simplified terms, according to Raattamaa, the monocentric structure is the worst, the polycentric somewhat better, but the most just is a sprawling landscape.

Advocating sprawl is however problematic for several reasons, environmental (for the amount of green areas it consumes, being inefficient energy-wise, for public transport etc) as well as economic (relating to the lack of economies of scale in providing technical infrastructure, service etc). These environmental and economical effects will again have justice implications in the sense of the distributional aspects of the impoverished service provision and environmental degradation.

It should be noted though that there have been other previous planning attempts to overcome the core-periphery problem while at the same time assuring a degree of concentration, as for example in the 1920s socialist planning concept of the centre-less 'linear city' or futurist concepts as the city-less grid landscape or Archigram's 'plug-in city' (see Rowe & Koetter, 1978).

Conclusions

Relating the discussion on the policies promoting polycentricity to the three dimensions of spatial justice outlined in the introduction, we can conclude the following:

- *the spatial distribution of qualities (asking who wins and who loses from the policies), i.e. the 'spatiality of (in)justice'*

Compared to a national or regional monocentric structure, a polycentric development can be said to improve the situation for the people in the smaller centres outside the main centre and if these are the typically disenfranchised groups, it could be said that polycentricity entails greater spatial justice. However, it is important to inquire what a polycentric development and assumingly increased social

and territorial cohesion means for those outside the ‘strengthened’ region. The cohesive region must per se relate to some other areas, which are not part of the urban network. Are these areas self-sufficient or part of some other cohesiveness? Or are they fragmented areas that are likely to be dependent on the new great cohesive territory? At the European scale, a possibly polycentric and territorially cohesive EU will have both types of neighbours: Iceland, Norway, Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt etc.

Relating back to the regional scale, the distribution of qualities, access to labour market, housing etc are likely to be more spatially just in a polycentric organisation compared to a monocentric, but doubtfully better compared to smaller settlements. However, as mentioned previously there are clearly limits to dispersed settlements, for example relating to the necessity of concentrating public spatial intervention and infrastructure to certain areas. In this way regional polycentricity could be seen as a crossroad between the “unjust” monocentric structure and the problematic dispersed settlements.

- *the extent to which elements of (in)justice are inherent in the spatial ideas being promoted, recognising the impact that space as a social product can have on social/economic/political processes, i.e. the ‘(in)justice of spatiality’.*

There are just as well as unjust elements inherent in the notion of polycentricity. A suggested just element is that of the focus on the relations between the nodes, which can be seen as enabling marginalised nodes to become strong through networking and not merely the traditional criteria of centrality or size. However, as mentioned previously, regional polycentricity could also be said to have an inherent unjust element to it since it depends on an increased level of mobility, which has a bias towards the typically dominant social groups.

Furthermore, the notion of polycentricity still embodies the core-periphery relation – albeit not as severe as the notion of monocentricity – which could be deemed problematic from a justice point of view. However, polycentricity does encompass ideas of more evenly distributed power, but it is important to bear in mind that there are not only three options at hand: monocentric, polycentric or dispersed structures, in fact there are and could be several other ways of organising space.

To conclude, polycentricity is promoted as a beneficial principle in the new European space, but in this paper it has been shown how using spatial justice as a normative and critical principle creates problems for this assumption. A polycentric structure is likely to imply several positive impacts, however, most likely distributed differently and to celebrate it as *the* solution to the quests for competitiveness, territorial cohesion and environmental sustainability is just to make it too simple.

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