Territorial Development + Local Autonomy = Spatial (in)justice?[1]

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Local autonomisation as a starting point for questioning the development imperative

The starting point for this issue of the journal is the notion of local autonomy as understood by international organisations (OECD 2006 and the Council of Europe 1985 being the most cited)[4]. The definition of autonomy that they employ is essentially institutional, generally covering two criteria, identified by Clark in 1984: the capacity for initiative (the capacity of the local level, as a layer of government and a set of institutions, to accomplish tasks of local interest), and the power of immunity (the possibility of local action without oversight by higher levels). By "local", we mean here the spatial level closest to the spatial injustices experienced and targeted by territorial development policies. This "local" refers preferentially to the institutional public actors (regional authorities), but also private and civil society actors that seek to implement, oppose or divert territorial development policies (Madanipour *et al.*, 2017).

The scientific literature emphasises the contradictory imperatives that the "local" has had to face in recent decades in Europe. To begin with, the neoliberal policy of reducing public debt has prompted nation-states to remake themselves through successive policies of devolution, fusion and decentralisation (e.g. see Brenner, 2004), which have often meant a change in the modes of territorial government rather than its disappearance. While the nation-state often continues to be described as the main frame of reference and source of control, other levels have emerged: one supranational level is the European Union, an ever more important generator of standards, frameworks and directives that affect the conception of public territorial development policies (Evrard, 2015). This is particularly salient in post-socialist countries like Hungary or Romania, where the EU constitutes the main initiator of

territorial public action (as **Tünde Viràg*** and **Csaba Jelinek*** describe in this issue)5, even though this policy continues to be filtered through the interpretative prisms of the member states (as clearly shown by **Eniko Vincze***, **Cristina Bădiță*** and **Iulia Hossu*** in this issue). The local and regional levels have also been reinforced, and are positioned as the supposedly proper layers for public intervention6.

To justify these transfers of prerogatives, it is argued that state power alone is insufficient to drive development. For example, the European Commission argues in a communication entitled "Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes" that "centrally-led, top-down development policies and programmes alone cannot succeed in addressing the complexities of sustainable development and fighting poverty" (2013).

In contrast, local authorities benefit from a positive outlook. Seen as being "closer to the citizens", they would have the "responsibility to meet their primary needs and to ensure access to basic services for all" (*ibid*.). The latter view prompts Jaafar Sadok Friaa7 to claim, in the context of the preparation of the programme of urban development and local governance for Tunisia: "In order for decentralization to work, local authorities must gain autonomy, capacities and responsibilities" (World Bank, 2014). In their development programmes, international organizations thus advocate for multilevel governance that strengthens the power of the local level, which is supposedly more legitimate and more effective in its capacity to produce development. More local autonomy would thus be synonymous with more distributive justice for the benefit of local territories and their populations. "Autonomising" development then produces a logical shift in the conception of development itself, which gains the patina of a new, or at least stronger, equalising purpose.

In the second place, this shift of balance towards the local is also seen as being more democratic. It is presented as a response to demands from citizens themselves to participate more in decision-making. This is one of the responses to the many claims for increased autonomy from specific territories, populations and communities that seem to be proliferating around the world (e.g. Catalonia, Scotland, Quebec, New Caledonia, Greenland...). And nation states often choose to grant greater autonomy to avoid independence (Castellarin, 2018).

This trend is particularly evident in European territorial policy. In the infancy of

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5. The authors whose articles appear in this issue are identified by an asterisk in this editorial.
6. Regarding the states, Renaud Epstein speaks of remote government in the French case (Epstein, 2008; 2013), Cyril Blondel of remote and elitist government in the Croatian and Serbian cases (Blondel, 2016). In parallel, city government is increasingly attracting scholarly attention, identified as places of social change (Pinson, 2009 ; Gagnon and Jouve, 2006). With regard to France, see for example Issue 2 of the 2008 journal *Esprit*, dedicated to the "government of cities", or Issue 1 of the 2010 journal Pôle Sud dedicated to "new urban criticism".
7. Described as lead urban specialist at the World Bank.

European regional policy, in the 1970s, territorial development strategies were essentially top-down, and almost always combined with state subsidies (Barca *et al.*, 2012, p. 137). At that time, the European Commission was betting on improved infrastructures (transport, energy, etc.) and regional integration to reduce the development gaps between European regions (measured by GDP). It therefore concentrated its attention (and its resources)[8] on regions that were defined before 2000 as "less favoured", then as "lagging behind in development" over the period 2000-2006, and finally as "less-developed" since 2007. Since 2009 and the publication of his first report, Fabrizio Barca has constantly condemned the top-down direction of Europe's regional policy and called for a "place-based approach", i.e. one that is bottom-up and geared to the specificities of each territory (Barca, 2009).[9] Local authorities are thus encouraged to devise and implement their own territorial development strategies, with European or international policies playing a support role (Evrard, 2015). In the process, they are made accountable and placed in competition with each other.

Autonomy is a multifaceted and relational concept. By employing it in this issue of the journal, we want it to be an inclusive instrument that can be used to stand back from current policies, which might be described as the autonomisation of development. What do these policies produce in terms of spatial justice from the perspective of the social sciences (geography, sociology, anthropology) and from a "local" level (based on field observations) that is not solely urban? What is the outcome in terms of spatial justice of approaches that make the local the level at which development is conceived, articulated and structured? More specifically, are these policies the vehicles of a fairer spatial distribution of wealth and opportunities?

A focus on the question of autonomy and territorial development in Europe

In its positioning, this issue of the journal draws on critical theories in the social sciences to question the very concept of development. Whether the emphasis is on freedom, the human, the territory, durability or sustainability, economics, the social world and community, the idea of development always postulates progression from a starting point of supposed inadequacy to the fulfilment of an ideal. As has been emphasised by many researchers in the "post" perspective – in particular post-socialism and post-colonialism, but also in the decolonial current – the main problem

8. Via the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund in particular, but also the "rural development" component of the CAP.
9. Fabrizio Barca, then Director-General at the Italian Ministry of Economics and Finance, was asked by Danuta Hübner, Commissioner in charge of regional policy, to contribute to the debate on the future of cohesion policy after 2013.

with this way of thinking is that it always positions the West, its values, its "performances", its "Modernity" as the model for this supposedly desirable progress (Blondel, 2017, 2018; Boatcă, 2006; Boatcă and Costa, 2010; Mignolo et Tlostanova, 2006; Tlostanova, 2012). Apart from the position of dominance of the First World thus constituted over the correspondingly backward Second and Third Worlds[10], this prevailing conception of development limits the range of possible approaches to being-in-the-world or to being-here[11]. Its other main fault is that this extreme simplification precludes thinking about developments and changes outside of a so-called linear progression – or even progress – from point A to point B, and therefore has the consequence that certain territories and certain populations are thought of as "lagging behind", "in transition", or "catching up" in a game in which the First World made up the rules by and for itself in order to be and always to remain the winner (Koobak and Marling, 2014). As Carlos Salamanca Villamizar and Francisco Astudillo Pizarro note, exploring "development" from a "spatial justice" perspective is therefore a way to "incorporate questions such as the distribution of the costs, damage and negative consequences of *development*" (2018).

By focusing the question on the "development" of Europe's internal peripheries, this edition of the journal seeks to explore how this hegemonic global position, so often described and decried, also holds true within the First World and its immediate periphery[12]. In other words, its aim is to observe the results of the connection (and disconnection) between policies – international (in this issue, for example, that of the UNDP in Hungary and of the World Bank in Romania), European (here, mainly European Cohesion policy), and national (often adapted, at least partially, to the above-mentioned policies) – at local level. At a time when "local" and "peripheral" territories are often stereotyped and stigmatised in the public arena, this issue of the journal, which takes a resolutely interpretative perspective, seeks to explore the links between local autonomy and spatial justice within the framework of territorial development policies that aim to accentuate the scope of action available at local level in Europe.

Indeed, as a one-off, this issue of JSSJ focuses almost exclusively on the European continent and more specifically on the way that public policies for territorial development within Europe are devised and interwoven, contradict and complement each other. Since we raise the question of autonomy, what we propose here is therefore to explore the outcome in terms of justice of the switch in recent years to

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10. See the writings of Wallerstein and their more recently interpretation in political sociology (in particular by the aforementioned Manuela Boatcă).

11. In its Heideggerian conception, see for example Paquot (2007).

12. See for example the work of Mark Duffield (2002) or of Anita Lacey and Susan Ilcan (2011).

handling questions of development at local level, in particular procedural justice (what empowerment[13] of the local?) and distributive justice (what contribution to the erasure of territorial disparities?).

Out of the six articles collected here, four[14] present the results of empirical research conducted as part of the European H2020 RELOCAL – "Resituating the local in cohesion and territorial development" – project.[15] These articles focus on localities[16] – and populations – that are marginalised and/or peripheralised at the local, regional, national levels and/or sometimes beyond, in Finland, in Hungary and in Romania.[17] We emphasise here the issue of scales in order to tackle the processes of (resistance to) peripherisation and marginalisation, because that is a way to connect together the referents of "development". As **Sarolta Neméth*** explains in her article here, while Finland – in terms of the standards that the European Union has chosen for itself – may appear more "developed" than other parts of the continent, this does not contradict the fact that at local or regional level, certain places, certain districts, certain towns, certain populations, suffer from local forms of territorial discrimination (as defined by Hancock *et al.*, 2016) or territorial stigmatisation (as defined by Wacquant, 2007).

The other two articles in this issue, outside the RELOCAL research project, present ideas that enter into dialogue with the content of the core group. **Alain Malherbe*, Elisabetta Rosa*, Jacques Moriau*** and **Martin Wagener*** explore the consequences in spatial justice terms of the successive institutional reforms in the handling of homelessness in the Brussels-Capital Region (Belgium). **Kevin Cox*** proposes a more theoretical counterpoint, which compares the conception and implementation of local autonomy in public policies in England and the United States since the post-war period. Drawing on a post-Marxist conceptual framework, this article looks at development policies as the symptom of a state intervention that seeks to mitigate the spatial disparities produced by capitalism. This contribution invites us to consider the specificity of the social and spatial processes underlying the structure of the state in order to understand autonomy devolved to local level.

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13. Understood as the transfer of political capacities from state institutions to civil society (Gagnon and May, 2010, p. 48).

14. Plus the interviews published in the "public space" section.

15. RELOCAL receives support from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under subsidy agreement No. 727097.

16. "Localities" as defined by Madanipour *et al.* are "porous and interconnected elements embedded into wider contexts" in the "centre of a series of forces that contribute to spatial (in)justices and to democratic legitimacy" (2017, p. 77).

17. By peripherisation, we mean "more than remoteness from centres of growth or a so-called economic lag (...), a process of production and/or reproduction of different forms of dependencies" and by marginalisation "a set of processes that weaken the social mechanisms of integration" (Nagy *et al.*, 2015, p. 135-136).

A reinforcement of the local as a synonym of the reshaping – but also the perpetuation – of spatial injustices

Within this broad context, this edition of the journal aspires to provide input into answers to two sets of questions. First, how are these recent territorial development policies adopted at local level? By describing the local development measures undertaken under the stimulus of increased autonomy or, where applicable, in resistance to that stimulus, the goal is to document, to specify and to put into perspective the impact of this generalised demand on distributive justice in different contexts. What injustices are targeted? What concrete results are achieved (in whose favour and at whose expense)? What is in question here is the capacity of the local to manage the production of space in a fairer way (DeFilippis, 1999).

From the articles in this issue, the first observation we can formulate is that, while the development policies pursued by the European and international institutions, and the waves of decentralisation, have helped to reinforce local prerogatives, close examination *from* the local level shows that local capacities to reduce spatial injustices appear limited. Next, the challenge posed by European financial largess and the somewhat summary interpretation of the EU-predetermined issues in national operational programmes seem to induce the local players, in the Romanian and Hungarian cases presented in this issue, to conceive and target the most peripheral territories, often inhabited by the most marginalised populations, as "the problems to resolve". Played out here locally, therefore, we find the same conceptualisation of development as at international level: the characterisation of territories and populations as "lagging behind", "underdeveloped". They are, in other words, naturalised in their "difference", reified. The underlying idea is that the problems they cause need to be resolved not for themselves, but in relation to an idealised centre. In this issue, **Tünde Viràg*** and **Csaba Jelinek*** describe, for example, how local public action is construed for the Gyorgi Telep neighbourhood, an old, isolated mining district located on the edge of the city of Pécs in Hungary, largely populated by Roma people. While the idea at one stage was simply to demolish the neighbourhood (as if physical erasure alone could resolve social problems), the goal has gradually become to "integrate" the neighbourhood into the city by creating slightly better living conditions there, a strategy that keeps an unwanted population on the outskirts. The "problem" is in no way resolved. While living conditions have been improved, very little seems to have been done to enhance access to employment, health or education, as **Judit Keller*** and **Tünde Viràg*** similarly show in the case of Encs in Hungary. With the result that marginality and peripherality continue and are even exacerbated in these two places.

Unsurprisingly, the lack of resources provided, the lack of coherence in the objectives of the funding agencies (from one international programme to another, from one schedule to another), as well as a very short time commitment, produce very limited outcomes in terms of distributive justice. **Sarolta Németh*** argues in the case of Kotka in Finland that this step towards the local is nothing short of a way of assigning responsibility and blame to a territory (which is thus further peripheralised) and its population (which is thus further marginalised). "You will achieve something if you do something." What was once the slogan of the operation in Gyorgy Telep is crystal clear. According to this principle, everyone is responsible for their own failure. Yet all the authors make the point, in Brussels (Belgium), in Pécs or Encs (Hungary), in Kotka (Finland), in Cluj or Codlea (Romania), that local empowerment means the withdrawal of central government and the persistence of inequalities. It would be an illusion to think that it could be otherwise. As **Eniko Vincze***, **Cristina Bădiță*** and **Iulia Hossu*** explain, difficult social situations, although embedded in a specific context, are only a local reflection of global inequalities that are the driving force and product of world capitalism. Similarly, in his analysis of the US point of view, **Kevin Cox*** warns the reader that excessive local autonomy, characterised in particular by the responsibility of raising one's own finance – because of the US tradition of a non-interventionist state reinforced by austerity policies – ineluctably contributes to competition between territories.

Beyond these expected results (albeit often unfamiliar in the Francophone literature), this issue of the journal focuses on a second set of questions: By whom and with whom? What initiatives, what attempts have been undertaken at organisational and procedural level, in the proposed "democratic renewal"? The objective of this issue is to describe the organisational and democratic adaptations that this increased autonomy may entail at local level. What are its effects in terms of procedural justice? To what extent does increased local autonomy in the management of development policies provide excluded and minority populations – those whom these spatial justice policies are supposed to benefit – access to decision-making? The issue here is to explore the participatory processes introduced for and by local autonomy. Beyond simple access to the political agenda, the question raised here concerns the reality of the rebalancing of powers within the decision-making processes of local authorities. Are territorial autonomies, as Preciado and Uc hoped, "practices both of decolonial resistance and the creation of local power" (2010)? Or are they simply a sort of second best?

The experiences introduced to us through this issue are an inducement to caution regarding the capacity of this form of local empowerment to enable excluded populations to regain control of public policy. However, they confirm the emergence

of a sort of local elite constructed around an alliance between municipalities and civil society organisations, the latter often acting as the spearhead of local development policies conducted by the former in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, cities and regions. Several articles in this issue thus cast (unsurprising) light on situations where NGOs become the real actors of territorial development as intermediates between populations and institutions (which themselves become offices for the registration and monitoring of initiatives). This is, for example, what **Judit Keller*** and **Tünde Viràg*** claim in the case of Encs (Hungary). This mechanism can even enable the most residential and most bourgeois municipalities to shed responsibility for certain social questions, as **Alain Malherbe*, Elisabetta Rosa*, Jacques Moriau*** and **Martin Wagener*** show for the handling of homelessness in the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium.

Here again, Europe is no exception to what studies of development have shown elsewhere in the world. Because this empowerment of local civil society raises its own questions. As **Csaba Jelinek*** and **Tünde Virág*** explain, such a shift is not synonymous with democratisation – the NGO Maltá is no more transparent in its organisation than the municipality, and moreover its members are not even elected. Thus, as Fabien Desage and David Guéranger argued in the French case, greater closeness to the territories and populations concerned – if not in the conception, at least in the management – of public development policies, does not mean that those territories and populations play a greater part in those policies. The "local", like the "national" before it, seems to govern development policy from outside (i.e. non-inclusively) (2011, 2018). Here again, the territories and populations targeted continue to be seen as objects of public policy and not as political subjects that might have a voice in the process.

To quote this article: Cyril BLONDEL, Estelle EVRARD, "Local Autonomisation as a Starting Point for Questioning the Development Imperative" [« Partir de l'autonomisation du local pour interroger l'injonction au développement »], *Justice spatiale/Spatial Justice*, 13, octobre 2019 (http://www.jssj.org).

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