Inequality, space and location: the place of geography

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Charles Tilly imagines a rectilinear space in which an individual's position on an axis of social rank is related to various 'social sites' defined in terms of such criteria as income or wealth, power, fame and prestige and overall well-being. Any set of social units is unequal to the extent that its members occupy different positions, or 'locations', within this abstract space. The dynamics of inequality concern the extent to which persons stay in the same 'inferior locations' throughout careers, lifetimes or generations.

The geographical imagination would be tempted to reconstitute this model. An individual's state of well-being could be displayed as a vertical axis in three-dimensional space, in which the other two representing distance define location in Cartesian co-ordinates. Geographical inequalities could be described by a surface of human well-being, analogous to the Earth's physical topography. The identification and interpretation of such patterns has been central to geographical perspectives on inequality for some time (e.g. Smith, 1977). The point of the reference to inferior locations would be to recognize the disadvantages associated with life in particular places. Place is a thicker concept than location: a human creation involving its inhabitant's culture or way of life, as well as their environment, infrastructure and political economy. The point of this conception of place is to stress the particular local manifestations and interrelationships among conditions which may constrain or enhance opportunities for well-being.

The accident of birth in particular circumstances is crucial to future life chances. Britain's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, referred to this in an address to the last Labor Party conference of the twentieth century, imagining two babies on a hospital maternity ward, delivered by the same doctors and midwives, yet with two quite different lives ahead associated with differences in place as well as in parental status. One goes out to cold, damp and cramped accommodations; his mother has no job, no family support, no one to share the joy of the new baby, a father nowhere to be seen. Life is a long, hard struggle, with this child's individual potential hanging on a thread. The second child goes to a prosperous home, grandparents desperate to share the caring, and a father with a decent income and even larger sense of pride. They are already thinking about schools, friends she can make, new toys they can buy; expectations are high, opportunities seem limitless. Even for parents in similar circumstances, local opportunities for well-being are subject to inequalities quite at variance with the supposed universal coverage of the welfare state. There are increasing references to Britain's 'post-code lottery', whereby the quality of health care, education and other public services depends very much on where people live. The place of good fortune looms large in accounting for the uneven surface of human life chances, in Britain and elsewhere (Smith, 2000a).

The most thorough recent examination of inequality in Britain showed the gap between rich and poor widening from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, reversing the experience of the two previous decades (Rowntree, 1995), as in most other industrialized countries. The end of the Thatcher era saw a leveling out of this trend, but inequality is now increasing again, by both income group and place, with the more prosperous parts of the country benefiting most from economic growth. Average household income in the richest post-code area of the country is more than five times that in the poorest (The Guardian, 15 January 2001).

Charles Tilly points to the need for robust evidence of long-term trends. My own contribution has included the investigation of intra-city inequality in the United States. Analysis of successive census returns for the Atlanta metropolitan area shows marked increases in inequality: the ratio of maximum to minimum median family income by census tract increased from 8:1 in 1960 to 30:1 in 1990. The spatial expression of inequality by race had also increased, the ratio of advantage of predominantly white tracts over those predominantly black rising from 1.4 to almost 3.7. Similar trends have been observed in some other cities, but with variations depending on the particular context of place (Smith, 1994: 161-86). The causes are by no means obscure: a capitalist economy which systematically benefits the already affluent and excludes a substantial, highly localized minority from regular paid employment, exacerbated by a weak social security system, a history of racial discrimination, and a political system which favors rich individuals and corporations. In terms of the simplistic images of process involving queues and conversations, significant numbers of citizens of the richest country in the world do not even join the queue for appraisal by the labor market, and have no voice in the conversation of power relations.

Conditions are, of course, much worse in many other parts of the world, where a growing majority of people have no prospect of sharing the level of material consumption which most Americans take for granted. And their meager levels of social security are likely to be under threat from governments reflecting the hostility to public spending associated with contemporary neo-liberal orthodoxy. Michael Walzer (1983) argues that the primary good we distribute is membership in some human community, which enables persons to share in all the other social goods, and reminds us of Lee Rainwater's axiom that money buys membership in industrial society. For all the hope of a globalizing economy spreading affluence, the world is becoming increasingly polarized between rich and poor, at all geographical scales. Just as in Britain there has been no recent evidence of the much-vaunted 'trickle-down' effect whereby economic growth is supposed to raise the living standards of the worst-off (Rowntree, 1995), so the world's impoverished masses appear to have gained little from this process except enlarged aspirations which can never be fulfilled.

While the globalizing economy is clearly implicated in the inequality-generating mechanism which Charles Tilly refers to as opportunity hoarding, its impact is localized. The shift from land and machines to financial capital as a basis of control over value-producing resources might appear to have released opportunities for enhanced well-being from ties of place - to physical environment and fixed capital. The conventional wisdom is also that access to information via electronic communication will further enhance this freedom. And greater personal mobility might also encourage people to seek opportunities away from home, creating a more fluid inequality surface. A possible future scenario inspired by such expectations has been offered by the foundational head of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, Jacques Attali (1991: 5-6), who envisages a future of 'rich nomads' and 'poor nomads'. The rich, as the consumer citizens of the world's privileged regions, will be able to participate in the liberal market culture, roaming the planet in search of the information, sensations and goods that only they can afford, while yearning for lost human fellowship, home and community. They will be confronted by the poor, roving masses of boat people on a planetary scale, seeking escape from the destitute periphery where most of the world's population will continue to live.

However, the reality may well be a more spatially fixed polarization. The benefits which people seek are still likely to be found largely in the built form of such major, localized capital investments as hospitals, schools, universities and workplaces, and in the skills of those whose labor enable them to function effectively. Against the possibilities of distance learning, along with the rapid adoption of the internet and mobile telephone, has to be set the recent hesitancy of e-commerce manifest in the demise of some prominent 'dot-com' businesses; e-health care and social welfare services remain as inconceivable as e-affection and virtual love. Face-to-face interaction and corporeal contact with particular others in particular places still matters. While the traditional localized community may largely have disappeared, other place-based sources of mutuality and solidarity seem to be surviving economic globalization, in such forms as ethnic or religious chauvinism and resurgent nationalism. Territoriality, in the sense of control over portions of geographical space, still plays a crucial role in the process of opportunity hoarding. Like place, territory is continually being imbued with new significance, not least in parts of the world like the Balkans and Israel/Palestine where its occupation is vigorously contested.

Geographically defined membership, in the form of citizenship of a relatively affluent nation-state, remains a source of crucial opportunities. While the rich may be potentially mobile, few seek the nomadic life detached from familiar persons, places and identities. As for the poor, their capacity to roam the world is constrained not only by lack of resources, but also by the rigor with which state borders are policed to restrict immigration. For example, recent increases in the number of those seeking refuge in Britain from poverty and ethnic pogroms in Eastern Europe have seen the formerly heroic figure of the political asylum seeker increasingly described as 'bogus', nothing better than an 'economic migrant'. Reflecting something akin to a moral panic, one newspaper identifying the 'hardest-hit' part of the country refers to the need to 'spread the burden', as refugees 'pour into' Britain 'swamped' with applications; the fear expressed is that 'soft-touch' Britain could soon be the world's top destination for people 'most of whom aren't real refugees' (News of the World, January 21, 2001). Such reporting reinforces reluctance to share opportunities with strangers in need.

There appears to be widespread popular belief in an entitlement to monopolize such benefits as national citizenship bestows, keeping others out as firmly as did some traditional more localized communities. Yet, it is hard to argue that the British people, for example, deserve their relative advantage in some strong moral sense. Indeed, citizenship in Western liberal democracies has been described as the modern equivalent of feudal privilege: an inherited status that greatly enhances life chances, and similarly hard to justify (Carens, 1987: 252). The accident of birth in a particular place, whether nation-state, city or neighborhood, provides no more convincing a moral claim to desert than being born to particular parents, or as male or female, with dark or pale skin. Yet it is on such morally arbitrary grounds that enormous differences in opportunities for well-being are based. And it is on such grounds that growing hostility to 'outsiders' such as refugees and asylum seekers is defended.

As we settle into the twenty-first century, it is hard to see substantial changes in the forces making for increasing inequalities in geographical space. Capital appears to be economizing on the use of labor rather than reaching out to incorporate the peripheral poor - except to the extent that they come very cheap and with little expectation of environmental protection and social security. Lowly paid workers, like the unemployed, lack effective demand for ever more sophisticated products, the disposal of which capital needs for its continuing expansion: one of the contradictions identified by Karl Marx which may yet come to rebound on the global economy. In richer parts of the world, what were luxuries a few years ago are today's necessities: most of the British population, including half its school children, now have mobile telephones. There are about 4100 internet hosts per 100,000 population in the countries classified by the United Nations as 'high' on the human development index, but the figure is only 24 per 100,000 in 'medium' countries, and negligible in countries with 'low' human development (UNDP, 2000: 201). This vast 'digital divide' threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities rather than to narrow them. And even if personal computers and mobile telephones did eventually trickle down to the poor, new products would have been invented to perpetuate the advantage of the better-off.

Charles Tilly concludes with a call for careful reasoning about the processes that generate inequality, wherever it occurs. While different kinds of economy and society generate different patterns of inequality, it is not hard to find some common causes. Control of the means of production and its output facilitates the accumulation of wealth, which is readily translated into the political power on which further advantage can be built within hierarchical social structures. Such is the nature of capitalism. Such was the experience of the former socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, under different social relations, even if the degree of inequality was less than under capitalism. And such is the experience of 'post-socialism', 'mafia capitalism', or whatever is replacing socialism, as vast inequalities open up in Russia and elsewhere. Careful empirical investigations will continue to be required to clarify details of the process of inequality, subject as it is to the specifics of geographical as well as historical context.

While the focus tends to be on positive aspects of the issue, trying to identify and explain the facts of inequality, it is important not to overlook the normative dimension. Social justice and morality have an important part to play, not only in providing philosophical grounding for normative judgment, but also in the promotion of change. It was the Enlightenment revelation of rights of national citizenship which began to erode conventional hierarchies of privilege, to require the equal treatment of all, in at least some respects. And it is common understanding of the moral arbitrariness of the accident of birth in particular circumstances which underpins objections to aspects of the lottery of life in Britain, and elsewhere. While the contemporary world has inherited Enlightenment conceptions of impartiality and universality which encourage egalitarianism, and while the discourse of universal human rights retains much of its rhetorical power fifty years after the United Nations declaration, there are signs of a new parochialism consolidating. This is expressed in an ethic of care for our own, our familiar nearest and dearest, which may be accompanied by disdain for the fate of distant others. The geographical scope of caring relations may be broader than that of the insular pre-modern community, but there are more local manifestations than the chauvinistic nationalism expressed in some British attitudes to closer integration with Europe, as well as towards immigrants.

The importance of relationships in geographical space to social justice and morality has been recognized in recent years (Smith, 1994, 2000b). Debates on the spatial scope of beneficence raise the question of how far we (in advantaged parts of the world) are capable of extending the care we customarily bestow on our own family, community members or fellow citizens to more distant strangers (Smith, 1998). Moral universalism was invented at a time when Western Europe was trying to come to terms with responsibility to others being incorporated into expanding empires. Now that the globalization of economic relations is creating a truly interdependent world, universalist sentiments are having to contend with what appear to be ever more powerful claims to the monopolization of territorially-based opportunity hoarding. Thus, we (in Britain and similar countries) hardly question our right to bestow mobile telephones and expensive computer games on our children, while others elsewhere starve. Underlining some of the points made earlier in this contribution concerning the place of good fortune, Stuart Corbridge (1998: 37) stresses that poor people in poor regions of the world are often deprived for reasons that are random and accidental: "To the extent that these Other people could have been 'Us' (the affluent), and to the extent that their lives are inextricably linked to our own, there are good reasons for attending to their needs and rights as fellow human beings in a manner that will make calls on our 'own' resources and entitlements". If this kind of view could be accepted as moral truth, with the persuasive power to motivate action as well as concern, there might be some hope for the changes required to create a more egalitarian political economy. But the prospects are far from encouraging.

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