

LITERATURE

Ferenc Gyuris: The Political Discourse of Spatial Disparities. Geographical Inequalities Between Science and Propaganda (Contributions to Political Science Series).

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The issue of spatial disparities has been in the forefront of geographical thought and enquiry for a long time, along with a number of other disciplines contributing to the topic. Beyond the otherwise obvious core concern of these analyses, however, there have always been (and still there is) a massive load of ballast, either explicitly political or ‘only’ obliquely ideological. Taking this into consideration, yet quite surprisingly, this volume is the very first attempt to provide a comprehensive, in-depth overview of the political discourse on geographical inequalities, based on the author’s doctoral dissertation submitted to (and defended at) Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. As the subheading of the book suggests, the analysis of such a topic is never ‘neutral’, nor apolitical; on the contrary, the results of scientific enquiry have always been tightly connected to political and economic power and, therefore, might be considered as a set of socially constructed and/or negotiated claims, cloaked in a scientific (dis)guise. To put it very briefly, the principal aim of the author is to unveil these intricate relationships.

In order to do so, Ferenc Gyuris first provides concise definitions for the contested concepts of ‘*spatial unevenness*’, ‘*spatial differentiation*’, ‘*spatial inequality / disparity*’, and ‘*spatial inequity / injustice*’, thereafter focusing on ‘*spatial disparities*’ which are understood by him as ‘*the spatial aspects of social disparities, thus, those forms of unevenness in space that can be traced back to human agency*’ (p. 13.). After that, he presents a wide-ranging historical overview of the conceptualisation of social disparities spanning from the Antiquity (Ancient Greece and Rome) through Christianity and the Age of Enlightenment in England and France (with a short Central and Eastern European outlook) to the Marxist and Anti-Marxist interpretation of Darwin’s ideas on natural selection and the post-WWII problematisation of social disparities. In Chapter 2.6, as a case study from the recent years, the author analyses the extensively debated 2009 book entitled ‘*The Spirit Level*’, written by epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. With left-wing reviewers tending to present its findings as ‘scientific truths’, whereas right-wing critics questioning its validity (and thus, labelling it as

an ‘unscientific’ work), the diverse receptions of the book clearly demonstrate the politically constructed nature of such contributions to the debate.

Beyond the conceptualisation of inequalities in general, the emphasis is then shifted from social to *spatial* disparities (from Chapter 3 to 9), with a particular emphasis on the actors shaping the dominant discourse(s). Just as in the case of the previous compendium on social inequalities, this contextual analysis is also embedded in a broader historical context, from the early social surveyors relying on ‘moral statistics’ in the wake of the Industrial Revolution through the ‘classical’ Marxist tradition to Non-Marxist and Neo-Marxist approaches. Concerning the 19th century French and British contexts, the author first provides an overview of the pioneering work of Adolphe Quetelet, Charles Dupin, André-Michel Guerry and Charles Booth, along with the latter’s far-reaching influence on the other side of the Atlantic, especially on the subsequent work of the Chicago School of urban sociology. However, even before (and partly parallel with) their ecological approach, another highly influential tradition emerged from the mid-19th century; the Marxist conceptualisation of spatial disparities. Within the confines of the ‘classical’ Marxist tradition, Ferenc Gyuris thoroughly analyses the spatial aspects of the work of Marx and Engels, Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of ‘uneven spatial development’, as well as the related writings of Lenin and Stalin. In connection with this particular strand of thought, he concludes that the issue of spatial unevenness gradually became one of the focal points of their arguments and hence, made the entire Marxist discourse inherently spatial. Moreover, under the umbrella of ‘scientific socialism’, the above-mentioned thinkers almost exclusively presented their concepts as scientific ones (aimed at providing legitimacy *against* capitalism).

In reaction to the Marxist authors’ problematisation of spatial unevenness, however, several Non-Marxist voices also emerged from the mid-20th century. Concerning the early Cold War context, Ferenc Gyuris comprehensively examines a number of important (yet conflicting, both neoclassical and non-neoclassical) theoretical contributions published within only one decade, i.e. the works of Myrdal (1957), Hirschman (1958), Easterlin (1958), Borts and Stein (1964), Williamson (1965), and Friedmann (1966). After this initial heyday fuelled by the ‘big science’, there has been a sudden decline in spatial disparity research in the Western world during the 1970s, caused by the changing circumstances of global geopolitics on the one hand, and the harsh criticism of these concepts on the other. Nevertheless, this temporary devaluation was soon followed by another significant re-appreciation of the topic in the rapidly neoliberalising economic environment of the 1980s, primarily marked by the works carried out on β and σ convergence, along with endogenous growth theories and Paul

Krugman's 'New Economic Geography' (NEG), not to mention the booming neoclassical spatial disparity research connected to the policy-making (planning and monitoring system) of the European Union.

Largely building on Scheler's (1926) distinction between factual and orientation knowledge, the author attempts to deconstruct 'objective' research results throughout the entire book and demonstrate how they alter(ed) in favour of different political claims requiring scientific legitimacy. In addition, most of the abstract – yet often taken-for-granted – models of spatial inequalities formulated in the above-mentioned works (for instance Williamson's inverted U model or the later concepts of β and σ convergence) are also critically (re-)analysed. Ferenc Gyuris provides clear and thoroughly elaborated arguments, and eventually comes to the conclusion that over this long-standing tradition, the problematisation of spatial disparities has almost always gone hand in hand with the legitimisation and de-legitimisation of certain political powers. As its main tools, several strategies are presented, such as the selective use (or in some cases the complete negligence) of case studies, the acceptance of hypotheses as explanations, or – perhaps less intentionally – the misinterpretation of the actual causes of inequalities. To recapitulate the main findings of the book, figures 9.1 and 9.2 (pp. 332–334.) provide an excellent synopsis of this extraordinary discourse analysis.

Obviously, this monograph fills a significant theoretical gap, therefore it is strongly recommended for Hungarian readers from the field of social sciences, mainly human geographers (and those familiar with regional science), sociologists, economists and political scientists. Nonetheless, even for the international academia, the work of Ferenc Gyuris also points far beyond the usual theorisation of the subject from a rather unconventional, (post)socialist perspective by throwing light on the theoretical and empirical shortcomings of Western mainstream Neo-Marxist approaches (various kinds of leftist 'dependency theories' and especially the concept of 'uneven development' worked out primarily by David Harvey and the late Neil Smith). The true novelty of the book undoubtedly lies in the arguments elaborated in Chapter 8.2 (and particularly in 8.2.2 and 8.2.3., pp. 270–330.): here, the author provides the critique of the re-discovered concept of 'uneven development' supplemented by a wide array of empirical examples spanning from the former Soviet Union to post-WWII China and Hungary. (Even by the publisher, Springer Verlag, the book is labelled as '*[t]he first work to test Harvey's uneven development concept on »real existing socialism«*'.) In connection with the massive body of Neo-Marxist literature on the topic of geographical inequalities, although underlining that these accounts should definitely not be thrown to the garbage heap of pure political propaganda, Ferenc Gyuris convincingly argues for an urgent

need of the international recognition and a greater appreciation of the context of the actually existing socialism(s) (or, as he puts it, '*the real existing socialism*').

Indubitably, this comprehensive volume is highly recommended for researchers, lecturers and university students interested in the contested research history of spatial disparities from all fields of the social sciences.

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