



What is the point of urban justice? Access to human space

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Published online: 7 September 2020
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Abstract

Do we need a theory of urban justice? If so, what desiderata would such a theory have to meet? This paper makes a programmatic point, namely, that urban justice is a field of political philosophy in its own right, and that the recognition-theoretical approach is capable of expressing what is at stake there. A revised version of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition meets the three desiderata of a theory of urban justice: relationality, spatiality and diversity. Whereas justice-related questions on the domestic level typically refer to the basic structure of society—concerning issues of basic rights and wealth distribution—on the city level such questions are concentrated mainly on the way urban space is organized. Ultimately, what is at stake is to articulate a vision of the city as an embodiment of human space; a space that is structured in such a way that it meets the demands for recognition. The paper tests if the framework is capable of expressing the key moral challenges of two justice-related issues of contemporary cities, namely, segregation and gentrification.

Keywords Justice · City · Recognition · Segregation · Gentrification

Introduction

For some time now, the philosophical reflection on the meaning of social justice has broadened its scope from the domestic realm to the global realm. Global justice theory is timely, given the process of neoliberal globalization, a widening of the global income gap and the fact that political philosophy traditionally has been focusing on the nation-state. However, the process of globalization also developed into a different direction: it went hand in hand with devolution, urbanization and the formation of megalopolises. This development raises the question if social justice theory should also pay more attention to a societal unit very different from the global or the national, one that is much closer to our life worlds, namely the city.

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Modern cities are plagued by a number of problems that seem to indicate the need for thorough normative evaluation, such as neoliberal-capitalist displacement and dispossession, gentrification, a reliance on market processes and an obsession with economic growth, the disregarding of the rights of homeless people, lack of citizen input, lack of tax base sharing, lack of affordable housing, lack of public services in certain quarters, social and ethnic segregation and so on (Brenner et al. 2012; Dikeç 2007; Fainstein 2010; Harvey 1973, 2009; Marcuse et al. 2009; Mitchell 2003; Soja 2010).

These well-known challenges suggest that “the city” is indeed a relevant unit of analysis for social justice. The main question that I want to explore is how these normative challenges should be framed theoretically. Is conceptual innovation needed here—do we need an *urban* theory of justice—or is it a matter of applying existing theories of social justice to the urban context and if so, which kind of theory would be most appropriate?

First, we will explore the question to what extent urban justice simply is a function of the aggregate level of state justice. Before we think about the contours of a theory of urban justice, we first have to be clear about the kind of normative questions that are related to the urban frame (“Urban justice: why bother?” section). Next, we will hone in on the more substantial question of the paper, namely what kind of theory would be most fitting. I will argue in favor of a recognition-theoretical approach (“The recognition-theoretic approach” section). This approach is promising because it allows the articulation of a conception of human space. Human space is a normative conception of space that is structured by different patterns of recognition, namely care, respect and esteem, and that is embodied both by physical structures, institutions and intersubjective relations between individuals and groups (“Human space” section). Finally, the paper tests if the theoretical framework is capable of expressing the key moral challenges of two justice-related issues of contemporary cities, namely, segregation and gentrification (“Urban justice as access to human space” section).

Urban justice: why bother?

The extent to which cities are relevant from the point of view of social justice depends to a large degree on the preliminary question whether they are relatively independent units of government. One major difference between the old city-states of ancient Greece—where Western reflection on justice took off—and modern cities of the industrialized West, is that modern cities depend on policies and regulations of higher-order political bodies such as the state and the European Union. But if cities would be simply at the mercy of other actors, such as national and regional governments, the question how to achieve a just distribution of benefits and burdens there should focus on those entities and structures that constitute potential agents of chance. Urban justice in that case would simply become a subject of higher forms of government.

A Rawlsian inspired analysis could for instance argue that the formation of disadvantaged neighborhoods with a declining system of education and a lack



of public services is a strong indication that the principles of justice have been insufficiently institutionalized in the basic structure of a particular society (Rawls 1999). In that case, urban (in)justice would be a function of national (in)justice. The point of focusing on the urban frame in that case is at best a way of tracking where the manifestations of unjust governance at the state level most clearly are visible, at worst it seems a diversion from the real causes of injustice by looking past the arena's where the action is.

A good reason to zoom in on lower levels of government in that scenario could be to develop an argument for a change in the division of labor between higher and lower levels of government, to the effect that this complete dependence of city governance on higher-order government agents leads to forms of injustice at the local level. In that case one would have to show that existing forms of urban injustice are related to the way in which actual cities are constrained to act. In fact, part of the emerging literature on urban justice seems to head in this direction, namely where different versions of the argument for more robust local democratic control are proposed, particularly in terms of the "right to the city" (Lefebvre 1996; Purcell 2008; Marcuse 2009; Harvey 2009, 2012; Frug and Barron 2008).

Other authors, who are skeptical of such proposals, argue that cities actually *do* have considerable room to maneuver. For instance, Susan Fainstein argues that governance at the urban scale is sufficiently autonomous to consider it a separate unit of analysis. Although she admits that "recourses available to cities are determined largely by higher levels of government and the autonomous decisions of private investors, local public policy making still affects who gets what" (Fainstein 2010, p. 7). So where does urban government make a difference?

The choice of objects of investments (e.g., stadiums vs. housing; infrastructure vs. incentives to private developers; schools vs. convention centers) as well as locational decisions (e.g., where to put the bus station or public housing) is made by local governments. Particular policy areas in which municipalities have considerable discretion and thus the power to distribute benefits and cause harm include urban redevelopment, housing programs, zoning, racial and ethnic relations, open space planning, and service delivery. Whether the policy emphasis and budgetary priorities should be on physical construction or human capital development, dispersion of low-income households or neighborhood improvement are decisions made locally (Fainstein 2010, pp. 7–8).

Most of the themes referred to here are related to the way urban space is organized. This is why spatial questions are so central to reflection on urban justice. Furthermore, as a result of an ongoing process of devolution that is characteristic for the last decades, there is a loosening grip of nation states on the political affairs of metropolitan areas. A reconfiguration of the relationship between higher and lower levels of government developed in the sense of an increasing range of responsibilities and tasks being devolved to local administrations. The effect is that "cities have acquired much stronger roles in the political, economic, social and cultural arena's" (Novy and Mayer 2009, p. 108; Katz and Nowak 2018). So city-level institutions increasingly have the responsibility for policy area's that affect the lives of city dwellers.



This responsibility of city institutions rests on a presupposition that cities should be understood as polities that are distinct in some relevant ways from the nation-state of which they are a part. First of all, cities have specific collective needs that require government institutions for the city as a whole, specifically regarding the organization of space. Hence the range of policy areas over which the city exercises final control. Secondly, democratic city politics presupposes citizens who identify not only with the nation-state, but also with the city in which they live. This identification ideally is rooted in a sense of urban community, a sense of attachment to a *particular* city with a common public ethos (comparable to the “nation” on the state level). And despite the fact that cities in reality are often rather anonymous and very diverse places that defy a strong sense of community (Lofland 1973; Young 1990, p. ch. 8), at the same time many citizens identify with their city and sometimes even cultivate a sense of urban pride. Daniel Bell and Avner de-Shalit refer to this sense of urban attachment with the term “civicism” and they argue in their book that “cities have been increasingly the mechanism by which people oppose globalization and its tendency to flatten cultures into sameness” (Bell and de-Shalit 2011, pp. 4–5).

Thus the local authority that city governments in reality typically have is not a mere coincidence. Now the main normative question that we face is, by which standards of justice should this local responsibility to govern be guided? Unfortunately, political theorists have mainly focused on the nation state (statism) or on global governance (cosmopolitanism) when thinking about standards of social justice (Davoudi and Bell 2016a, pp. 7–8).

The recognition-theoretic approach

If we want to determine what a fitting approach to urban justice would be, we need some criteria for choosing. The first desideratum is that such a theory should be *relational* in nature. What is characteristic for cities, at their essence, is that they can be interpreted as systems to connect people, first of all with each other but also to the places they work or go to school, and so on. Cities are defined by large population size and high population density. That entails that many people are living together on a relatively limited geographical area. Although the resulting social proximity should not be taken as proof of a strong sense of community—there is a literature on urban indifference and blasé attitude (Simmel 1903/1969; Wirth 1938/1995)—living in cities *does* involve networks of people and networks of these networks, although these networks have differing degrees of emotional intensity, ranging from civil inattention (Goffman 1963) to close-knit urban villages (Robinson 2006, p. 51).

The second desideratum of a theory of urban justice is *spatiality*, that is, sensitivity to the constitutive nature of space. Justice questions that are related to more classical themes, like the distribution or redistribution of personal wealth and income and the establishment of basic civil, social and political rights, are dealt with on the level of what Rawls calls the basic structure of society. What is mostly left to the urban jurisdiction is the power and the authority to organize urban space. That local control, however, entails its own kind of wealth distribution: not so much in terms of *personal* income (although local taxes do affect that as well) but in terms of service



delivery, infrastructure provision and so on. Investment decisions regarding services like education, public transport and health care that clearly benefit one neighborhood while neglecting another, reproduce the city's socio-economic infrastructure through spatial formations that "make the production and reproduction of injustice more 'hard wired' into the city" (Davoudi and Bell 2016b, p. 266). In that sense, urban space becomes inextricably linked to advantage and disadvantage. This is especially the case if we take into account the effects of neighborhood disinvestment on *personal identity*, that is, on the way a person's practical relation-to-self is structured, particularly in terms of self-respect and self-esteem. As we will argue below (see "Human space" section), spatial disadvantage has an objective but also an intersubjective aspect that relates to people's self-understanding. Hence most types of injustice in the city are not simply embedded *in* space, but are actually created and maintained *through* a certain organization of space (Dikeç 2001).

Finally, a theory of urban justice should acknowledge urban *diversity*. A key characteristic of cities from a sociological point of view—besides large population size and high population density—is deep social heterogeneity (Wirth 1938/1995; Pile 1999). This intense heterogeneity stems from migrations to the city of very diverse social groups: ethnic, cultural, artistic, professional, intranational, and international groups. In addition to that, cities actively produce difference through the phenomenon of critical mass: whereas eccentricity in typical rural areas remains isolated and marginalized, in urban conditions it clusters and produces subcultural variety, including particular services and certain types of labor (Hannerz 1992). In the city we therefore find a high level of cultural complexity and subcultural variety within a relatively limited space. A theory of urban justice should take this defining characteristic into account.

The recognition-theoretical framework that I want to suggest as a productive approach to issues of urban justice meets the first of these desiderata: relationality. For this approach is based on an intersubjective conception of human identity. The way someone understands and evaluates herself is mediated by different patterns of recognition. The fact that personal identity is dialogical implies vulnerability to structural misrecognition and this vulnerability entails certain moral obligations in terms of legitimate expectations to be recognized in particular ways. This picture of the self might not be so controversial by now, but the moral consequences are still in dispute amongst the theorists of recognition (Margalit 1996; Fraser and Honneth 2003; McBride 2013). My goal here is not to outline these discussions, but to apply a revised version of Axel Honneth's approach to some of the main challenges of today's cities in order to assess its suitability.

Secondly, the recognition-theoretical approach also meets the spatiality condition. Authors who have discussed moral issues and justice claims in terms of "recognition" (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1992, 1995, 1997) have been building upon central ideas that have been developed by the great nineteenth century thinker G.W.F. Hegel. One of the core ideas at the back of this "dialogical self" is what Charles Taylor takes to be Hegel's fundamental insight: the "principle of necessary embodiment" (Taylor 1979, p. 18). There can be no understanding of the world or my place in it without some external medium that shapes this thought in certain ways. This Hegelian notion of the "embodied subject," that has been quite influential in continental



philosophy, entails that there is no sharp opposition between the human mind and the human body, its surrounding socio-cultural environment or the concrete reactions of others to me. The embodied subject in that sense is not with clear contours or sharp boundaries. Embodiment carries the meaning that one's identity should be seen rather in terms of openness or connectedness to our immediate social, cultural and physical contexts that constitute us in different ways.

Thirdly, the concept of "recognition" is often associated with a politics of minority rights and multiculturalism (Taylor 1994). Hence it should be able to accommodate the third desideratum as well. Yet the theorist that has produced the most developed and differentiated theory of recognition, and therefore qualifies as the most promising candidate for the task at hand, failed to properly and convincingly incorporate that type of recognition, namely Axel Honneth. In his book *The Struggle for Recognition* Honneth differentiates between love/care, respect, and social esteem (1995). These categories of recognition are focused on different dimensions of the personality, respectively: needs and emotions; equal moral accountability; and traits and abilities. He identifies three related types of self-relation that are mediated by the corresponding type of recognition, namely basic self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Self-confidence designates the ability to express one's needs and desires without fear of being abandoned, self-respect implies the self-understanding of being a person with an equal moral status, an equal moral responsibility, and finally self-esteem is the positive self-evaluation of one's own particular capacities and accomplishments.

Differentiated as this concept of recognition may be, it does not allow a proper recognition of social attachments (Van Leeuwen 2007). I define "social attachments" as identifications of oneself and particular others as part of a social group on the basis of a shared and valued good, such as a particular culture or a country of origin, without this belonging being the direct result of individual choices or certain achievements. Attachments are a morally relevant feature of the human condition given their importance for a sense of social belonging, so fundamental for human well-being. In Honneth's original taxonomy the recognition of social attachments either takes place in the third sphere, namely in terms of esteem for "particular traits," or in the second sphere namely in terms of respect for "cultural conditions" for autonomy. Yet neither of these solutions addresses what I refer to as difference-respect: a formal recognition of social attachments. Difference-respect is formal because it is a recognition of the value of these shared goods not "for society" or "as such," as in esteem, but *for the social group* involved. Yet, although it is formal, difference-respect cannot be reduced to respect for personal autonomy and its preconditions, as Honneth wrongly suggests in *Redistribution or Recognition?* (Fraser and Honneth 2003). That would constitute an instrumentalization of attachments that is add odds with identifications that have unique significance for people (Van Leeuwen 2006). Hence, I distinguish respect for "autonomy," the more traditional concept of respect, from respect for "social attachments" and refer to the first type as "autonomy-respect" and the latter type as "difference respect". Respect for attachments acknowledges the intrinsic value of a shared good *for the particular social group* involved. This type of recognition is constitutive for self-respect as a sense of belonging (see Table 1).



Table 1 The modified structure of relations of recognition

Mode of recognition	Respect (formal)		Esteem (evaluative)
	Autonomy-respect (1st axis of respect)	Difference-respect (2nd axis of respect)	
Dimension of personality	Needs and emotions	Equal moral accountability	Traits, achievements, abilities
Practical relation-to-self	Self-confidence	Self-respect as a sense of equal moral accountability	Self-esteem
		Social attachments	
		Self-respect as a sense of social belonging	



What do these different spheres of recognition amount to is that together they can be seen as the combined intersubjective conditions for the development of an intact sense of self, that is, a self that is characterized by positive self-relations across the board of the recognition typology. These conditions define a much broader sense of justice than the usual focus on “autonomy” and its preconditions. The patterns of recognition that people live with, one could say, define a kind of space in which one is able to develop an identity and a way of life that is truly human. By that I mean that the intersubjective standards can be seen as having moral significance to the degree that they articulate the formal conditions of the good life for people in universal terms. These intersubjective conditions do not define a particular politics of the good in terms of a life organized around a particular comprehensive doctrine (Honneth 1995, chap. 9). It is in that sense that I want to talk about the space of recognition as a typical human space. Justice implies, in short, that people have access to this human space.

Human space

The notion “human space” needs some unpacking in order to be helpful as a normative concept. We have argued that the Hegelian roots of recognition theory allow for a more spatially sensitive notion of justice. However, the main focus in the last section has been on recognition rather than on space. Although recognition explains what the *human* aspect entails in this formulation, we did not yet shed sufficient light on its *spatial* meaning.

A good beginning for a more spatially sensitive concept of justice is the observation that some types of injustice do not simply take place “in” a particular space, such as a particular state or city, but are actually created and reproduced by the way space is organized (Dikeç 2001, p. 1793). Yet there is a tendency in political theory to conceive of space “as being innocent or, in other words, apolitical” (Lefebvre 1976, p. 30). Whereas “space” in theories of social justice is usually no more than a background parameter, implicitly present in all notions of “distribution” of essential goods amongst members of a cooperative scheme, in a spatially sensitive conception of justice the spatial structure, or geography, itself is reflected upon for the reason that it determines—that is, limits or enhances—a certain set of crucial opportunities. In short, a spatially sensitive concept of justice encourages a strategic and theoretical emphasis on the specifically (and often neglected) spatial aspects of justice and injustice (Soja 2009, p. 32). And as we have argued, such spatial aspects of justice are especially relevant in the urban context.

Organizing urban space often entails more than simply manipulating objects “in” physical space, for it typically involves reproducing the social, economic and political relations that are bound up with it. In order to understand these injustices a non-physicalist conception of space is key (Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 1973). If urban space is socially produced and reproduced and cannot simply be conceived of as a “container,” a “stage” or a “context” of politics and questions of justice, then certain social injustices cannot be resolved by “distributing” goods *within* space. Instead,



what needs to be analyzed are the ways in which the organization of urban space itself actually produces and reproduces injustice.

On this basis, some theorists have made a conceptual distinction between two types of urban justice: “justice *in* the city” refers to the absolute conception of space that perceives cities as more or less neutral containers in which certain essential goods are distributed in ways that can be evaluated as either just or unjust, while “justice *of* the city” refers to injustices that are produced and reproduced *through* social space (Davoudi and Bell 2016a; Dikeç 2001, 2009). Both types of injustices are relevant from the moral point of view. Let me illustrate this with some examples. An example of injustice *in* the city is the withholding of voting rights in municipal elections for non-naturalized, legal immigrants. It could be argued that this is a maldistribution of individual political rights—typically anchored in the basic structure of society—that has no direct spatial dimension. However, *indirectly* there is a spatial dimension to the effect that residential clustering of immigrants with no voting power entails that “not only individual immigrants are not heard, but entire neighborhoods are not represented” (De-Shalit 2018, p. 82). This might stimulate a lack of concern for these neighborhoods by political actors that tend to cater to those with voting power.

The second type of injustice, namely injustice *of* the city, is more ingrained spatially and as such harder to overcome. For instance, if certain policies of desegregation and geographical dispersal—often in the name of “urban renewal” (see “Urban justice as access to human space” section)—turn out to be spatial tactics of control and disempowerment, leading to a loss of self-respect and communal cohesion, it is hard to conceive of this in terms of an uneven “distribution of goods or services” that could easily be reversed. Rather it is a kind of domination and exclusion that is linked to the way social space is being organized and subsequently reproduced (Merry 2013; Young 2000).

This becomes especially clear if we not only focus on the *objective* aspects of disadvantage that are part and parcel of a particular neighborhood, such as a lack of opportunities regarding education or communal reproduction, but also on the *inter-subjective* impact and meaning that this has for the people who live there. Here I’m referring to the way that such spatial formations can—and in many cases will—be interpreted as a lack of respect by those who have some control over these spaces. Urban space is organized space and as such it can be conceived of as an *embodiment* of respect or disrespect by those groups and actors that have a measure of control over this organization. And given the anthropological vulnerability that we have discussed in terms of the “dialogical self,” such deposited or reified (mis)recognition implies that urban space can have either an affirmative or a detrimental effect on the way people relate to themselves. In that way, space not only contributes to a stabilization of disadvantage through a local structure of reduced opportunities, for instance compromised educational opportunities, but in addition, the lack of self-worth that this may constitute exacerbates the reproduction of injustice through an assault on the internal, but intersubjectively dependent, resources for fundamental well-being and for taking advantage of existing opportunities.

Human space refers to urban space in its capacity to actively shape personal identity by embodying the different patterns of recognition, namely care, respect and



esteem, that positively affirm the corresponding aspects of the personality, namely needs, personal autonomy, social attachments and individual abilities. Given the fact that urban space is produced and reproduced space, it directly or indirectly entails the responsibility of particular institutions and actors, including the demos of a city or even a country.

Inhuman space is space that radiates a sense of neglect, disregard, rejection or even disgust. Besides sheer *disinvestment* in certain neighborhoods, that we will discuss later in the context of segregation, we can also think of particular investments here, like gated communities with walls, gates and guards that warn off the underclass “other.” As Mike Davis puts it in the context of Los Angeles, such security measures are clearly directed towards certain “pariah groups—whether poor Latino families, young Black men, or elderly homeless white females—[who] read the meaning immediately” (Davis 1990, p. 226). Other types of defensive architecture also come to mind, like “bumproof” benches in parks, anti-homeless spikes in front of luxury apartment buildings, or sprinkler systems programmed to drench unsuspecting sleepers at random times during the night (Omidi 2014; Davis 1990, p. 232 ff.). Such design features target the homeless who are looking for a place to rest or sleep. Of course this makes life for the homeless—who typically have to deal with a notorious lack of sufficient housing and shelter—more difficult than it already is. But it also signals to them that they are *unwanted*. The homeless will get the message that such designs are implemented to effectively ban them from city centers in order to make room for tourism and commercial interests. So besides the fact that daily survival becomes much harder this way, such street environments also *express* a lack of care and concern for the basic needs of this particular group.

Whether we talk of structural disinvestment or defensive architecture: such spaces are not only constitutive for a lack of objective opportunities, but they can also undermine a positive relation-to-self. Given the fact that misrecognition in those cases is materialized in spatial arrangements, this type of disrespect by definition is structural and difficult to overcome. It tends to negatively impact the inter-subjective conditions for the possibility of leading a “good life,” or more modestly, a minimally meaningful existence. So saying that space is constitutive of justice/injustice not only refers to a “geography of opportunity,” namely to spatial disparities in resources, opportunities, and access to opportunities (Sundstrom, forthcoming), but it also refers to its possible effects on citizen’s practical self-understanding to the extent that urban spaces are seen and understood by those who physically access, occupy, and use them as expressive of recognition or misrecognition.¹ And these

¹ This conception of human space is quintessentially moral in nature given that it involves normative standards of recognition that it must live up to. Hence this is a fundamentally different concept of space than the phenomenology of space that Henry Lefebvre has developed and that has inspired a lot of theorists who write about cities (Purcell 2002). According to Lefebvre’s descriptive claims, space ought to be understood in terms of a dialectical triad consisting of “perceived space,” “conceived space,” and “lived space”. Space is at the same time “objectively” perceived, conceptually envisioned (maps etc.), as well as experienced and shaped by those who inhabit it (Lefebvre 1991). The only way that normativity gets introduced here is through the notion that people should have a right to *control* the production of space that they live in, namely in order to fit their needs (Lefebvre 1996). But we cannot simply leave such power to produce space to the citizens of cities or neighborhoods themselves in the false hope that a legitimate decision will magically appear if we only let “the people” decide (see beginning of “Urban justice as access to human space” section).



latter effects are morally relevant as well given that they can compromise justice in the recognition-theoretical sense as securing the “conditions of mutual recognition under which personal identity-formation, hence individual self-realization, can proceed adequately” (Honneth 2003, p. 174).

Urban justice as access to human space

This recognition-theoretical framework entails the justification of classic negative rights as well as positive rights within the sphere of respect for autonomy, namely civic rights, political rights and social rights (Honneth 1995). To what extent is reflection on rights, however, relevant for a theory of *urban* justice? Theories of formal rights seem more relevant for a theory of domestic or global justice, given that rights are established and institutionalized nationally or supra-nationally. Yet there are two complications here.

Firstly, this observation is true where it concerns the abstract conceptualization and justification of such rights. Another question is whether fundamental formal rights embodied in the basic structure are effectively realized in the urban context. Homelessness can again be a good illustration here. Although formal social rights are firmly established in most modern democratic constitutional states, including systems of social security and sometimes even an explicit right to housing (Leckie 1989), the sad reality is that there are about 4.1 million people in the European Union who are homeless each year for a shorter or longer period, mostly in urban centers (EC Report 2013). For the USA this number ranges from 2.5 million to 3.5 million (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2015), while for Canada the official federal figure is well in excess of 200,000 (Gaetz et al. 2013). These numbers show that homelessness is not a marginal phenomenon, but more importantly they illustrate that the mere focus on rights as *formal* structures is insufficient. Political theory cannot hide behind the epithet of “ideal theory” and move on to the global realm, as if local implementation is a mere side show. It has to broaden its scope from the state and the supra-state levels of government to the middle of everyday urban conditions. One may have a social right to housing, but one cannot *sleep* in that right (Mitchell 2003).

Secondly, a theory of urban justice also ought to be sensitive to the way political rights are institutionalized in the urban context. What is of crucial importance is that citizens have the opportunity to significantly influence, though not determine, the way their immediate surrounding urban space is organized. It is not sufficient if they are only allowed to influence the political process by way of periodic voting or running for public office themselves. Urbanites should be able to influence the decision-making process itself, because government policies concerning immediate living space often have a huge impact on their personal lives, for instance regarding public transport, zoning and schools. Citizens should not, however, have the right to *determine* planning and zoning for the reason that neighborhoods may be tempted to ignore the interests of minorities or the larger region or state on whom they at the same time depend. A neighborhood should for that reason not be conceived of as private property or a sovereign self-governing unit (Fainstein 2010). Local



parochialism at the level of the neighborhood or even city is a real risk if decisions are unchecked by the larger society. Localities tend to protect themselves by shifting problems to outsiders. “The most familiar example of this is exclusionary zoning. The point of exclusionary zoning is to ensure that neighboring jurisdictions ... have to deal with the people you want to exclude” (Frug 2014, p. 2). A well-documented illustration in this regard is the Forest Hills casus: a middle class, mostly Jewish section of Queens, New York, that was confronted in the beginning of the 1970’s with the influx of black families through a housing project that New York City planned to build in the area. Richard Sennett describes in great detail how, during the protests against these plans, a self-absorbed and self-interested sense of community developed without any regard for the needs of the black families in question—they simply had to go and live somewhere else (1974, ch. 13). So local concerns should filter through to local government and being taken seriously—local inhabitants should have *power to influence*—but neighborhoods should not get the final say in decisions concerning zoning and planning—they should not get the *power to decide*.

Fundamental to the recognition approach is the moral significance of the relationship between “recognition” and “personal integrity,” as well as the relationship between “personal integrity” and conditions for “the good life.” This seems rather intuitive, but as is always the case with general ideas of justice: it is easy to agree on them as long as we keep things nice and general. Yet as soon as such frameworks are applied to more concrete urban problems, perplexing moral questions arise. So in this section, I will discuss two major urban challenges—segregation and gentrification—and articulate the central moral dilemmas in terms of different claims for recognition. The goal here is programmatic, namely, to access the use-value of this theoretical frame for urban justice issues. We will not attempt to solve these moral puzzles here, but just lay out what’s at stake in them from the recognition-theoretical point of view.

Segregation

Recognition or misrecognition are always *embodied* and their physical embodiment is especially relevant in the city scape. Neighborhoods that are underserved and badly maintained, with failing infrastructure, low performing schools plagued by high teacher-to-student ratios and dilapidated facilities, with lack of police protection, garbage collection and public transport, are not only a disadvantage from the *objective* point of view (public school system in decline, smelly and dangerous streets, and so on), but the obvious disinvestment in the neighborhood is also an *intersubjective* expression of a lack of concern by city government and the wider city population. Such spaces tend to be dehumanizing. The sense of disrespect that this neglect is able to cultivate, if long enough exposed to it, can become part of a damaging self-understanding that undermines the sense of being on an equal footing with others in society. It is this sense of being disrespected and not being taken seriously that, under certain circumstances, can become a source of moral outrage and revolt, even criminal activity and violent youth gangs (Shelby 2007; Dikeç 2017).



A skeptical way to respond to these alleged expressions of injustice is that it is not so obvious that there is an identifiable actor that is responsible for the perceived misrecognition. The moral significance of certain distributional patterns, according to the logic of a theory of recognition, is that some agent is actually responsible for the lack of recognition; *recognition is an act* that is expressed, or embodied in certain media. Yet in the case of US segregation, responsible actors are not hard to find. There is a well-documented history of deliberate segregation, not only by private parties such as real-estate developers and banks, but also by U.S. governments (Rothstein 2017). This had a huge impact on disparities in wealth accumulation and opportunity between white and black households in the US today. And although the segregation of the black population in the United States is more dramatic than it is in continental Europe (Massey and Denton 1993, p. 77), “tendencies [are] moving in the direction of the pattern in the United States” (Marcuse 2000, p. 278).

A major moral dilemma for a theory of urban justice is how to respond to this situation. What does “respect” exactly entail here? If we follow through on respect in the traditional sense of autonomy-respect, we would have to argue in the direction of desegregation policies and integration into the mainstream-society. People have been wronged not only by limiting their residential choice, hence their right to autonomy, but also for the reason that their equal moral status has been undermined. Policies would have to focus on opening up opportunities to the ghetto poor in terms of place of residence, safety, better schools, and a better residential mix of low and middle-class income (Anderson 2010; Trappenburg 2003). Important as this fairer distribution of essential resources may be from an *objective* point of view, the recognition approach stresses the moral significance of the positive impact on a person’s practical relation-to-self that this autonomy-respect allows, sometimes referred to as the *intersubjective* point of view. From that perspective, the sense of dignity and equal moral status that such policies make possible for a wider group of citizens is fundamental.

Yet we could also perceive this situation from the perspective of difference-respect. If members of a cultural or ethnic group are on the receiving end of discrimination, exclusion, and comparative disadvantage, as Iris Young puts it, “the neighbourhood clustering of the group can serve as an important source of self-organization, self-esteem, relaxation, and resistance” (Young 2000, pp. 216–217; Merry 2013). From the point of view of difference-respect, such relative separation within urban areas is quite legitimate if its purpose is mutual aid, building a sense of togetherness in an indifferent or even hostile wider culture and collectively struggling to achieve a more just city. Again, in terms of the moral logic of recognition: if city governments accommodate that kind of clustering, it not only allows the cultural reproduction for that urban community to take place—the *objective* dimension of recognition—but in addition, it acknowledges the particular attachments of citizens and thereby affects the self-understanding of those groups involved—the *intersubjective* dimension or recognition. That kind of difference-respect not only stimulates a sense of belonging to the social group that is clustered residentially, but arguably, it could also stimulate a sense of belonging to the wider political community for the reason that this group feels respected *in its difference* by that wider community. Or to put it negatively, *not* allowing such clustering could undermine a sense



of self-respect as belonging in a double sense: not just to the particular residential community but also the wider urban or national one.

The challenge for any theory of urban justice is to recognize this central moral dilemma. The dilemma is not a brute dilemma for the reason that we might want to argue, and I believe should argue, for a model where we look for an optimum by both accommodating the demands of autonomy-respect as well as of difference-respect. Where exactly the optimal juncture of these axes of respect lies in concrete urban contexts will not be examined here. What one has to resist, however, is the traditional tendency to reduce respect for alterity to respect for autonomy, for instance by arguing that the need for urban clustering will magically disappear once we have eradicated formal discrimination and racist prejudice. That would insufficiently acknowledge people's tendency to live together with those that they share a history with or particular ethno-cultural identifications. What needs to be prevented—and this is the legitimate concern from the point of view of autonomy respect—is that such clustering goes hand in hand with lack of recourses and reduced opportunities, especially regarding education and opportunities for the job-market.

Here the second and the third sphere of recognition overlap: *human* space in the city should not only constitute and support *self-respect*, both in terms of a sense of moral equality and social belonging, but also *self-esteem*, that is, the awareness that one's abilities and contributions are valued and significant for society. The sphere of societal labor cannot be underestimated for developing a sense of pride and self-reliance for those that contribute to it (Honneth 2012). Long-term unemployment remains a social stigma that undermines a healthy sense of self-worth. Hence tensions between the legitimate goals of minority clustering on the one hand, and securing access to job-opportunities on the other, need to be taken seriously if they arise in concrete urban locations.

Gentrification

After a period of disinvestment, some neighborhoods get back on their feet and become attractive again for private developers, public investments and people looking for a place to live. And here is where the next moral challenge presents itself, namely gentrification. The effects of this renewed interest are rising rents, increased costs of living, and a transformation of the neighborhood in terms of its socio-economic composition. This transformation includes a transformation of the built environment: new commercial establishments pop up like upscale restaurants and new or refurbished apartment blocks, often only affordable for middle-class incomes. And in many cases a gradual displacement of working-class residents takes place as a result. There often is a racial element present here: ethnic communities are destabilized as new economic elites—often, but not always composed of whites—move into the area (Patch and Brenner 2007).

According to Neil Smith and others, gentrification developed in the second half of the twentieth century, namely from a local reality first identified in a few major advanced capitalist cities such as London, New York and Paris into a world-wide urban phenomenon (Smith 2002; Atkinson and Bridge 2005a). As Smith puts it:



“gentrification had evolved by the 1990s into a crucial urban strategy for city governments in consort with private capital in cities around the world” (2002, p. 440). Yet this “generalized” gentrification, that is interwoven with the world-wide impact of neoliberal urbanism, is highly varied and unevenly distributed as well as accompanied by many instances of disinvestment leading to ghettoized poverty at the same time (Smith 2002, p. 439; Atkinson and Bridge 2005b).

Gentrification involves a diverse range of stakeholders, such as private real-estate developers, landlords, local governments wanting to upgrade, citizens aspiring to move to particular urban areas, and residents currently living there (Lees et al. 2008). As has been observed in many gentrifying neighborhoods, this mix of different interests fuel strong social and political conflicts. Class frictions in such areas are embodied in “the outward appearance of houses side by side with one another—some with all the marks of grey poverty; their neighbors smartly repainted and with all the externals of wealth” (Ash in Lees et al. 2008, p. 17). Sometimes the resistance against gentrification is expressed very openly, as happened in the well-documented Tompkins Square protests in the Lower Eastside of New York (Smith 1996). Yet in other cases a strong sense of injustice amongst inhabitants of gentrified neighborhoods seems strangely absent. Hayward and Swanstrom interpret this lack of protest in the face of gentrification displacement as follows:

They [original inhabitants] do not necessarily experience moral outrage, assign moral responsibility, and act politically to challenge redevelopment’s outcomes. After all, when you are forced out of your home not by your government but by anonymous market forces, to whom do you protest? (2011, p. 15).

Now although this perception that government has no responsibility here is wrong, as we will see later, gentrification contrary to segregation cannot so directly be traced back to government institutions, such as the laws that forbade African-Americans from owning or renting in certain districts (Young 2011, p. 47). Yet the fact that injustice is not experienced, or is hard to assign to one particular actor or person in charge, does not entail that injustice is not present.

This category of injustice—by some referred to as “thick injustice” (Hayward and Swanstrom 2011) or “structural injustice” (Young 2011)—does, however, pose a challenge to the recognition-theoretical approach. If there are no particular actors responsible for unjust distributional patterns, because these are the effect of—in the words of Nancy Fraser—the “quasi-objective, anonymous, impersonal market order that follows a logic of its own” (2003, p. 214), how can recognition theory deal with such injustices? If unjust distributional effects are not rooted in ideologies about achievement or moral status, but in system imperatives, can we even begin to discuss the moral wrongness of these effects in terms of “misrecognition” and “disrespect”?

According to Nancy Fraser’s critique of Axel Honneth, this is the reason that not all injustices can be reduced to the normative concept of “recognition,” but that we need a parallel category of “distribution” in order to be able to analyze and combat distributive injustices that are the effect of market mechanisms (2003). Although Fraser’s alternative framework has problems of its own (Zurn 2003; Honneth 2003), problems we will not go into here, this critique blew a gaping hole in Honneth’s ambitious version of his recognition theory, that basically claims that the reigning



recognition order of a society *fully determines* that society's economic distributions.² There is textual evidence that Honneth sometimes leans towards that ambitious but ultimately untenable version (Zurn 2015, p. 140 ff.; Thompson 2006, p. 111 ff.). Yet Honneth at one point in his exchange with Fraser grudgingly accepts the limitations of his own perspective: "My attempt to reconstruct the recognition order of modern capitalist societies was not connected to any explanatory aims" (Honneth 2003, p. 249). This allows us to take seriously a more modest version of his argument, namely that the recognition order is one among several determinants for the functioning of markets, that cannot simply be interpreted as autonomous norm-free systems either. Markets generally operate within a highly regulated system of normative preconditions that can be reconstructed in recognitional terms (Honneth 2003, pp. 135–159). The system of law being perhaps the most conspicuous one (Honneth 2014). Capitalist economies are embedded in a host of legal arrangements that: "establish and secure private property; create and regulate corporations; enforce the actionability of contracts; establish the legality of commodity markets for some entities but not others; protect against fraud and deceit [...]" and so on (Zurn 2015, p. 134). For the real-estate market, we can in particular think of zoning regulations, building codes, tax-incentive schemes for private developers, regulations concerning rent-stabilization and eviction, to name a few.

Now although this legal background does not completely determine distributional outcomes of markets for citizens (Honneth's ambitious thesis), they certainly can put a limit on possible negative outcomes from the point of view of fairness and respect (Honneth's modest thesis). For instance, if the net effect of consumer choices and investment decisions by private developers push a single mother with her two children out of her apartment for the reason that housing has become unaffordable, the system of law *can* be evaluated from the moral point of view and regulations *can* be adjusted accordingly. Although remedies like rent-stabilization might not satisfy those who want to revamp the whole capitalist economic structure instead of simply putting limits to it, such limits can and should be interpreted as ways to *respect citizens* and their fundamental interests by protecting them against such economic outcomes. So, although distributive effects of market dynamics can typically not be fully *explained* in terms of "(mis)recognition," political and legal institutions either violate or acknowledge the principles of respect for the way that they *deal with* those effects, and the degree to which markets are given *leeway* in the first place. Hence, these institutions can be evaluated from the normative point of view of the

² This lack of an empirically testable explanatory account of capitalist economies makes the recognition-theoretical approach a compromised framework for articulating the claims of the protests against capitalist globalization. As Zurn puts it: "The causes of the dislocations are to be found in variables specific to the global political economy: currency rates; disproportionate supply and demand; asymmetrical regulatory environments; capital flows; stratified availability of technologies; differential natural resources; diverse interest rates; differential regimes of private property; and so on. This means that recognition-based remedies will likely be simply ineffective against the root problems" (2015, p. 144). According to Zurn and others, Fraser's theory might allow for such a framework, but her sketchy remarks on the dynamics of capitalism are far removed from an adequate account of the current state of global capitalism (Zurn 2015, p. 153; Thomson 2006, p. 117).



recognition perspective by analyzing to what extent accumulation tendencies of capital are checked by means of regulatory social and economic policies.³ And here we can focus again on gentrification as an example.

Firstly, we have to correct the impression that gentrification is only a matter of private parties, with the government serving only as a junior partner. Governments *themselves* increasingly and actively engage in gentrification, although they use euphemistic labels such as “urban renaissance,” “urban renewal” or “revitalization” (Lees et al. 2008). The strategy is to implement redevelopment projects that deconcentrate the urban poor by dispersing the residents in an attempt to reign in local social problems, like crime, vandalism, drug abuse and massive unemployment (Uitermark et al. 2007; Goetz 2003). The premise is that spatial concentration of disadvantaged populations *reinforces* aspects of disadvantage (UTF 1999, p. 45). So not all gentrification is a matter of “anonymous” market imperatives. Hence to ask if government produced gentrification is an expression of respect or not, is a meaningful and relevant question.

Secondly, even in cases of more consumer-led gentrification where market dynamics drive the process of gentrification (Ley 1994), governments have a role and therefore carry responsibility. Governments can *choose* to deregulate the housing market with the full commodification of housing as a result, or they can *choose* for countervailing policy initiatives, like rent control and social housing, to rein in market forces that otherwise push people out of their homes and neighborhoods. Choosing to fully commodify the housing market is often conceived to be a violation of rights of those who need to move out of an apartment or house they can no longer afford (Fainstein 2011). People typically grow emotional attachments to the place where they live: the house, the neighborhood and local social networks (Nine 2018; Radin 1986; Fried 1966). From that perspective, allowing market forces to displace inhabitants entails a disregard for self-respect as a sense of social and spatial belonging. The category of recognition that is at stake here is difference-respect, namely the acknowledgement of citizen’s social attachments to a particular place and community.

But countervailing policy initiatives like rent control, inclusionary zoning and social housing could also be interpreted as undermining respect for individual responsibility, given that they could be seen as subsidizing “expensive tastes” (cf. Kohn 2016)?⁴ In other words, from the point of view of autonomy-respect one could argue that people should live in neighborhoods based on their ability to pay. Perhaps

³ Such policies can only be institutionalized provided that government agencies have sufficient political power, which shows that there is no inherent incompatibility between “power” and “recognition.” In fact, the act of recognition always presupposes a certain measure of control. As I have argued before, the logic of a theory of recognition entails an actor and corresponding moral responsibility.

⁴ Margaret Kohn presents this point of view, without actually agreeing with it. Although she does believe that the choice to keep on living in an inner-city neighborhood that one cannot really afford, is basically an “expensive choice,” she argues that being threatened with eviction as a result of gentrification is still morally wrong because of “bad price luck,” a notion she borrows from Gerald Cohen. The fact that the *market is responsible* for the expensive nature of the taste entails that the person is *not* responsible for it (2016, p. 98). This strikes me as a reductionist way to argue against displacement; reductionist because it relies, I think dubiously, on the logic of autonomy-respect.



inner-city living has become a luxury in some places rather than a basic need. For instance, why should affordable housing be included in a complex like New York City's Battery Park City—as Fainstein argues (Fainstein 2010, pp. 96–100)—within one of the hottest real-estate areas in the world? And relatedly, do landlords not have a basic right to receive a return on investment that is market conform (Greenberg 1990)? Should governments even promote gentrification in order to obtain a better residential mix that increases amenities for poor neighborhoods (Byrne 2003) as well as “liveability” (Uitermark et al. 2007)?

My point here is to illustrate the ability of the recognition-theoretical approach to express the key moral dilemmas at stake in gentrification conflicts. In the existing literature on gentrification, economic and social-scientific perspectives are dominant. Here gentrification conflicts are typically conceived of as interest-based struggles involving conflicting claims to scarce resources (see a.o. writings in Lees et al. 2010). This is sometimes referred to as the *objective* dimension of social conflicts. Yet this interpretation of social conflicts is one-sided, for it does not acknowledge the importance of the *intersubjective* expectations to be recognized (Honneth 1995). For instance, displacement involves a threat both to material conditions for survival and comfort—living space, shelter, storage, location—as well as to intersubjective conditions for personal identity—respect for social attachments and dignity. It is this latter threat and the associated sense of moral resentment that seems crucial for a proper understanding of the moral logic of gentrification conflicts.

That sense of felt disrespect, of being ignored in one's social attachments to a particular place and social network could undermine one's sense of self-respect as a sense of belonging, not only for the reason that one is unable to live in that neighborhood anymore—the *objective* dimension—but also because that whole aspect of one's personality is simply ignored, as if it is without any moral significance—the *intersubjective* dimension. This experience could increase a self-understanding as “punctual” or “isolated” (cf. Fullilove 2001; Elliott-Cooper 2019). Or to put it the other way around, if city governments take policy measures to protect vulnerable working classes (and sometimes even middle classes) in neighborhoods under pressure of gentrification (or super-gentrification), it expresses the vision of citizens as extended, as caught up in a network of valuable social relations and place-attachments and thereby stimulates and values a self-understanding that is more integrated. That self-respect as a sense of belonging could contribute in another way to what we have referred to as human space; space that acknowledges the fundamental structures of human well-being on different levels.

Conclusion

What makes the recognition-theoretical model fitting for the urban arena, in addition to the desiderata already discussed, is that it is a broad social philosophy rather than a narrow political philosophy (Zurn 2015, p. 23). The moral framework that it is based on is not firmly tied to the state level of government. In fact, the focus is not on governance in the first place but on the articulation of the



moral grammar of social conflicts and the legitimate claims that can be put forward within such conflicts on the basis of the intersubjective nature of the human condition.

This framework has the potential to formulate a vision of human space that is everything but one-dimensional for the reason that it consists of different types of recognition with different categories of moral claims. Although Axel Honneth tends to reduce his original tripartite division of recognition types to the conditions for the possibility of individual freedom (Honneth 2002, p. 516, 2003, pp. 180–181, 2014), I want to defend that the different spheres of recognition and the particular moral claims that they involve ought not be reduced to, or instrumentalized for, one recognition type. Instead they entail an irreducible moral pluralism (cf. Taylor 1985). I do agree with Honneth, however, that, *all things being equal*, the sphere of respect in the case of conflicts between the recognition categories should be prioritized, given that this is the sphere of fundamental individual rights (Honneth 1997, p. 33). Yet there are two important caveats here. Firstly, all things aren't always equal: for example, in the case of mentally ill homeless people it is not clear at all that "respect" should be prioritized over "care" (Van Leeuwen 2018). Secondly, my interpretation of the sphere of respect and rights is more complex than the traditional conception that Honneth defends. Respect and corresponding moral claims in my version of the taxonomy have two axes: one axis concerns individual self-determination and the other axis concerns the moral relevance of a sense of belonging (Van Leeuwen 2007). This complicates any ambition for unambiguous moral criteria and clear decision-rules. Yet I think we should resist a reductionist account. The strength of this approach is a type of moral pluralism that factors in the moral relevance of needs, of autonomy, of social attachments and of individual abilities and thereby does justice to the complicated moral challenges that we have discussed.

The detailed moral-political assessment of the different claims for recognition that are involved in these complex moral dilemmas, ultimately needs to take place in the context of the particular characteristics and features that define them. There is no room to do that here; my *programmatic* point is to show that urban justice is a field of political philosophy in its own right, and that the recognition-theoretical approach is capable of expressing what is at stake there. Ultimately what is at stake is to articulate a normative vision of the city as an embodiment of human space: a space that is organized in such a way that it meets the demands for recognition that we have outlined above. If we take the diverse moral claims of the recognition framework as part of a differentiated conception of justice, then the point of *urban* justice is to provide sufficient access to human space in our cities today.

Acknowledgements I want to thank the following people for reading the paper and providing me with helpful suggestions: Nir Barak, Avner de-Shalit, Arnoud Lagendijk, Michael Merry, Ronald Sundstrom, Marcel Wissenburg and two anonymous reviewers.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.



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Bart van Leeuwen Recognition theory was the key approach in my dissertation *Erkenning, identiteit en verschil* (2001) and subsequent journal articles (a.o. in *Inquiry, Philosophy and Social Criticism*). Moreover, in the last decade my research focused on the urban frame. I have published articles on different aspects of urban justice, for example: urban communities and segregation (*European Journal of Social Theory*), urban citizenship (*Political Theory, Urban Studies*), and homelessness (*Political Theory, Public Health Ethics*), a social problem closely related to gentrification. For my key publications see: <https://www.ru.nl/english/people/leeuwen-b-van/>

