

Dossier

Introduction: Spaces of inequality¹

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Several authors have defended the idea that social inequalities are a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Gorän Therborn's typology of three major dimensions – resource, vital and existential inequalities – are well known (2006). Each of these dimensions is produced by different drivers and processes, and in most cases they are systemically interconnected. Of course, in this era of economic and financial globalization, income and wealth are powerful drivers that are widening the gaps between countries and between individuals and social groups belonging to the same society (Piketty 2014). But similar trends are happening in respect of other types of resources, such as education, knowledge and technology. In fact,

... a number of theoretical approaches have stressed the role played by education and skills in structuring professional pathways and earning levels – i.e. in stratifying the workforce. These perspectives suggest that in a globalized world, where economies are increasingly interconnected, one can identify certain relatively homogeneous professional classes at the international level. (Carmo et al. 2015)

Although globalization is a rather ambivalent concept, from this we can capture different meanings about the contemporary world. One of them is to consider space as a multiscale source that, at distinct levels, is producing social and economic mechanisms of interdependence and differentiation (Castells 2000). There is no doubt that

... the world has become increasingly interdependent due to the generalization of information networks and an increase in spatial mobility and migratory flows. Nonetheless, this greater interdependence has not resulted in better integration of social and spatial processes. In fact, in many cases, globalization has generated new discontinuities and fragmentations. (Carmo and Carvalho 2013: 36)

Inequality is an objective expression of the growth of social cleavages that tend to divide social groups, communities, classes and territories. For instance, the access people have to different kinds of resources are not only producing important levels of inequality, as some of them tend to be gradually concentrated and even confined into the hands of a few privileged groups (such as multi-millionaires, scientific experts, technocrats, etc.).

Most of these trends, which are being examined by a number of authors and institutions, have been increasing over the last two or three decades (OECD 2015). They are affecting the socio-economic situation of people currently but, in the near

future, they will have a growing impact on the well-being of the population. If these trends continue to grow, one could expect that in the medium term vital dimensions, such as life expectancy or mortality rates, may be seriously affected, particularly within the most vulnerable groups. These processes are tremendously complex and are changing the structure of the contemporary societies.

Inequalities are multi-dimensional by nature. And one of the dimensions that is still relatively neglected in the scientific analysis is 'space'. Inequalities are not immune to the different spatial contexts in which they are being produced: in fact, space is far from being a neutral variable regarding several types of inequality. One of the contributions of this special issue is to call upon 'space' as a determinant dimension in inequality studies. The notion developed by Henry Lefebvre addressing space as an important source of social production and reproduction became important (1974). At least since the so-called Chicago school (or ecological school), urban sociology has researched the relationship between space and the social composition of the city's inhabitants and workers. During the first half of the twentieth century, several authors from this school demonstrated that in Chicago space was conceived as a fabric of divisions, tensions and social exclusions (Park and Burgess 1925). This became a core topic in urban sociology, and one of the aims of this special issue is to extend it to other topics of research.

The articles that make up this special issue consider space as an active or independent variable that both helps explain how inequalities are produced and how these mechanisms develop differently across diverse geographic contexts. In fact, the more or less explicit exercise that is apparent in all of the contributions is to use space as a

kind of analytical tool that enables the analysis and explanations to be more profound. For instance, by using different scales it is possible to deepen comparative perspectives between specific territories. In addition to being an important driver of social and economic inequality, the use of 'space' is simultaneously a pertinent tool that allows us to look at inequality through different analytical scales.

In conclusion, this special issue has two main aims: to address the importance of space as a determinant dimension producing inequalities; and to conceive space as a methodological tool that can enhance the sociological analysis. Thus, in a sense, this approach requires us to 'give more space to space'.

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Note

¹ The edition and organization of this special issue was part of my activities as researcher in the Observatory of Inequalities and as principal researcher for the LOCALWAYS: ways of local sustainability: mobility, social capital and inequality project (PTDC/ATP-EUR/5023/2012).