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Social justice and geography: towards a South African geographical research agenda

Summary

Drawing on arguments seeking a grounded development of the concept of social justice, this article investigates the potential bearing of the concept on South African geographical research. It is argued that it is philosophically desirable to conduct empirical research focused on the interpretations which agents give to the concept of social justice. It is then suggested that a re-thinking of the debates on normative social justice in the light of arguments for contextual interpretations of this concept provide a framework for a discourse of social justice within South African geographical studies. In particular, three avenues of enquiry are suggested. First, that South African geographers aim at uncovering what the concept of social justice represents with reference to multiple variables and institutions within various spatio-temporal settings. Secondly, that these empirical descriptions of social justice can be compared with various debates on social justice currently found in the social sciences. Finally, that geographical theorisation of the concept of social justice be developed with reference to empirical illustrations of the meaning of the concept.

Maatskaplike geregtigheid en geografie: na 'n Suid-Afrikaanse geografiese navorsingsagenda

Die artikel ondersoek die relevansie van argumente wat die ontwikkeling van die maatskaplike geregtigheidskonsep empiries wil begrond vir geografiese navorsing in Suid-Afrika. Daar word geredeneer dat dit uit 'n filosofiese hoek wenslik is om empiriese navorsing te fokus op agente se interpretasies van die maatskaplike geregtigheidskonsep. Daarna word aangedui dat argumente ten gunste van kontekstuele interpretasies van die onderhawige konsep 'n raamwerk bied waarbinne die diskoers hieroor deur Suid-Afrikaanse geograwe gevoer kan word. Veral drie moontlik relevante navorsingsrigtings word op grond hiervan aangestip. Eerstens, dat gestreef word om bloot te lê wat die opvattings oor maatskaplike geregtigheid is met betrekking tot 'n verskeidenheid veranderlikes en instellings en binne verskillende tydruimtelike kontekste. Tweedens, dat sodanige empiriese beskrywings van maatskaplike geregtigheidsopvattings vergelyk word met verskeie huidige debatte rondom hierdie aangeleentheid in die sosiale wetenskappe. Laastens, dat teoretisering van die konsep binne geografiese geledere geskied aan die hand van empiriese illustrasies van betekenistoekenning daaraan.

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Social justice refers to the distribution of society's benefits and burdens and how this comes about. The concept is traditionally the concern of moral and political philosophy, although various disciplines have contributed to its development and application. Recent debates, however, suggest that spatial investigation should be associated with normative social justice theory (Harvey 1996; Smith 1994). The re-visitation of normative understandings of social justice and its role as a framework for geographical investigation can be explained on the basis of two sets of considerations. First, there appears to be a shift in the understanding of morality associated with the recent post-structuralist rejection of ethical dogmatism and universalism as a basis for explaining how moral codes are generated (Young 1990a). Secondly, structuralists suggest that there is a need for universal, egalitarian frameworks to guide geographical research and practice, enabling the improvement of the human condition for all (Harvey 1996; Smith 2000).

A paradoxical consequence has been that geographical debates on social justice increasingly express a particularist, post-structuralist need for emancipation and the inclusion of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed (Young 1990a, 1990b), as well as incorporating universalist concerns insisting that institutions of governance propagate material equality in the process (Pratt 1993, Smith 2000). Whereas these debates, particularly as seen in the work of Smith (1994a, 2000) and Harvey (1992, 1996, 2000), aim to develop normative frameworks to bridge the "discontinuities" divide between universalist and particularist social justice theorisation, questions centring on what may be learnt from contextual constructions of social justice are largely absent from geographical investigation (Visser 2000a). Unlike the participants involved in the international geographical discourse of social justice, South African geographers have not directly engaged with this concept. This is not to say that moral concerns do not underpin or reveal themselves implicitly in South African geographical research, but rather that investigations focused on the concept of social justice have not been forthcoming. Nevertheless, the limited body of research focused on the intersection between the meaning of the concept of social justice and geographical change in South Africa echoes the duality in theoretical positioning seen at

the international level. The work of Smith (1994a; 1995; 2000), taking a liberal-egalitarian stance on morality, is the most important in terms of social justice investigation in the South African context, while Visser (2000a; 2000b; 2001), suggesting a classic liberal alternative, has also recently engaged this field of study.

This article presents an argument for an empirically driven investigation of social justice within the South African context. A key suggestion is that in exploring such possibilities geographers may be able to demonstrate and ultimately theorise the role of spatiality as underlying the distributive ideals of specific geographical settings. It is suggested that what "real people" actually interpret social justice to be is framed by, and contributes to, the interpretation of spatial relations. These interpretations can change moral perspectives, as those involved constantly (re)negotiate the meaning(s) of distributional issues, with findings which may form the foundation for moral philosophical reflection. The aim of this article is not, however, to demonstrate the superiority of one theoretical understanding of social justice over another, but rather to present a set of arguments that creates a space in which South African geographers can contribute towards the mapping of changing views on social justice. These arguments are, in the nature of philosophical debate, not complete, but ongoing. The investigation of the relationship between interpretations of social justice as revealed in empirical reality and those that are theoretically defensible as superior therefore remains unresolved.

In order to investigate these concerns, the first part of the article focuses on the types of arguments that geographers may put forward in the pursuit of uncovering the impact of geography on the meaning accorded by differentially located agents to the concept of social justice. Thereafter, the discussion aims to demonstrate that there is — relative to work completed elsewhere in the social sciences — cause for considering such an argument. Finally, consideration is given to what this may mean in terms of a South African geographical engagement with social justice.

1. The case for an empirically grounded theorisation of social justice

Recent studies in political science and sociology suggest that social justice theorisation can, and in fact should be influenced and reworked by a consideration of the ways in which decision-makers and communities interpret social justice (Marshall *et al* 1997; Miller 1992; Swift *et al* 1995). Such studies, which have not yet researched geographical or urban planning theorisation of social justice, suggest that within various empirical settings interpretations of the concept are vastly more diverse and widely located in geographical and historical contexts than current debates suggest. The apparent reluctance of geographical studies to engage with empirical understandings of social justice has, however, to be read against broader disciplinary paradigm shifts.

Speculations as to what constitutes a just society have been the stuff of political philosophers from ancient Greece onwards. However, since the 1960s social justice has increasingly become a key element in political and moral philosophy. It is also within this context that John Rawls's *A theory of justice* (1971) emerged, causing an explosion of liberal political theory. David Harvey's *Social justice and the city* (1973), drawing on aspects of this general debate, was another text which transformed the field of geography. While aspects of this work dealt with social justice, its main engagement was the fundamental social and economic processes that structure space in Western society — in other words, capitalism. Consequently, since the early 1970s geographical discourse has focused on the nature of capitalism and its spatial consequences, a topic which proved more challenging than that of social justice itself. As Smith (1992: 128) noted, "Anglo-American geography appeared to have considered the unjust outcomes of the prevailing capitalist system too obvious to require refined analysis". The "cultural turn" of the social sciences in the late 1980s led to a new paradigm in which the meta-theoretical and universalist principles of historical materialism and structuralism were increasingly rejected. The emergence of a post-modern geography and post-structuralist social theory led to the development of a more particularist interpretation of the moral realm. In this context debates concerning social justice have also been re-examined (Harvey

1996). Although a productive field of research has developed from this normative turn, the main focus has been on the causality of "the cultural" in shaping spatiality. Whereas spatiality represents geography's key intellectual construct, geographical social justice research has not asserted the explicit causal power of interpreted space in shaping understandings of social justice. One reason for this reluctance has been the inability to present an argument for the place of empirical research in the development of social justice theorisation (Visser 2000a).

Superficially, however, it can be argued that there is little reason for social justice theorists to pay attention to the findings of social scientists generally or geographers in particular. Basically, the justifications of moral principles given by Rawls (1971), Nozick (1974) and Hayek (1976), for example, occupy different logical spaces from the descriptions and explanations of the moral principles to which people in the "real world" actually subscribe. It could be suggested that empirical research is unlikely to contribute to political-theoretical debates, mainly because the philosophical task of justification remains largely immune from whatever one might discover about the beliefs current in any particular society concerning justice. This view can, however, be countered by Miller's (1992) arguments suggesting that empirical beliefs can be regarded as "data" against which theories of justice may be "tested". Supporting Miller's view, Elster (1992) argues that such theories need "empirical foundations" and that these may be provided by studies of the manner in which institutions allocate the scarce resources at their disposal. In this regard, productive engagements have proceeded from the collaborative work of Swift *et al* (1995). These authors suggest a number of arguments to justify the "empirical" study of social justice as a "foundation" upon which normative theory may develop.

First, perhaps uncontroversially, they suggest that knowing that others think differently gives the philosopher a sense of humility and fallibility, and an awareness of the need for caution. Nevertheless, the philosopher may still end up rejecting popular opinion. Thus, descriptive and explanatory empirical research may be useful to the normative project, but remains external to the theorisation of the concept of social justice. In this case, however, there is still no serious

suggestion that what other people think, or why they think it, can do more than give the philosopher a reason to reconsider his/her own arguments (Swift *et al* 1995).

Swift *et al*'s (1995: 19) second consideration is that interpretations of justice that do not correspond to ordinary thinking are doomed to failure, no matter how sound or robust they may be in philosophical terms. Quoting Dunn, they observe that "if historical agents are to be provided with reasons for acting, they must be furnished with reasons which are reasons for *them*" (Swift *et al* 1995: 19; my italics). In addition to the need to ensure an argument that can actually motivate those to whom it is addressed, there is, however, another point. Compromise for the sake of achieving, on balance, better outcomes than would be achieved by insisting on pure truth may be justified. The boundaries of political possibility are to a large extent set by popular opinion, so that judging what can be done politically requires knowledge of that opinion. Swift *et al* (1995: 19) add to the claim that it makes little sense to advocate something "impossible" to achieve. Thus the responsible theorist should concern him/herself with the sets of feasible outcomes given the *status quo*, and has a variety of moral arguments for taking lay beliefs into account when constructing normative theory. Nevertheless, one does not need to regard those beliefs as making any difference to the truth about justice, for the conclusion may well be simply that justice is unattainable and will be so while popular opinion remains as it is.

Swift *et al*'s (1995: 19) third argument is much stronger. The idea is that the right answer in politics, in this case the distributive principles that are justified for a society in question, may be internally related to lay beliefs. Whereas the second argument regarded those beliefs merely as constraints upon the feasibility of achieving a just society and the justification of principles of justice as occurring quite independently of popular beliefs, the third argument claims that at least part of the answer to the question of how goods should be distributed is to be found by considering the way in which people think they ought to be distributed. One may develop the position that there are good moral reasons why one should respect the opinions and judgements of fellow citizens. In terms of this view, however, it is not so much that there is no other manner by which to arrive at norma-

tive principles (what Rorty (1990) refers to as a "historico-sociological" description of the way we live now) as that people have normative reasons to accord moral weight to the beliefs of relevant others.

The particularist version is not clearly supported by the influential theorists, although Rorty, following Rawls (1971), is one of its most outspoken supporters. Rorty claims that Rawls's theory of justice is political and not metaphysical, indicating how liberal democracy can apparently get along without philosophical presuppositions, requiring only history and sociology (Rorty 1990: 284). Read closely, however, Rawls calls for serious consideration of certain fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society, not only because they represent "the way we live now" but because we have reason to value a society where coercion is used only in ways that are publicly justifiable to its members. Consequently, the importance of public justifiability leads the political theorist to see "society's main institutions and their accepted forms of interpretation [...] as a fund of implicitly shared ideas and principles" (Rawls 1993: 13-4). The idea of society as a fair scheme of cooperation between free and equal citizens is such an idea, articulated by Rawls in terms of the imaginative construct of the "original position". From that device of representation emerges a substantive theory of distributive justice (see Rawls 1971).

Seen in a different light, Rawls allocates a constitutive role to the ideas shared by his fellow citizens for independently justified moral reasons, not because those shared ideas are all that exist. If it is asked why it matters that society be publicly justified and hence why political philosophy should take shared ideas seriously, the answer lies in what Rawls calls the "liberal principle of legitimacy". In Rawls's (1993: 137) opinion,

> Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution, the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse, in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason.

In this view, the political philosopher has a moral reason to care not only about truth as such, but about truth that can be publicly justified.

This argument is by no means uncontested. Fundamental questions can be asked about any argument that suggests that what is, in terms of distributive choices, is also what ought to be. The Kantian view, for one, suggests that this is not possible. Even Marx disagrees to an extent. Perhaps recourse to communitarian theory is in order. Here it might be useful to consider the work of Walzer (1983) or MacIntyre (1998). Yet, even if one assumes that what ought to be is not morally embedded in a philosophical sense, this does not mean that what ought to be in its application should not take account of what is and its context. Even Kantians expect the categorical imperative to apply to particular maxims that arise from particular situations. A thought experiment in role reversal is therefore more than merely an exercise in abstract reason. Insofar as it can address real others, the categorical imperative applies to maxims that are replete with the local, the partial, the conditional and the contextual. Smith (2000: 211) argues that the view behind theorists such as Rawls's veil of ignorance as to people's status in society invites a similar interpretation. Okin (1998) too suggests that Rawls's theory of justice is most coherently interpreted as a moral structure founded on people's equal concern for others as for themselves, a theory in which empathy with and care for others, as well as awareness of their differences, are crucial components.

In sum, in advancing the position that there is a space for particularist spatio-temporal geographical engagements with empirically revealed moral choices, criticism cannot be ignored. It is the contention, though, that the discovery of how things are and how they might be improved in the eyes of those whom geographers profess to assist, will encourage greater sensitivity to those differences that really matter, especially in cases where the interpretation of geographies is involved. The strategic space for local investigation of geographical social justice is not that of moral truth *per se*, but of moral truth that can be publicly justified, satisfying Rawls's liberal principle of legitimacy. As Smith (2000: 118) notes,

> [I]f a geographically sensitive ethics has no more than one major message, it is the importance of context, of understanding the particular situation: how things are, here and there. If the human capacity of putting one's self in place of others is to be an effective wellspring of morality, this requires understanding that place, and its morality.

2. Spatio-temporally differentiated understandings of social justice

Drawing on literature that supports the notion that there is a theoretical use for empirical research into how social justice is interpreted by the general public, this section demonstrates some aspects of the implicit investigation into geographical social justice presented therein. Consideration is given to studies that aim to provide empirical foundations to test and (re)direct existing social justice theorisation and possible future theoretical requirements. The study also alludes to a framework within which a South African geographical engagement with social justice may be developed. Drawing on these empirical studies, this section demonstrates that understandings of social justice are differentiated over space, located in particular histories and geographies, and contested across class and other social divisions — all themes that lie at the core of contemporary geographical investigation but are omitted from current geographical social justice theorisation (see Visser 2000a for a more in-depth discussion).

In a review of empirical studies, Miller (1992) focused on beliefs relating to social justice and indicated how these beliefs were nationally differentiated across a number of industrialised capitalist democracies.[1] Although there are as yet no systematic cross-national studies of beliefs about distributive justice, there are a number of *ad hoc* comparative studies at both the macro and the micro levels. Using the USA as the focus of comparison, Miller (1992) reported that differences in understandings of social justice are quite considerable, especially in the case of societies whose social structure and culture are radically at variance with that of the USA. In the case of advanced capitalist democracies, the contrasts are less marked, but there is a general tendency for the USA to occupy a different position on matters such as general attitudes to equality and inequality.

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1   I have to point out, as Miller did, that there are grounds for scepticism about the quality and relevance of the empirical work that has been done in some cases. The point, however, is not to present a definitive argument but to illustrate a more general observation that understandings of social justice differ according to specific spatio-temporal contexts.

Miller reports that there was substantial variance between countries such as the United States and a number of European states in relation to income differences. In European countries such as Italy and West Germany these differences were interpreted as too marked, while in the USA this view was substantially less pronounced (see for example Bell & Robinson 1978). Miller (1992: 586) explained the variance between Britain and the USA in the following terms:

> As one might expect (given underlying cultural similarities), the United Kingdom and the United States are close in their citizens' general beliefs about justice and somewhat less over the more practical question of the government's responsibility to promote social justice, where the American tradition of anti-governmentalism makes itself felt, particularly on the issue of welfare provision.

To illuminate this point of "tradition"[2], Miller reports that sharper differences emerge from a three-sided comparison between the USA, Germany and Sweden, using experiments where subjects were asked to rank contribution, need and equality rules as means of allocating a range of resources (see for example, Tornblom & Foa 1983). In this study it emerged that whereas American businessmen favoured the contribution rule for most resources and American students favoured it for money and status, Swedish students were egalitarian in their preference and consistently opposed to the contribution rule. German students adopted an intermediate position, favouring the rule for status but not for money. In Miller's (1992: 547) mind these differences can be explained as followings:

> This pattern of responses corresponds to the differences in political culture that one would normally attribute to these three societies, with the United States displaying the highest degree of individualism, Sweden the highest degree of social solidarity and Germany occupying an intermediate position representing a blend of capitalist and social democratic ideology.

We need not probe too deeply into either culture or society to recognise that both history and spatial location are key variables in explaining these differences (see, for example, Hobsbawm 1994; Tornblom & Foa 1983). The evidence also presupposes a further point:

2   We might consider Scruton's (1996: 516) observations concerning the differentiated exposition of the social justice debates in the USA and Europe as explicable by the cultural and historical differences between these societies.

that while these societies are democratic, industrialised, capitalist countries there is also differentiation between them.

Very few comparisons have yet been attempted between understandings of social justice in developed and developing countries. Drawing on studies by Murphy-Berman (1984) and Tallman & Ihinger-Tallman (1979), however, one might suggest that a systematic comparison of societies with well-developed capitalist economies with those in which market relations have not yet come to occupy such a central position would find quite significant differences in conceptions of social justice.[3] In particular, the pre-eminence of desert criteria, which was a major theme running through many empirical studies of Western society, may be radically less marked elsewhere. An important point made by Miller (1992) is that there might be a very real difference in the way in which people in the developing world view the notion of social justice. Not only is there therefore a need for social justice theories to be sensitive and responsive to differences in the "North"; it should also be recognised that people in the "South" may understand social justice in a radically different manner.

Similarly, though, it could be suggested that understandings of social justice are not stable over time but change, sometimes dramatically. Here we may consider the various types of economic policies implemented by various countries at different times. We may consider, for example, the USA and ask why certain policies were pursued at certain times. Miller refers to the tradition of anti-governmentalism in the USA. However, one of the sharpest breaks with this country's historical trend of individualism and anti-governmentalism can be found in the introduction of the "New Deal" under Roosevelt in the 1930s (see for example, Galbraith 1949; Hawley 1969). The reason for the deviation from normal policy was the societal effects of

3   For example, in Murphy-Berman's (1984) study, American and Indian respondents were asked to judge how a company should divide a $200 bonus between two employees in the light of information about each person's work performance and domestic needs. The Americans were inclined to favour either equality or contribution as the basis for distribution; the Indians, on the other hand, overwhelmingly favoured distribution according to need. In Tallman & Ihinger-Tallman's (1979) study in Mexico, need was deemed more just than desert as a criterium for the distribution of employment opportunities.

the Great Depression of the 1930s. The understanding of social justice at the time changed: the state had an obligation to redistribute wealth so as to provide for the poorest. These policies were successful, but also led to a neo-conservative backlash as a response to the perceived limitations of this system — precursors of "Reaganomics" and the retreat of the welfare state 40 years later — based on a more traditional adherence to individual liberty and anti-governmentalist sentiments (see for example, Galbraith 1983). Likewise, in Britain the immense destruction of the Second World War led to the notion that the state had to act as a redistributive agent to guarantee the betterment of those in the worst positions, leading to the introduction of the extensive welfare state under Beveridge and Atlee. The welfare state, however, implied a distribution of society's benefits and burdens that was perceived by some members of the electorate to limit the individual's economic activity and the creation of wealth. The enormous problems of the welfare state in the late 1970s and the "undermining" of wealth generation by overly progressive taxation, for example, arguably led to economic collapse and the Thatcherite backlash (see for example, Phillips 1993; Simmons 1996).

Interpretations of social justice are, however, not only spatially differentiated on a national level and changing over time but also socially, geographically and historically differentiated within particular localities. In this respect we could consider variables such as gender, class or race categories internal to a particular country or region. In emulation of the work of Alves & Rossi (1978), Robinson & Bell (1978) and Beedle & Taylor-Gooby (1983), for example, it is suggested that beliefs concerning social justice differ between and within various socio-economic classes. Not only are such beliefs in the USA different from those held in Britain; within each society they differ too. Drawing on the work of Hochschild (1981), Kluegel & Smith (1986), and Lane (1962), as well as McClosky & Zallar (1984), questions relating to whether the working classes were significantly more egalitarian in their beliefs about social justice than the middle class within the same society arrive at some surprising conclusions.

The most interesting example is that working-class subjects (in America) generally endorsed rather than rejected the dominant belief in the fairness of income differentials based on skill, effort and achie-

vement. This was particularly evident in the interview studies of Lane (1962) and Hochschild (1981). Lane, for example, found that working-class men rejected the proposition that incomes should be equal. This, however, did not make class irrelevant to beliefs about justice and desert. Most studies, in Miller's (1992: 583) view, find some correlation between a low rank on one of the class measures and egalitarianism. The relationships appear easiest to establish when defined in terms of income. In the most general sense there was cross-class consensus on what constitutes a socially just distribution. However, where these relationships exist, Miller suggests two broad avenues of inquiry. If one appeals to the idea that beliefs about justice are a rationalisation of self-interest, people will tend to endorse the view of justice which, if implemented, would work to their relative advantage. At the individual level, it has often been observed that people tend to regard a small percentage increment on their current income as fair pay for the job they are doing.

Transferring this to the social level, one might expect to find people at the lower end of the income scale favouring its compression and those near the top in favour of expanding it, which would give a familiar and straightforward explanation for the differences in belief unearthed in empirical studies of social justice. An alternative approach, potentially very useful to geographers, is to relate differences of belief to differences in social context. Here it could be argued that lower-class respondents, for example, tend to have greater exposure to solidaristic relationships and less exposure to competitive relationships than higher-class respondents. Thus, the linking assumption would be that one's immediate social experience colours one's general view of society. For example, someone who experiences a high level of solidarity in his or her everyday relationships will be inclined to conceive society in solidaristic terms and therefore to use the appropriate criteria in making judgements of social justice. In the light of this, we may finally suggest that understandings of social justice are differentiated within localities.

These observations enable us to draw a further conclusion, illuminating the differentiated nature of social justice on various scales. Our discussion of how geography and history shape understandings of social justice implies that different scales illuminate different understan-

dings of social justice. We have seen that there are broad differences in how key characteristics of social justice are differentiated by tradition, for example, in Scruton's (1996) observation of "American" and "European" discussions on social justice. We have also observed that social justice is differentiated in terms of the "developed" or "developing" nature of a nation's economy. We have also indicated that differences exist between countries within Europe, for example, between Sweden and Germany. So, too, have we seen differences between various strata within a society, for example, in the USA. Thus social justice is interpreted differently by rich people and poor people. The point is that as we draw different boundaries, different understandings of social justice emerge. While residents of the USA have a general understanding of social justice different, for example, from those in Britain, if we delve deeper, drawing boundaries within Britain or the USA, we find that understandings of social justice can be expected to vary from one place to another within each country as well.

These observations, albeit general and somewhat sketchy, point to a number of concerns central to geographical investigation, some of the possibilities of which are explored in the concluding section.

3. Towards a framework for South African social justice research in geography

The illustrations of differentiated understandings of social justice between people in different places, at different times and with reference to differential positioning in the social order, touch upon central themes in the study of human geography itself — the spatial and temporal differentiation and organisation of human activity. It is my contention that these differences hold clear potential for geographical investigation. By accepting the notion that there is an intellectual space for investigating empirical understandings of social justice, far more can potentially be achieved than merely knowing what social justice is understood to mean to particular theorists and what spatial implications those theories hold. This suggests at least three new levels of geographical engagement.

In the first instance — as has been demonstrated in the previous section — the geographer can aim to uncover what the concept of so-

cial justice represents with reference to multiple variables and insti-
tutions within countless spatio-temporal settings. Such a project mi-
mics aspects of the studies reported above. It would suggest either
direct or indirect observation of how social justice is reflected in
people's discourse or discernible through their actions. A number of
South African-based questions may be posed, for example:

- To what extent does class frame particular understandings of dis-
  tributional issues in South Africa, over time and space? Are
  "poor" classes more in favour of egalitarian interpretations of so-
  cial justice and are "wealthy" classes in favour of individualistic
  liberal views concerning the distribution of material goods? And
  spatially, do people living in the townships understand social jus-
  tice differently from those in the suburbs. And has this changed
  over time?

- Are distributional issues focused on material goods or are they also,
  as post-structuralists suggest, framed by non-material interests
  such oppression, discrimination, and/or lack of political power?

- By virtue of the historical materiality of apartheid we may also
  engage the question of whether the meaning of social justice, as
  suggested by communitarians or "the cultural turn" in social
  theory, is principally influenced or framed by cultural or ethnic or
  religious, or other characteristics?

- Does the spatial proximity of different "others" play a role in the
  manner in which social justice is conceptualised? Is the moral
  realm affected by the knowledge of poverty in close proximity to
  the better-off? And are these views mediated by cultural or social
  or political or religious, or other characteristics?

- Which local, regional, national or even international political in-
  stitutions should engage with distributional issues? Are there
  other types of institutional forces that might oversee or instigate
  the distribution of resources, for example, various formations of
  civil society such as NGOs or CBOs?

- What methodological techniques are appropriate to these types of
  investigations, and why?

The second geographical project is directly related to the first and
would involve a comparison of these empirical descriptions of social

justice with the various current debates on social justice in the social sciences. Here geographers would attempt to indicate which theoretical understandings of social justice are currently supported in multiple geographical and historical contexts. As such, these debates would aim directly at testing the validity of various claims pertaining to social justice and contribute to theoretical debate by identifying those theories that find resonance in empirical reality and those which may clearly be discarded. This approach could, I believe, produce fruitful investigations bringing theory and reality closer together. Here, for example, on might ask:

• Are the theoretical positions supported in geographical research into social justice relevant to the moral logic illustrated in empirical research? Thus, is there reason to suggest that egalitarian, structuralist, communitarian or classical liberal interpretations function as logical wholes in South Africa's empirical reality?

• Is there empirical substantiation for the rather simplistic view that a philosophically coherent and "logical" view of distributional desire exists in empirical reality?

The third geographical project would allude to a geographical theorisation of the concept of social justice, developed with reference to empirical illustrations of the concept's meaning in various spatio-temporal settings. Here geographers would aim to demonstrate that a deeper spatial structure can be extracted from the empirical understandings of social justice at their disposal. Geographers would seek out similarities in the factors influencing the type of meanings people ascribe to the concept of social justice. The main task of the geographer would be to illustrate that its principle explanatory construct, *viz* space, constitutes one of the core elements which theorists must consider in the theoretical development of social justice. As a result, the conclusion which geographers would aim to achieve is that understandings of social justice are intimately related to space — that interpretations of space and the histories underlying their development directly shape the meaning of social justice and underpin people's differentiated and located understandings of this concept. Thus, the geographical task would not only be to illustrate historically and spatially differentiated meanings of social justice but also that space shapes the nature of these ideas, as well as the way in

which they are negotiated and change over time and with reference to various spatialities. The questions to be posed may include:

• How does the spatiality of the apartheid city, for example, underpin distributional choices in terms of the post-apartheid city?

• Do spatio-historical interpretations of the spatiality of the South African city underpin divergent interpretations of social justice in these cities? And should spatiality be involved in shaping moral beliefs? If so, in which ways may geographers assist in changing the manner in which space is interpreted in South Africa?

• In what way does the broader moral discourse, both nationally and internationally, impact upon understandings of social justice in particular empirical settings? For example, does the manner in which a particular society or community is described externally shape the manner in which it understands internal social justice?

• Can spatial interpretation provide a methodology by which to link theoretically diverse interpretations of social justice and to theorise a coherent alternative moral project? For example, in what way can planning tools, such as Integrated Development Planning, change the manner in which agents understand their respective right to resources and responsibility for resource distribution?

These are only suggestive of a broad range of potential questions South African geographers, and social scientists generally, may pose in future research. While these suggestions are incomplete, in making them, this paper aims to stimulate South African geographical reflection concerning social justice. In presenting an argument that demonstrates that empirical research focused on contextual conceptualisations of social justice constitutes a plausible intellectual endeavour, the possibility of a regionally sensitive engagement with the moral realm seems possible. Ultimately, there is a post-colonial concern that South Africans have much to contribute to understanding the different ways in which social justice is understood. By engaging with what "real people" actually interpret social justice to be, South African geographers can make a meaningful contribution, demonstrating how the interpretation of spatial relations underpin and change the meaning(s) of distributional issues. Such findings might form the foundation for moral philosophical reflection, in South Africa and elsewhere.

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