Social Justice and the City: Equity, Cohesion, and the Politics of Space

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The truth is that we cannot include as citizens all who are necessary for the city's existence.

Aristotle, *The Politics* III, v: 2

The city has been a primary context for thinking about questions of social justice, citizenship, and social cohesion. At a conceptual level, the public spaces of the city provide a stage for imagining larger conceptions of the social good. More substantively, cities as diverse social spaces and divided economic spaces raise issues of equality and inclusion in acute and often visible ways (Harvey 1973). In this discussion, I consider how concepts of social justice help to shape a politics of space, with particular reference to spatial initiatives within British government.

Social Justice, Equity and Cohesion

The discussion begins by briefly outlining a liberal conception of social justice in terms of objectives of equity and social cohesion. It goes on to sketch the relation between these social justice concerns and the development of urban policy in Britain. The main part of the discussion considers how questions of equity and cohesion have been spatialized within a framework of community, and in relation to processes of social exclusion and inclusion, within the politics of government under New Labour.

Notions of social justice within programs of liberal government draw heavily upon debates within liberal theory. In turn, these debates rest on a larger conception of citizenship in liberal societies. Citizenship, in a liberal context, is reflected in a set of conjoined political and civil rights. Political rights relate to the individual's participation within public life – in modern liberal democracies these include the right to join political parties and to stand for public office, as well as the principal right to vote. Civil rights, on the other hand, concern the rights of the individual in a free society; commonly taken to include freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of movement and association, the freedom to own and possess one's property, and justice before the law. Together, these primary rights establish the

formal equality of citizens, at the same time marking the boundaries of a shared political and civil community.

A notion of social justice, however, goes beyond the formal rights of citizenship. At a further level, social justice is concerned with the fair distribution of economic and social goods (Rawls 1971). The necessary conditions for equal social membership, in this move, extend beyond civil and political rights to *social rights*. These include a degree of economic and social well-being, and rights to dignity and respect (Marshall 1950; Commission on Social Justice 1994). On this level, the concept of social justice is concerned not with the formal equality of citizens, but with the substantive inequalities between them. It proceeds on an understanding that the extent of meaningful social membership is shaped by people's material circumstances, and closed off by forms of prejudice and discrimination. If liberal rights of citizenship work to establish formal equality together with political and civil community, this second principle of social justice is based on a recognition of *actual* inequalities, and of the limits to social solidarity.

Against the formal equality of liberal citizenship, then, might be posited what John Rawls has called a "difference principle" (Rawls 1971: 74). Legal equality cannot in itself ensure an equitable share of social and economic advantages. Rawls proposes, therefore, that in a just society economic and social inequalities should be arranged so as to be of greatest benefit to its least advantaged members (1971: 83). This approach to social justice aims to realize principles of equity and fairness, at the same time as it assumes conditions of inequality and difference. As such it is central to a politics of social welfare that aims to redress the effects of inequality through the distribution of public goods, and the public redistribution of private goods.

There is a further point to be taken from Rawls's theory of social justice. In his account, shared conceptions of justice provide the basis for social cohesion: in a diverse society, he holds, "public agreement on questions of political and social justice supports ties of civic friendship and secures the bonds of association" (Rawls 1980: 540). Similarly, Marshall saw the provision of social rights as fundamentally linked to membership of a common culture (Marshall 1950); while more recently, Britain's Commission on Social Justice argued that economic and political legitimacy depended on a form of public support that people will very reasonably withhold unless they believe that the order under which they live has some concern for them and offers them chances that are, within the limits of the possible, fair (Commission on Social Justice 1994: 19).

Within these different accounts, notions of equity or fairness are closely tied to issues of social order and integration. Principles of social justice in this way translate the liberal ideal of equality and civic community into a more substantive commitment to equity and social inclusion.

How, then, might social justice objectives be realized in a policy context? For Rawls, political and economic arrangements invariably involve a version of the social good, and of how institutions and interventions might be designed in pursuit of this end (Rawls 1971: 259). In this sense, policy gives technical form to a broader ethos of government. In a recent British context, questions of social justice increasingly have been framed in terms of government efforts to "enable" individuals and communities to realize rather abstract "opportunities"; based on the assertion that what "government can do for people is limited, but there is no limit to what people

and communities can be enabled to do for themselves" (Commission on Social Justice 1994: 22). The following discussion considers how this ethos of government is worked out in spatial terms.

Social Justice and Urban Policy

Issues of social justice were central to the development of urban policy in Britain. During the 1960s, a number of liberal capitalist governments undertook programs of policy intervention in response to the perceived urgency of an "urban problem." The precise nature of the "urban problem" was defined in various ways in different contexts, and commanded different kinds of policy response. In the British case, the urban was problematized in terms of two key factors: poverty and race. Informed by debates in the United States, the "inner city" came to be conceived as a new space of government, mapped along lines of severe deprivation and increasing racial tension (Blackman 1995: 43). Coordinated urban policy in large part responded to a series of studies – carried out by government researchers and by independent social scientists – that highlighted the concentration of poverty, entrenched male unemployment, low educational attainment and substandard housing in inner urban areas, frequently correlating these factors with the distribution of ethnic minority populations (Gibson and Langstaff 1982; Atkinson and Moon 1994).

The Urban Programme, introduced in 1968, was designed to provide a coherent framework for urban policy interventions. Bringing together a range of programs in education, social services, employment, industry, public order, and health, it marked out the inner city as a complex space of government. At the same time, it was based on a clear rationality of social justice: urban policies were to be directed towards areas of "special social need," identified on the basis of a number of indices of deprivation. The development of British urban policy in this way spatialized issues of social justice in terms of a social geography of need. Social and economic problems might be governed – and objectives of equity and social cohesion pursued – through the management of urban spaces. These twin objectives are especially evident in urban policy's orientation to problems of poverty and public order; problems which were understood in spatial and in racial terms.

While urban policy developed in Britain as a response to a set of social pathologies, by the end of the 1970s its central concerns had shifted towards issues of economic development. Urban deprivation increasingly came to be understood as an economic problem, with concomitant – although disputed – economic solutions. This conception of the "urban problem" was common to different political perspectives. Community Development Projects and Inner Urban Area Studies in the 1970s developed economic explanations for urban decline; albeit rather different ones from those which informed neoliberal urban policy in the 1980s and after (see CDP 1977; DoE 1977; DoE 1985). Under Conservative administrations after 1979, urban areas were conceived as sites of government in specific economic ways, and as amenable to certain economic forms of intervention, increasingly linked to market development (see Thornley 1992; Deakin and Edwards 1993). This is not to suggest, however, that economic initiatives wholly displaced social projects; rather, in a neoliberal context, economic objectives came to be seen as

consonant with social and environmental concerns, and to be linked more broadly to the quality of urban life and the ambience of urban spaces.

An emphasis on economic development involved a reworking of the equity objectives of urban policy. By 1991, the minister with responsibility for urban policy was able to announce that the government was "turning the tide on the old idea that resources should flow towards needs, irrespective of how well they will be used" (Heseltine 1991: 11). In this move, neoliberal urban policy broke with a welfarist discourse of need, and articulated a new ethos for the government of the city. A social rationality of need was to give way to an economic rationality which directed resources to those areas with clear potential for development. This approach shaped urban policy initiatives in the 1990s, specifically within City Challenge schemes and through the operations of the Single Regeneration Budget. These programs provided funds to local agencies on a competitive basis, requiring them to attract private investment into urban development programs within a framework of public/private "partnership."

Such a shift from need to enterprise in the distribution of resources did not, however, entirely replace equity concerns within urban government. The targeting of local sites for development, rather, sought to meet equity objectives while rationalizing public budgets and allowing them to be steered more effectively in line with central government priorities. Strategies of targeting and competition might in this way be seen as instrumental solutions to larger problems of social justice and redistribution in the government of cities. Questions of distribution within urban policy – questions which had been located within a discourse of social need – became constructed as more narrowly economic problems. Area-targeting in this sense supported distinct, though not always separate, government rationalities – as a mechanism it was designed to ensure both equity *and* efficiency in the use of public resources. It produced a kind of mutuality between the social and economic government of the city – between a (rather weakened) concern with social justice, and objectives for local enterprise and market development. The sites of urban government in turn were understood as spaces of both deprivation and development; where social problems might be rendered amenable to economic solutions.

Social Justice as Social Inclusion: The Spatial Politics of New Labour

Changing approaches to the government of British cities have constituted the subjects of policy – the urban poor, ethnic minorities, the unemployed, the poorly housed – at the same time as they have marked out spaces of intervention. A politics of space in this way has been inseparable from the drawing of *social* boundaries. Such a link between the social and the spatial has helped to shape the politics of social justice developed under a New Labour government in Britain. This can be thought about in two ways. First, different urban spaces are identified as sites of social exclusion. Second, the space of "community" is seen as the basis of a politics of inclusion and civic solidarity.

A central project of the Labour government elected in Britain in 1997 has been to develop a "new politics" which goes beyond a form of social democracy centred on the state and a neoliberal politics oriented to the market (Blair 1998; Giddens 1998). While this opposition represents a rather simplistic understanding of an "old"

politics of left and right, the New Labour agenda has been presented as a funda-
mental rethinking of the role and limits of government, and of its relation to the civil
domain. Central to this idea is the view that government should act to promote
individual and collective opportunities, and to foster a communitarian vision of civil
society based on mutual rights and responsibilities (Blair 1998).

A notion of social justice is at the center of the new politics (Blair 1998: 1). This is
based on a principle of the equal worth and dignity of citizens, which requires
government to take a role in combating forms of discrimination that deny this
fundamental equality (1998: 3). Beyond the principle of formal equality, however,
lie issues of social and economic equity. This is understood, however, not in terms of
a politics of distribution, but of the distribution of *opportunities* in society (see also
Giddens 1998: 101). Equity objectives directed towards the effects of material
inequalities are in this way translated into a (somewhat confused) notion of "oppor-
tunity for all." Blair contrasts such an approach to equity to the manner in which an
"Old Left" too often had stifled opportunity in the name of abstract equality. Gross
inequalities continue to be handed down from generation to generation, and the
progressive Left should robustly tackle the obstacles to true equality of opportunity
(Blair 1998: 3)

Welfarist principles of universalism are dismissed as a kind of "dull uniformity" in
social provision, firmly associated with an outmoded, statist politics (1998: 3). At
the same time, the new politics differentiates itself from a neoliberal position which
identifies opportunity simply with individual freedoms, often based on an antipathy
to the notion of "society" itself (1998: 1). Questions of equity, rather, extend beyond
individual opportunity to a broader politics of social cohesion – as Blair notes,
"without a fair distribution of the benefits of progress, societies risk falling apart
in division, rancour and distrust" (1998: 20).

This second point opens on to a key dimension of the New Labour project. A chief
register for New Labour's concern with social justice has been the language of social
exclusion. In this way, issues of equity and social cohesion inform a particular
approach to social space. Notions of inclusion and exclusion carry with them a
conception of social boundaries and membership, marked out in part by acceptable
forms of behavior and particular identities. As in Rawls's argument that shared
conceptions of social justice secure the "ties of civic friendship," so New Labour's
approach to social inclusion has been premised on a set of mutual rights and
responsibilities; both among citizens and between citizens and government:

For too long the demand for rights from the state was separated from the duties of citizenship
and the imperative for mutual responsibility on the part of individuals and institutions.
Unemployment benefits were often paid without strong reciprocal obligations; children
were unsupported by absent parents (Blair 1998: 4).

Such a perspective outlines a communitarian vision of social rights and obligations,
at the same time as it sets up particular individuals and groups as a problem for
government.

The boundaries of social inclusion/exclusion are marked not only in terms of
behavior and identities, but in terms of spaces. As well as targeting certain social
groups (unemployed people, absent parents), a governmental concern with social
exclusion centers on particular social spaces. Most notably, large public housing

estates have been targeted as crucibles for processes of social exclusion. One of the initial objectives of the government's Social Exclusion Unit, a body designed to run across different policy domains in order to tackle issues of exclusion in a coordinated manner, was to address the condition of Britain's "worst" public housing estates, and the problems facing the three million people who live in these spaces. These problematic sites have been characterized in terms of multiple factors of social and economic deprivation – crime, unemployment, educational failure, poverty – in an approach that recalls with a very deep resonance the origins of urban policy in the identification of a complex "urban problem" in the 1960s. This spatial logic was reproduced in the form of various "Action Zones" – in education, health, and employment – that located socioeconomic problems firmly in physical sites.

The spatiality of social membership is particularly pronounced in respect of approaches to public order. In particular, public spaces have been identified with the activities of a law-abiding majority (Cooper 1998: 470–1). This has gone together with the problematization of certain activities, and of the presence of certain types of people, in public spaces. Problems of homelessness, for example, have frequently become translated into a question of the visible presence of homeless people on the streets; where too often an intolerable social condition has been collapsed into what are seen as unacceptable social activities – begging, public drinking, or forms of unauthorized street enterprise. One of the most striking spatial strategies developed by the New Labour government for the control of behavior in public space has been the provision for child curfews, designed with the aim both of protecting young people from potential public dangers, and of regulating their behavior in relation to appropriate times and spaces. They also invoke a strong notion of parental responsibility, based on the view that children's activities should be supervised within the space of the home.

These approaches to the politics of social exclusion, cohesion, and membership bring together spatial with social factors. Particular spaces, that is, are seen both to be shaped by and to reproduce certain kinds of behavior and social conditions. Such an approach to social space is evident in policies of regulation and public order, but also central to a politics of inclusion. A key domain within which a version of the social is integrated with a spatial politics is in New Labour's approach to "community." A language of "community" is both difficult to pin down and unvirtuous to reject: while it has been all-pervasive within the "new politics," it has not always been clearly defined. In broad terms, New Labour's approach to community might be thought about in two key ways. On one hand, notions of community refer to local social spaces as sites for policy intervention. Here, a politics of community provides a means of targeting areas of socioeconomic disadvantage in a concerted way. The government's New Deal for Communities was conceived as a means for realizing the rather notional version of community "partnership" that had characterized urban policy in the 1990s, in the form of more effective and inclusive local initiatives (see Blair 1998: 9). The politics of community, here, relates to a local scale of policy development that provides a means for distributing resources and directing initiatives towards specific sites. In this respect, it is consonant with an equity approach within government that seeks to address the effects of inequality through the distribution of public goods, and the public redistribution of private goods.

On the other hand, an extended sense of community has been invoked as an inclusive space of social membership. In this move, community refers not to the local spaces of social life, but to a larger collective of citizens – to an inclusive society itself. At different moments, then, "community" invokes a local politics of equity, and a broad politics of social cohesion. We might recall at this point the emphasis placed – within Blair's discourse as in the liberal theory of John Rawls – on social justice as a basis for social solidarity and order; for trust and "civic friendship." Through its recourse to notions of community, New Labour has sought a basis for general social order and cohesion in a vision of the local and affective. Similarly, its emphasis on interlocked rights and responsibilities – firmly grounded in a communitarian philosophy (see Etzioni 1995) – sets out a relation between citizens, and between citizens and government, which is highly immediate and even individualized. An inclusive politics of community underpins this effect:

only a society small enough to permit trust is small enough to permit responsibility... Just as man's natural power of first hand knowledge, so his power of love or of active concern, is by nature limited, the limits of the city coincide with the range of man's active concern for nonanonymous individuals (Strauss 1973: 31).

A politics of community, then, might be seen as a means of extending the range of people's "active concern" for others by rendering them somehow *familiar;* brought together within relations of civic trust and mutual responsibility. The limits of the city, understood as a domain of social membership, in this way extend out from the local spaces of community to a notion of the larger public *as* community. In this approach "community" functions not as a euphemism for various social minorities or marginal groups, but as a container for the majority (see Cooper 1998: 470).

Conclusion

Principles of social justice invariably open on to a politics of space. Questions of equity and distribution are played out across physical spaces, while objectives of cohesion invoke a vision of an inclusive arena of citizenship. Since the late 1960s, British governments have undertaken urban initiatives on the basis of changing conceptions of the problems of the city – problems that have been variously understood in terms of need, deprivation, and development. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, a self-consciously "new politics" of government constructed the problem of social justice largely in terms of processes of social exclusion and inclusion. In this context, a politics of space referred both to the physical sites of exclusion – certain housing estates, on the streets, specific parts of the city – and to an inclusive space of community. In its approach to public space, further, the New Labour government marked out certain unacceptable forms of behavior, and consequently certain kinds of person such as the homeless or the juvenile, from the claims to public space of a responsible majority. As a place where social questions might be posed in spatial forms, the order of the city remained a primary way of imagining the basis for a cohesive and a good society.

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