Culture and the Just City

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Introduction

This paper examines the degree to which programs for what has been called the ‘welfare city’ in Denmark and other countries can be considered a ‘just city’ in twenty-first century terms. The welfare city is characterized by ideals of equitable access to collective consumption goods such as services and housing, and the operationalization of programs of redistributive justice (cf. Harvey 1973). Ethical demands for the cultural recognition of different groups now require that questions of the good life be addressed alongside deontological questions of morality and rights to create meaningful social justice. This paper argues that everyday urban life is the context and scale at which an integration of ethics and moral must be achieved. However, this synthesis requires a change in our understanding of the primacy of not only redistribution but also of the distinction between the cultural and the economic. It is here that urban sociology can contribute towards cultural-economic justice.

The Cultural and Spatial Turns

Urban sociology has found itself in continuous paradigmatic change: its objects of research, the city and urban life, are not only undergoing rapid shifts, but its spatial unit of analysis, limited to the urban, has been problematized. Interest in globalization has led to a questioning of the primacy of urban places given the power of flows in a global space. Cities as coherent units have also been argued to have given way to highly differentiated enclaves. Their ‘dual economies’ (Sassen 1991) may overlap in space but not time. Activities may be coordinated to overlap in time but not in space, occurring at several scales and locations. Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, cities have been rethought in ways that combine approaches and topics which were previously separated in functionalist approaches to urban studies. Despite interdisciplinary research approaches, the expansion of the range of sociological variables and methods to include indicators of quality of life, consumption and identity (cf. Massey 1994), and despite attempts to rigorously deal with the implications of a ‘de-differentiation’ of value spheres (Lash 1990) and the complexity of reflexive social forms (Beck/Giddens/Lash 1994; Beck 2002), the cultural and the economic have tended to remain as two solitudes.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented in The Welfare City Symposium, Danish Building and Urban Research Institute, Copenhagen 16-17 May 2001. Thanks to Niels Albertsen and to faculty at Aarhus School of Architecture.

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First in British and more recently in American social science, some observers have noted first a ‘cultural turn’ and second a ‘spatial turn’. Despite contested definitions (Kroeber/Kluckohn 1963; Williams 1981) and the likelihood that ‘culture’ is a discursive ‘black box’, or a ‘gloss’ which conceals as much as it reveals (cf. Latour 1993) the term has become central to the language of sociology. Aesthetics plays an important role in the ‘cultural turn’. In aesthetic approaches, cities are called upon to express a collective civic ethos and local identity. This ethos is the ‘ground tone’ of civil society (see also Ploger 2000). It can be conceptualized in terms of forms of judgement which lie in the province of what Kant and others before him termed aesthetic reason (i.e. relational judgments of composition, balance – without accepting Kant’s moral position tying the harmonious to the morally good, however). As a collective realization, aesthetic aspects of cities function as normative reference points in rhetorical appeals by which a sense of local society as a overarching political collective is invoked and staged in civic spectacles of governance and social solidarity (Debord 1977). Spectatorship has a broad appeal because it is confused with witnessing. It allows these performances to be mediated in broadcast networks, but obfuscates responsibility and short-circuits agency by erasing any calls to individual action. The content of these spectacles is collective – pride, horror, and xenophobia are some of the emotions mobilized for in-group (anti-globalization protests) and group-defensive (nationalism) purposes. But in terms of action, it often seems that only forms of illegal assembly, riot and vigilante justice remain as (pathological) forms of collective agency.

Following Maffesoli, one might call this an ‘ethical aesthetic’ in the service of the political economics of local boosterism. A particular ethos is fetishized as an ethic on the basis of shared, collective experiences (aesthesis – see Shields 1996; Maffesoli 1981). But analysts of this ethical-aestheticization have concluded that we must move beyond the thematics of representation and interpretation that are given such prominence in, for example, cultural studies (e.g. hooks 1990). Instead, we must ask: „What do cultural forms such as discourse and identities ‘do’ in the world?” (Morris 1992: 467; Grossberg 1998: 75). What does this ethical aesthetics and its fetishized cultural forms – spectacles and the spectacular architecture of world exposition sites (such as in Seville or Parc La Villette, Paris), museums and opera houses (e.g. the architecture of Frank Gehry or Daniel Libeskind), and urban revitalization projects – accomplish for and through people?

A ‘spatial turn’ emerges out of the recognition of the importance of place and location as the context of culture. In as much as cities and other settlements are the crucibles of community, cultural identity and its significance for urban governance has always been part of the questions relevant to urban sociology. Analysts such as Henri Lefebvre have argued that the spatial arena of place emerges as a synthetic arena.2 Shifts in the spatial scale of analysis reveal different social processes operating and they either enhance or diminish the prominence of the field within the social sciences more generally. In fact, the urban has been a prominent feature of political debate for four decades spanning the urban unrest of the 1960s; 1970s concerns over energy use in the built environment; 1980s central government attacks on the powers of municipal decision-makers, for example (by the Thatcher government in the UK) and renewed attention in the 1990s to cities’ economic role as spatial concentrations of aptitude and entrepreneurial potential. The urban is periodically rediscovered in the social sciences – most recently under the rubric of ‘the global city’ (cf. King 1990; Sassen 1991: 219) and at the slightly larger scale of metropolitan areas, the learning region (cf. Morgan 1997; Lundvall 1992).

2 Lefebvre developed a spatialized form of the dialectic in which syntheses transcend, or render obsolete, but don’t abolish contradictory conditions of their emergence. Furthermore, against the locked antitheses of dialectics, this third term returns to confront thesis and antithesis with an alter-image which has the transformative power to set the processes of dialectical materialism into motion again (Lefebvre 1991; Shields 1999a).
Culture, Ethics and Debates on Justice

The ethical and the aesthetic are paradigmatically treated as aspects of the question of the good life. It is in relation to cultural practices, and to the affirmation of regional and collective identities, that aesthetic endeavors are celebrated. For example, the European Culture program, new public buildings, or particularly well designed social housing may all be understood as actualizations of a collective horizon of value. By contrast moral philosophers generally accord precedence to questions of right, to Kantian moral judgment, as the cornerstone of the just society. Unlike ethics which are limited to particular social groups and are always at risk of being fractured into the particular values of a smaller grouping or individual, morals are argued to be independent of actors’ own values. Despite disputes over the specifics of natural justice and moral right, norms of justice are held to be universally binding, notably by liberal political theorists. Under the influence of Rawls and of Marxian theories of law, justice has been defined in terms of the removal of economic and social inequalities (e.g. Rawls 1993). Economic redistribution was a keystone of the welfare state operationalized in, for example, the elements of collective consumption, or fair procedures for access to housing, in the ‘welfare city’.

However, this emphasis on redistribution has been criticized by communitarian philosophers. They have argued that a universal notion of justice must accommodate questions of the good. A universal morality which does not address the specificity of human life at the ethical level cannot be fully just (Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy 1997). More recently, Albert Hirschman, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser have proposed a re-examination of the emphasis on economic redistribution in the liberal conceptions of justice. In brief, Hirschman’s thesis is that social struggles increasingly involve ‘non-distributable’ goods (cf. Hirschman 1994). Honneth has placed ‘esteem’ amongst the conditions required for identity formation in society. Thus recognition of cultural difference and identity is advanced as a prerequisite of the just city (Honneth 1995). Fraser argues that both redistribution and recognition are required – possibly by elevating questions of recognition to the status not of an ethics but of a moral right by regarding recognition as a form of status discrimination (Fraser 2001: 27).

“Justice today requires both redistribution and recognition … only by articulating recognition and redistribution can we arrive at a critical-theoretical framework that is adequate … Under what circumstances can a politics of recognition help support a politics of redistribution? This is a question of synergy and interference” (Fraser 1995: 69).

Struggles over cultural recognition and debates about tolerance also appear in popular understandings of the just society, and therefore also of the just city. It is in this context of the everyday that ethics and morals come into closer proximity than in their Kantian solitudes. For example, some American political sociologists points to a shift in citizen identification from a focus on the nation to both a global cosmopolitanism and to civic and community identification at the level of the city. This can be summarized as a three-part change in the nature of citizenship: rescaling, reterritorialization and reorientation (Clark/Hoffmann-Martinot 1998). Rescaling to the level of the civic, a reterritorialization on the city borough or neighborhood and a reorientation to community is evident even amidst the reassertion of the prerogatives of the nation-state post-September 11th 2001. Such a change is also reflected in changing loyalties to places, tradition and to the sources of identity, in the importance attached by many to the home, to religion and to symbolic consumption of food as much as particular styles of clothing (cf. Jensen 2001).

The Bindings of the ‘Cultural’ and the ‘Economic’

The effect is to introduce an identity politics of lifestyle and of everyday life (see Shields 1993) in which questions of the good rival questions of right. Issues of consumption are often treated as ‘cultural’ are fused with issues of production, regulation and economic ex-
exploitation. The most straight-forward economic struggles over distributive justice present themselves as more than economic struggles. In the context of deregulation, redistribution is as much about risk, about life chances, race, ethnicity, religion and language, the possibility of representing and articulating ecological stakes and the dependence of peoples on place for identity and thus cultural survival.

However, both political economy and cultural studies still treat economic class as constituting „a coherent and unified aspect of one’s identity, in contrast to other aspects of subjectivity“ (Gibson 1998: 309) – often including ethnicity, skin color and sex-gender. Katherine Gibson has pointed to the frustration of class theory in coping with the multiple identities and the fluidity of individuals’ and households’ involvements with the formal labor market, with informal modes of exchange, reciprocity with neighbors, kin and wider ethnic groups (Gibson 1998: 309). Complexity and contingency have therefore emerged as a problematic within studies of social stratification. Frequent references throughout the social science literature to ‘ethnicity-gender-class’ hint at the recognition of the contingency of identity and the admission of a cultural approach into the mainstream of social science analysis.

„Even the most discursive cultural practices have a constitutive, irreducible political-economic dimension“ (Fraser 1995: 72). They travel in pairs: „Contemporary political struggles around rights and entitlements are often as not struggles that cohere around a politics of identity constituted through processes as much cultural as economic“ (Fincher/Jacobs 1998: 3). However, they continue to tend to be reduced to a political economic model of redistributive justice (as argued by Rawls 1993; for examples of this reduction see Fraser 1995: 81; and comments by Grossberg 1998: 69-70; Shields 1999b).

The notion of the ‘welfare city’ must therefore be broadened to address more than the question of redistribution. The ‘just city’ requires a cultural approach which draws questions of the good (recognition, esteem, and status) into debates on questions of the right which have been settled either economically (through redistribution) or administratively (through rules of fairness and access). This requires going beyond political economics to what might be called a ‘cultural-economic’ approach (Shields 1999b). Yet in much social science analysis, cultural aspects of social struggle have been treated as the ‘surplus’ baggage of demands which are better understood through economic concepts and categories (on this overlap, see Young 1990; 1997: 154; Stokes/Ames 1996; Shaw/Falola 1995). A particular set of economic relations is therefore brought to the fore as a prerequisite to emancipation and to the just society. By contrast, culture, recognition and questions of the good – whether a matter of style, subculture, ethnicity, religion, or region – are often treated as a warped form of resistance which has been deflected into cultural performances rather than economic struggle or political debate. Yet this ethical aesthetic ‘surplus’ or excess is the reason why the phenomena of urban social movements and community politics can never be adequately reduced to their economic components without leaving out some aspect of demands for justice, recognition or citizen participation. If it was only to be a utopia of full employment, the welfare city would never be able to respond to the demands of identity politics.

The division of the cultural and the economic appears to be a dualism of two terms, neither of which makes much sense or ‘keeps its shape’ without the other. Why did the

3 Few sociologists have critically questioned the economic as a ‘natural’ foundation of the social order. The economic has been tantamount to a secular religion which confessed the supremacy of ‘laws’ of supply and demand and the god-like ‘invisible hand’ of the market. These are treated as immutable, remaining constant and are independent of every social formation. Critical political economists also neglected the cultural. Their treatment of it as epiphenomenal undermined social movements throughout the late twentieth century. In effect, the Left was complicit with the Right in dismissing ethnic, minority and youth social movements.
conceptual division of culture and economy appear to work well in the past? Here one can point to the fact that culture was anchored to place at a variety of scales, from the national scale of citizenship, through the regional identity of one’s birthplace or town, to the local identity of one’s neighborhood (as a neighbor, as a person able to afford to live in a certain area of a city). At each scale this fixed a set of scripts and locales, a habitus of class and region within the relations of everyday life which were never problematized. Economic events and processes, on the other hand, could be ‘fixed’ by more general variables which linked local markets and which impacted causally on the array of identities and habits which made up the sphere of ‘culture’, in the anthropological and cultural studies sense of the word. Culture was the long-term outcome and expression of economic processes at a given scale. With any dramatic economic change, for example the transition to modern capitalism in Europe, the relationship between culture, place and identity is altered (Houghton/White 1992). Forms of cohesion shift and transform social institutions and norms. There are many historical examples of such re-scaling, for example, the shift from village and kin to contract-based ties and regionalisms, to national systems of cities and more recently to far-flung emotion- and values-based solidarities which are global in scope. These spawned corresponding institutions including modern city governance, national bureaucracies and more recently international institutions and organizations.

This ‘economy to culture’ explanatory strategy is reversed in contemporary political economic narratives such as Regulation School approaches. Here ‘culture’ becomes the regulating factor which ensures the stability of economic patterns (cf. Jessop 1995). I argue that the relative autonomy of both fields is no longer certain, nor is ‘culture’ itself a stable referent. This poses a paradigmatic challenge to the social sciences.4

Cultural Economic Approaches: Foundation of an Ethical-Politics?

On one side, then, philosophers of the right have sketched a deontological theory of universal justice intimately tied to morality and debated through the political processes of republics. The very phrase ‘welfare city’ is tied to this category as the operationalization of political philosophy at the urban scale. One the other side are non-deontological theories of the good, traditionally a question of aesthetics, beauty and harmony in which situational ethics figures. Here it is not a question of universals but often of subjective taste and communitarian value. In the face of challenges to universal values by minorities, interest groups and members of diasporic cultures, the city has become a site of conflict that mirrors the philosophical debates. An ethical politics is required which responds to the contingencies of place-specific issues and demands for cultural recognition while continuing to operate in terms of justice for all. This involves understanding demands for recognition and for special cultural status in terms which are amenable to treatment within the (broadly successful) institutions and mechanisms of redistribution and universal rights. However, this appears to demand a synthetic understanding of the inter-relationship of the cultural and the economic. This categorical dualism haunts conceptions of value and the very calculability and comensurability of values which are at the heart of notions of how the just and the good life might be judged and negotiated.

A disavowal of the economic would only be a ‘dumbing down’ of the critical force of analysis. Various new schools of political economy appear to represent advances, within the academic terms of the discipline, by their ability to synthesize and reveal the con-

4 For example, in the face of the non-finalizable and uncertain interplay of the cultural and the economic, sociology’s statistical approach of reducing phenomena to a limited number of discrete variables (analyzed within the scale of a single nation-state) is in full retreat in front of a tradition of analyzing cultures as open totalities often in contact with others which is more ethnographic in spirit (see Appadurai 1996: 41).
stitutive importance of structures and processes which have otherwise been kept ‘off stage’, treated as derivative or extra-economic. Thus political economy has struggled to incorporate a sophisticated sense of the State, of civic public spheres and more recently of discourse and networks as essential regulating components of accumulation regimes (Jessop/Sum 1993).

If the development of political economy can be charted in terms of its success in gradually incorporating into its framework broader elements of social totality (and in some ways the analysts of the economic have done a better job than cultural analysts in taking steps toward broadening their terms of reference), it would also make strategic sense to approach this synthetic task from the side, so to speak, of the extra-economic (i.e. the cultural). We need to recognize that these analytical divisions are the result of theoretical decisions and are constructed categories. Grossberg, for example, comments: “cultural studies must return to the economic issues it has often bracketed, but it must also seek its own approach to political economy, one that does not automatically slot the economy into the bottom line, and which does not simply treat the economics of culture as a matter of commodification and industrialization” (Grossberg 1998: 68).

Honneth and others argue that recognition is an irreducible dimension of ethics. However, Fraser argues that they are incorrect in constructing an either/or division between recognition and redistribution. She argues that the key to this synthesis is not to reduce questions of justice to ethics but to recognize that:

“it is unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of being full partners in social interaction simply as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value in whose construction they have not equally participated and which disparage their distinctive characteristics of the distinctive characteristics assigned to them. ... misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalized sub-ordination – and thus, a serious violation of justice” (Fraser 2001: 26).

Rather than pluralist solutions that may lead to attempting to institutionalize incompatible values or orientations that undermine each other (for example, ecologically-exploitive and energy-intensive versus ecologically-sensitive practices), it is necessary to appeal to universal values which are exogenous to one particular cultural/value orientation or another (Fraser 2001: 37). The key principle is participatory parity in the political and day-to-day cultural and institutional life of the society.

But a recognition of cultural diversity and its integration with principles of redistribution to achieve justice for all requires a deeper understanding of the significance of cultural distinctions not only for identity but in the creation and maintenance of status distinctions. Stereotyped representations and discriminatory practices are entrenched in a manner that will not simply go away with philosophical declarations. The social sciences can contribute to the development of such frameworks by examining the interrelationship between the cultural and the economic.

The Just City

Because of its engagement with spatial issues of scale, boundedness and location, urban sociology is an important area of research that unveils the way in which the cultural and the economic spill over into each other, and one that allows both a close-focus on the ethical demand for cultural recognition at the same time as being able to draw on broader theories of moral governance and value. Fraser asks, „how can we develop a coherent orientation that integrates redistribution and recognition?” (Fraser 2001: 38) The answer to this includes not only synthetic theoretical perspectives but also an examination of the practical context of injustice, conflict and governance. Cities are now the context for most cross-cultural contact and the practical difficulties faced by multicultural policies. And, the city provides a working demonstration of the interrelation between the cultural and the economic. Processes of ethnic self-reproduction have become one of the central features of urban politics while ethnic and
regional cultural identities have become part of the vocabulary of urban economic boosterism (Shields 1999b: 306; Clark/Hoffmann-Martionot 1998). The urban as a scale of analysis and activism thus remains a key site despite shifts back to the bounded, policed conception of the sovereign state.

The urban has long been a site of contingency. The dualism of the cultural and the economic comes together in the lived and specific experience of place. The sense of sedimented identity rooted in the routines and trajectories of locales is not just a personal memory or sense of meaningful relationship with a geographical topography or temporal routine. ‘Place’ amounts to a coordinated synthesis of the symbolic, gendered, ethnic, kinship, as well as the labor and material conditions of existence (Pedersen 1996). As places, cities are arenas in which the ethical aesthetic and the moral are indissolubly linked. The contemporary city provides a common engagement and basis on which the trust necessary to democratic and ethical politics can be developed. Without this ethical engagement, divergent identities can dictate a xenophobic politics of race, ethnic discrimination and a reversal of the aims of cultural recognition and the elimination of status discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or identity (Bauman 1992). The ‘just city’, in as much as it draws on place-focused approaches, is the site in which the redistributive program of the ‘welfare city’ can be fused with efforts to end discrimination on the basis of identity and struggles for cultural recognition.

Bibliography


