Chapter 3
Social Disparities Meet Space and Concepts Surrounding It

Human society is a heterogeneous aggregate made up by a huge number of individuals, all of whom are different from one another. Thus, it is possible to distinguish a great many of societal groups along various lines of distinction. And one can measure virtually any parameter of the individuals or groups; actual values will always indicate a certain level of disparities. As it was explained in the previous chapter, these inequalities can attract much interest from the side of social research, for analytical as well as for political reasons. Among the many aspects to which one (especially a geographer) may give attention here, one is highly geographical in nature: social disparities can be analyzed in their spatial manifestation. This is the fact on which the whole tradition of spatial disparity research is based, which we will present and analyze in this chapter. Before focusing on the long history, the underlying analytical and political considerations, and the outputs of spatial disparity research, however, we have to briefly discuss the possibility of conceptualizing social inequalities in spatial terms. Although this point might seem to lie outside the domain of analyzing a political discourse, it is of fundamental importance in the actual case. Given the complex relation of space and society, we first have to explain what spatial disparity research indeed means and contributes to a better interpretation of social inequalities. Without making this explicit, we can hardly understand the analytical as well as the political importance of spatial disparity research, which is in fact a necessary prerequisite to reveal the factors that influence and the mechanisms that shape the spatial disparity discourse.

That social inequalities are difficult to conceptualize in spatial terms mainly comes from the fact that the relation of space and society is one of geography's most disputed topics, with many questions still open (for overviews of various approaches see Gregory 2009a; Meusburger 1999, 2008; Weichhart 2007; Werlen 1993, 1995, 1997, 2007a). Competing approaches[1] are, however, common in that they all enable the analysis of the spatial aspects of social inequalities, even if they do this in different ways. The traditional Newtonian concept of space, which is

[1] A brief but well-structured overview of these approaches is given by Gregory (2009a).

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utilized in encyclopedic as well as regional geographies, defines space as a kind of container-like phenomenon. In this interpretation, space is "an empty grid of mutually exclusive points" (Gregory 2009a, p. 708), "'an unchanging box' within which objects exist and events occur", "a co-ordinate system", "simply a given universal of existence" (Smith 1984, pp. 67–68). In this *absolute space*, each social (and natural) phenomenon can be localized along a geographical coordinate system. Thus, the configuration of these phenomena in the physical space can be mapped and described, and the difference between various places and regions in regard to certain social attributes can be presented.

In the concept of *relative space*, which is used by the representatives of spatial science, the connection of social and spatial is somewhat different. Here the focus is not on an *a priori* "given" space including social elements (and natural ones as well). Instead, in this approach the space as system or structure is constituted *by* the objects and events and, particularly, by their spatial relations (Gregory 2009a). This approach, where "physical space [is] superseded by mathematical space" (Smith 1984, pp. 68–73), also enables the conceptualization of social disparities through a spatial analysis of social phenomena. Thus, as Johnston (2009a, p. 711) puts it in line with O'Sullivan and Unwin (2002), it is possible to analyze "the arrangements of points, lines, areas and surfaces on a map, and of their interrelationships", and to reveal the geometry of the landscape. Social disparities will manifest themselves here as unevenness of social surfaces, and as peaks, slopes and valleys in an abstract, mathematical landscape.

For the advocates of *process-oriented* concepts of space, to describe a sort of abstract spatial form is not enough to reveal the processes running in the background (cf. Olsson 1974). This is because, as Massey (1984) put it, "it is not spatial form in itself. . .that has effects, but the spatial form of particular and specified social processes and social relationships" (p. 5). Thus, the representatives of the process-oriented approach reject the concepts about space we have presented in previous paragraphs. But coming to terms with the spatial aspects of social disparities is possible in a process-oriented conceptual framework as well. In Gregory's (2009a, p. 708) words, here one can explore "the process-domains of political economy and social theory, and then [trace] the marks made by these processes and practices on the surface of the Earth". Thus, the challenge of connecting social phenomena and geographical space is assured.

Even in theories which interpret space as a result of human activity, as a *social product*, it is possible to find the connection between social disparities and geographical space. Lefebvre (1991)[1974], for instance, draws up a theory where three ways to understand space are distinguished. For him, spaces can be differentiated as perceived, conceived, and lived spaces. Perceived places are spatial practices, which are concrete, material, and physical. Conceived spaces are the spaces of mental processes, which Lefebvre refers to as the representation of space. Finally, lived spaces embrace what he calls spaces of representation. These are spaces occupied and used by certain actions, through which they are permanently recoded (Elden 2009). (The same categories are also used by Soja (1989, 1996), who refers to them as Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace [Gregory 2009b].) From this

viewpoint, the link between social disparities and physical spaces can be conceptualized as the different processes of using and recoding space by those people being in different social conditions. Or, approaching from the geographical space, the various coding attached to its different elements (to different places) can mark a point going out from which one can reveal social inequalities in the background.

The analysis of certain social differences by observing the characteristics of geographical space is also possible in an *action-oriented* approach. For Werlen (2007b, p. 586), space is "not to apprehend as an object, but as a representational construct, which, according to the form of everyday action, obtains a peculiar characteristic". Actually, one can focus on the meaning attributed to physical-material conditions by various actors. By this, one can gain knowledge about social relations (e.g. relations reflecting disparities) from features of the geographical space (cf. Meusburger 2008). A generally similar stance is that of Weichhart (2007, p. 61). In his words, "spatial structures [constitute] a specific form of expression and a medium of social phenomena and systemic interrelations". Thus, even for him, the analysis of geographical space is a legitimate means to reveal certain aspects of social inequalities.

To sum it up, alternative concepts about space seem to be common in their conviction that social phenomena (even social disparities) have a sort of geographical pattern. Furthermore, their reasoning (at least implicitly) suggests that these geographical imprints might be worthwhile topics of research, which can get us closer to a more profound understanding of society.

We should also underscore, however, that the analysis of such geographical imprints can never give direct information about the individuals themselves. As Meusburger (2008) shows, although space is a medium of human activity, the pattern of activities visible in space is always equivocal and can be interpreted in different ways. In other words, the observation of spatial patterns produced by social acts is barely like reading a well-structured book where each word has a clear meaning. It is instead rather a kind of "tracking" (p. 246). It can reveal important mosaics of information, which, once fit together, might reveal remarkable aspects of certain social issues and bring the researcher closer to their understanding. But it can never enable a comprehensive, unambiguous, "objective" description of "reality" since it does not give a direct insight into the motivations and decisions of individuals who leave these geographical imprints behind themselves. Actually, this problem roots in the very "imprint-being" of each social phenomenon one can register in the geographical space. This is a challenge to emerge at any geographical (hierarchical) level one can focus on, at least above that of human body (Fig. 3.1).[2]

[2] We agree with Marston et al. (2005) and Marston et al. (2009) in that the scale in which geographical levels can be defined is just an epistemology, which is "tied to a global-to-local continuum" (p. 666). Thus, Fig. 3.1 is not aimed at presenting all geographical levels one can define, since the number of these is virtually infinite. The objective is rather to give an overview of the geographical levels that are frequently used in geographical research, and to illustrate their relation to the level of human body.

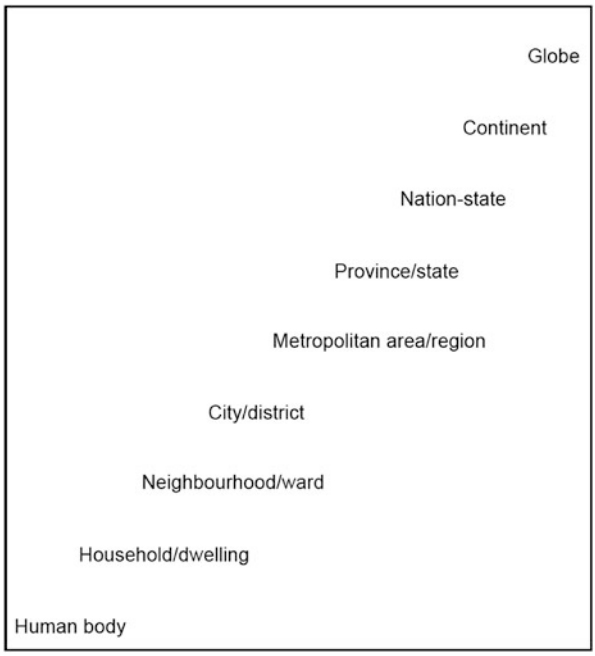

Fig. 3.1 A cascade of hierarchical (geographical) levels. Adapted from Marston et al. (2009), p. 665. Reproduce by permission of John Wiley and Sons

In this sense, this limitation concerns macroscale (global) as well as microscale (local) analyses.[3]

Yet, geographical imprints can be relevant objects to investigate. Although they are not unequivocal, they still enable (at least to some extent) the reconstruction of certain human activities and social processes, the outcomes of which they are (Meusburger 2008). In some issues imprints might even enable us to glimpse aspects of social issues that otherwise (e.g. in an individual-centered analysis) would remain invisible. For instance, a set of individual interviews would hardly enable one to reveal the striking disparities in income, employment or health indicators between the North and South of Italy, the West and East of Germany (the "old" and "new" federal states), or between Moscow and some mainly rural regions in Southwest Russia. Supposedly, these inequalities on the spatial meso-scale are perceived to some extent by the individuals, so thus they would not be totally absent in interviews. Still, the microscale analysis necessarily based on a relatively small sample, a limited number of entities, could easily point out that rich

[3] We should stress here that, according to many researchers, even analyses focused on individuals can fail in their attempt to reveal individual motivations and the process of individual decision-making, since this process is influenced by many factors even individuals themselves do not realize or are simply unaware of (Meusburger 2008; cf. Schluchter 2005). Thus, individual-centered research cannot be postulated as "superior" due to a presumed better explanatory power of social processes. And, consequently, research aimed at higher spatial levels is also not to be regarded as "less capable" to contribute to the understanding of social issues.

and poor people, employed and unemployed, healthy and unhealthy can be found virtually everywhere: in each country, each region and each city. This is of course true from a certain point of view. But it is barely possible in this way to identify the striking regional pattern of disparities, which is much more than a simple outcome of individual differences, and which strongly concerns regional peculiarities in tradition, social structures, or institutional arrangements. The same goes for international analysis, especially that in this regard most individuals have highly constrained or simply no personal experience of actual inequalities in income, employment or health conditions. In such cases, macroanalyses can provide a much more exact and sophisticated description of disparities. This cannot substitute for a deep-drilling, of course, just as the form, the morphology itself does not equal the underlying mechanisms, and statistical correlation is not the same as causal relation. But in such cases macroanalytical methods could reasonably contribute to the description of the phenomenon.

Moreover, geographical imprints of human action can give one insight into the deep strata of social, political, and economic circumstances of the past and their spatial characteristics, the roots of recent phenomena. This is because, as Stinchcombe (1965) emphasizes in his imprinting theory, organizations, and in a broader sense societal structures as well, usually take their features in response to the conditions of their environment at the time they emerge, and due to path-dependence, usually retain these features for a long time.

Thus, in our view the investigation of spatial disparities can be regarded as a legitimate contribution to the research and understanding of social disparities and their causes. This goes to its capacity both to provide useful information on individual acts and to reveal mechanisms behind social inequalities otherwise difficult to come to terms with on an individual level (such as those related to social and institutional structures).