

## Chapter 9

# Political Functioning of the Spatial Disparity Discourse: A Summary

In Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 we have provided a broad multidisciplinary overview of the theoretical concepts about spatial disparities. This journey through the history of the research tradition has shown that the challenge to explain geographical inequalities has inspired thinkers very differently in terms of personal background, the methods they used, and the way they conceptualized the topic (Fig. 9.1). The first actors came from the domain of natural sciences, and interpreted spatial disparities based on then accessible “moral statistics”. Later on, the tradition became dominated by new approaches. From the late nineteenth century onwards, philanthropists, charity movements, political philosophers, and even active politicians came to the fore. Thus, the discourse moved into the hands of actors actively involved in public issues, but only until the Cold War period, when spatial disparity research became the arena of academics—first economists, later sociologists and human geographers as well. Meanwhile, the original interest in questions such as education and crime, regarded then as decisive in the reduction of poverty, gradually shifted to the economic aspects, which have been dominating the discourse ever since. The attention paid to various geographical scales has also moved broadly.

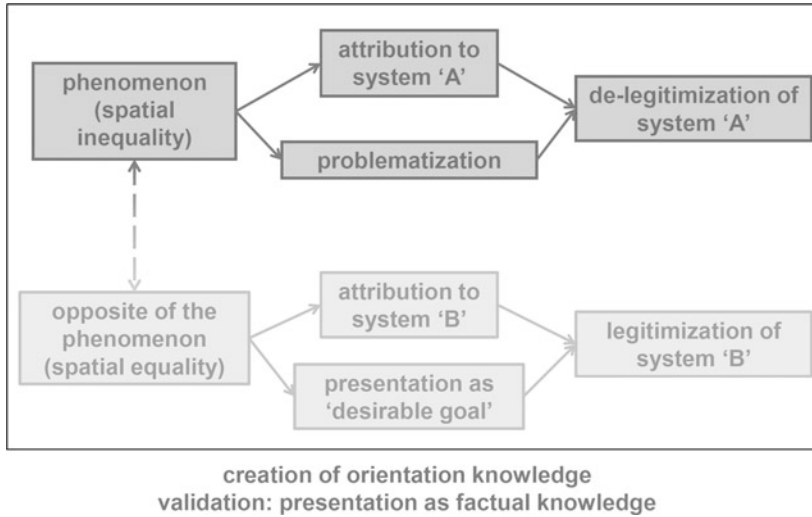
Despite these remarkable temporal changes, however, the theoretical concepts were common almost without exception in that they problematized spatial disparities, and did so a way that actively (sometimes implicitly, but in many cases explicitly) contributed to the legitimization and de-legitimization of certain political ideologies and systems (the only exception was US theoreticians of the neoliberal age, whose partial de-problematizing of geographical inequalities was in line with the neoliberal view about the “necessity” and in many cases the “desirability” of disparities). The process of legitimization has followed a simple scheme (Fig. 9.2). Spatial disparity as phenomenon has been problematized, and it has been discursively attributed to system “A” (or its main ideology). This creates for system “A” (e.g. capitalism in Marxist concepts) the image of bringing inequalities into being, hence, producing a problem, which is considered to undermine its legitimacy. In the meantime, the opposite of spatial disparity, thus, spatial equality is

Approaches and key thinkers	Date of key works	Background of main theoreticians	What is analyzed?	Geographical scale	Problematisation of spatial inequalities	Ideology or system to be legitimized	Political preference – explicit or implicit?	Science as means of legitimization
“Social physicists” (Quetelet, Dupin, Balbi & Gnerri)	early 19 <sup>th</sup> century	natural sciences	“moral statistics”	regional	yes	enlightened nationalism	explicit	yes
“Social surveyors” (Booth, social survey movements)	1880s to 1910s	philanthropy, charity movements	“moral statistics”	local (intra-urban, rural-urban gap)	yes	conservative, religious	explicit	yes
“Classical” Marxist tradition	1840s to 1890s	political philosophy & political sphere	economic issues (mode of production, output and distribution)	global, local (rural-urban)	yes	socialist/communist	explicit	yes
Marx, Engels	1910s							
Luxemburg	1900s, 1910s							
Lenin	1900s, 1910s			global, regional, local (rural-urban)				
Stalin	1950s							
Western “Cold War” tradition								
neoclassicals	1940s and 1950s							
Keynesians		economics	economic output and income	global, regional	yes	US modeled free market capitalism and liberal democracy	explicit	yes
Myrdal	1950s and 1960s							
Hirschman								
Williamson								
Friedmann	1960s							
neoclassical reaction (Borts & Stein)								
Western neoliberalism								
US convergence analysis ( $\beta$ and $\sigma$ )	1980s and 1990s	economics	economic output and income	global, regional	no	neoliberalism	dominantly implicit	yes
endogenous growth theories								
New Economic Geography (Krugman)	1990s							
EU spatial analysis	from 1990s onwards				yes	EU integration		

Fig. 9.1 (continued)

Approaches and key thinkers	Date of key works	Background of main theoreticians	What is analyzed?	Geographical scale	Problematisation of spatial inequalities	Ideology or system to be legitimized	Political preference – explicit or implicit?	Science as means of legitimization
Dependency theories (and forerunners)								
Baran	1950s	economics				socialism/communism		
ECLA structural school						capitalism and democracy but without US domination		
Prebisch			economic output and distribution (exchange, consumption)	dominantly global	yes		explicit	yes
Furtado	1950s and 1960s	economics		(Frank: global, regional, and local)				
Sunkel		sociology						
Cardoso	1960s and 1970s	history						
Faletto								
neo-Marxist dependency theories								
Dos Santos	1960s and 1970s	economics (+ sociology)				socialism/communism		
Marrini								
Frank								
Amin								
world-system model (Wallerstein)	1970s	sociology	economic output and distribution (exchange, consumption)	global	yes	socialism	explicit	yes
concept of uneven geographical development (e.g. Harvey, Smith)	from 1980s onwards	human geography	economic output and distribution (exchange, consumption)	<i>global, regional, local</i> (emphasis on those in italics) + <i>scales</i>	yes	socialism/communism	explicit	issue of validation: “morally righteous” instead of “scientific”

**Fig. 9.1** Overview of the various approaches to spatial disparities. Emphasis is placed on the background of main theoreticians, the analytical focus and scale preference of theories, the political ideologies and systems they were aimed to legitimize through problematization (or de-problematization) of spatial inequalities, and the use of science as source of legitimacy. *Source:* design by author



**Fig. 9.2** The scientific legitimization of political systems by problematizing spatial inequalities. *Source:* design by author

presented as the “desirable goal”. In the next step, equality is attributed to system “B” (in Marxist literature socialism), to which the concept provides firm legitimacy.

In fact, the discursive creation of such a strong “black-and-white” dichotomy has always been problematic given the complexity of real societies. For this reason, the main thinkers in the spatial disparity discourse have tended in most cases to make the world seem dichotomic. Here they have relied on a wide variety of strategies, all of which were generally not used in the same concept, but, as we have shown in this work, many of them certainly. These were:

- the conceptualization of spatial disparities (e.g. the selection of indicators and the geographical scale) based on an implicit presumption about the roots of inequalities and their link to certain ideologies and systems (for example Charles Booth’s and the social survey movements’ exclusive focus on “moral statistics”);
- the striking negligence of case studies that could easily provide empirical results undermining the dichotomic interpretation (such as the “blindness” of the concept of “uneven geographical development” to “real existing socialism”);
- the acceptance of hypotheses as explanations in cases they could not be substantiated by the empirical results presented in the concept (e.g. Myrdal’s statement about disparities in Europe);
- taking a “cavalier approach” in explaining empirical results in order to smooth discrepancies between the complex world and simple theories (for instance, a tendentious and oversimplified interpretation of the results of  $\beta$  and  $\sigma$  convergence analysis to indicate a plain tendency actually cannot be identified);

- overemphasizing empirical results that seem to substantiate the concept, while paying remarkably little attention (or diverting attention away from) results not in line with the intended political suggestion of the concept.

The efficiency of these strategies and the authors' willingness to substantiate what they believed in is indicated by the fact that, among the many theoreticians, Charles Booth was actually the only one who let the unexpected results influence himself strongly enough that he made considerable corrections on his *a priori* hypothesis. Yet, despite the political influence on their concepts, all authors actively used the image of science to justify their statements. On the one hand, they emphasized the scientific quality of their works, while often pushing rival interpretations into the domain of non-scientific knowledge, e.g. pseudoscience or political propaganda. On the other hand, they presented their results and findings without making a distinction between analytical and orientational knowledge. Hence, these concepts in whole were presented as "scientific", so thus the outcome of politically motivated and sometimes even unsubstantiated "wishful thinking" was also mediated to the reader as "scientific" knowledge, the "truth". This is how the political discourse of geographical inequalities has managed to use or misuse the scientific image in order to sell orientation knowledge as analytical knowledge, and to justify political endeavors.