

# Preface

This volume is the result of a two-and-a-half year Ph.D. program in the Institute of Geography at Heidelberg University. My aim with this work is to throw new light on some fundamental aspects of spatial disparity research, which had already become a major field of interest of mine during my bachelor and master studies in geography at the Department of Regional Science at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. After several years of intensively studying here the methodology and empirical considerations of spatial inequality analysis, my attention gradually turned towards the underlying conceptual issues. I became especially interested in the motivations and goals of the researchers who had provided valuable contributions to the field of study, and whose works I had regarded for a long time basically as neutral and apolitical, a presumption that became apparently unsustainable as my knowledge of the corresponding literature expanded. I soon realized that a deeper understanding of these aspects was impossible without a comprehensive overview of related concepts originating from different disciplines, which to my best knowledge was missing before the present work. Furthermore, I found it necessary to undertake a reflexive evaluation of these theoretical contributions in order to reveal the complex motivations shaping the research of spatial disparities.

Of course, no scientific work can have the claim of being independent from the context in which it emerged. This book is also a situated product. It certainly mirrors its author's attitude, which has been shaped to a large extent by the personal experience of everyday life during the postcommunist transition in East Central Europe, and by the manifold influence I have gained while staying and travelling abroad, that enabled me to take a look at my "context of origin" from outside (or, better to say, from various "outsides") as well. The main outcome has been a firm personal belief in the desirability of open debates, the competition of ideas, the freedom of thought, and the eclecticism of concepts. Without a doubt, this way of seeing is reflected by my thoughts on tendentiously one-sided interpretations of the world even if these may also contain certain ideas I can share with regard to specific issues. In the meantime, however, an important experience of mine has been the remarkable diversity of views various people can have about the same subject.

This experience is largely incompatible with mechanistic interpretations, which (at least implicitly) can be found in many concepts on spatial inequalities, and which present a world where individuals act purely according to higher interests or faceless regularities, without having their own feelings, passions, and personal (even if not always attractive) views about what is desirable. Such considerations of mine certainly have their imprint on the current volume.

Writing a reflexive essay on a research tradition is never an easy task, but one with many challenges, where the support of those standing close to us is even more important than the material or institutional circumstances in which we are working. For this reason I am extremely grateful to my supervisor, Peter Meusburger, for his valuable suggestions and careful commentaries on earlier versions of the manuscript as well as for the many inspiring and open-minded discussions we have had during my stay in Heidelberg. I also appreciate the patience and support I have received from him all during my graduate program, even in organizational issues, without which I could not have devoted so much time and energy to research. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the help of Johannes Glückler, whose well-grounded and constructive questions as well as pieces of advice concerning the organization of the research process eased my task to conceptualize research interests and find a feasible structure to my work. I have also benefited much from the kind remarks of Ulrike Gerhard and Marcus Nüsser on an earlier version, which have enabled me to make some findings of the essay more explicit.

I would also like to thank my Hungarian professors in the undergraduate programs without whose support I might have never arrived to the issues along which my thesis emerged. I am especially grateful to József Nemes Nagy, who first introduced me to the analysis of spatial disparities and from whom I have learned a lot with regard to the theory, methodology, and empirical aspects of this topic as well as about the functioning of its research practice. I owe a lot to Ferenc Probáld, with whom I have had many fruitful conversations on questions emerging during my research in the last two and a half years. I also appreciate the inspiration I got from Róbert Győri, who was the first to turn my attention to issues of discourse analysis and the political motivations of science.

For the chapters concerning spatial inequalities in “real existing socialist” systems, I am glad for Mária Csanádi and all that I have learned from her during common research projects and academic events in China about the analysis of party states, their functioning, and the structural changes through which they tried to adapt to changing circumstances. I am grateful to those friends and colleagues in China and Russia who have broadened my view of spatial disparities in communist and postcommunist contexts, especially to Qing Li (Beijing) and Elena Guseva (Moscow) for their help in finding some less conventional statistics on China and the Soviet Union for my research. I would also like to thank my friends Zoltán Gyimesi and Márton Czirfusz for the many stimulating conversations we have had on the relationship of politics and the production of knowledge, and Gergely Tóth, who turned my attention to some valuable works in political science on the functioning of political discourses. I would like to acknowledge the many talks with the friends in the Geographical Institute in Heidelberg, which provided me

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