

Justice in the City

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ABSTRACT Today, more than half of the world's population lives in cities. This alone suggests that political philosophy, particularly theories of justice, should pay more attention to cities than it has hitherto. Following Wolff and de-Shalit (2024), we can list the main characteristics of the city: institutional authority over a territory and limited powers; high population density and plurality in the respective territory; a cultural-political identity distinct from national identity, and comprehensive opportunities needed to foster creativity and different ways of life. Due to all these characteristics, theories of justice designed for the state cannot simply be applied to the city.

In this paper, I will focus on two very influential theories of egalitarian justice and attempt to determine how they can be adapted to the specific characteristics of the city. The first theory is John Rawls's justice as fairness, which includes the difference principle stating that economic and social inequalities are justified only if they maximize the benefit for the least advantaged compared to alternative arrangements. As this principle primarily concerns income and wealth, it is difficult to apply to the city because the distribution of income and wealth chiefly depends on the policies and laws of the state. Still, the city is responsible for providing many public services and distributing public goods. The difference principle needs to be modified to reflect the view that the situation of the least advantaged is not improved only through the distribution of material goods, but also the quality and accessibility of public services.

The second theory is Martha Nussbaum's approach, based not on goods but on capabilities. In this case, justice requires the development of various capabilities affecting the well-being of city residents. In this context, Nussbaum's capability for affiliation is particularly important. At the city level, it involves a sense of place, the feeling that people can cultivate their various potentials in the city. The city is a more cohesive community than the state; due to higher population density, other people's actions affect our everyday lives much more directly. The sense of belonging in the city, as the sense of our place, is different from the sense of belonging in the country and requires different city policies toward both space and public services.

Key words: justice, city, egalitarianism, capabilities, public services, virtues.

Introduction

The problem of justice in political philosophy, at least within the framework of the Anglo-American tradition I focus on in this paper, has mostly been presented as the issue of redistribution of resources within the political systems of nation-states. After stepping out of this political framework, the theory turned outward, towards global justice, recognizing that the global system is also connected by shared institutions and rules that should be governed by the principles of justice. However, what was surely missing in philosophical discussions about justice until recently was a step backwards from nation-states, towards cities.

Of course, this doesn't mean that no works were written about justice in the city, just not in the field of political philosophy in the narrow sense. We can provide a short list of works that use insights of political philosophy but belong to other fields. *Social Justice and the City* (1973/2009) by social geographer David Harvey should certainly be mentioned here. In this book, Harvey engages in political philosophy and offers an analysis of Marx and Rawls, but primarily focuses on revealing the hidden mechanisms of increasing and contributing to urban inequality based on national and local policies that, among other things, increase the prices of land and real estate thus pushing up house prices and rents at a much higher rate than redistributive policies can counteract. Although I primarily rely on Anglo-American authors associated with the social-liberal theoretical framework in this paper, the influence of the leftist Marxist perspective, which has significantly influenced many authors, especially Harvey, must also be mentioned in this brief overview. I am referring in particular to Henri Lefebvre, a philosopher and sociologist, the first to offer a systematic critique of the capitalist notion of space. In his book *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre demonstrated that space was not a neutral framework, but a product of social relations and ideological struggles. For Lefebvre, space is actively produced through institutional, economic, and cultural practices. Of particular importance is his concept of *the right to the city*, which emphasizes the right of city residents to shape the space of their city according to their own needs, not the logic of capital. Harvey took up and popularized this concept as a slogan for urban movements opposing gentrification and the commodification of city life. This paper will put emphasis on the concept of a secure sense of place as a core tenet of justice, viewing urban space through the lens of social relations, meaning that Lefebvre's influence on the understanding of urban space cannot be avoided, just like the conceptual framework of the right to the city as the collective right to redefine social relations through the transformation of urban space.

More recently, in her book *The Just City* (2010), urban planning academic Susan Fainstein applied the main theories of justice to the context of urban planning by analyzing the case studies of three cities, New York, Amsterdam and London. Fainstein uses the existing discussion in the field of political philosophy to define three values – democracy, equity and diversity – and examine how they can be achieved through urban

planning. In this context, even though she doesn't explicitly mention the problem of justice, it would be unfair not to mention Jane Jacobs and her very influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Jacobs critiques rigid zoning that became prominent in the 1960s and advocates for city planning based on diversity of space use, which increases the chances for colorful encounters on the street. Safety is her main argument – livelier, nosier neighborhoods and streets are safer – however, diversity can also be examined from the viewpoint of social justice as the absence of segregation on class, ethnic or racial grounds. Of course, in addition to the books mentioned here as examples, there are many sociologists, anthropologists and urban scholars who wrote about cities from the viewpoint of justice.

However, political philosophers did not write about justice in the city that often. And when they did, they usually applied theories of justice developed in the context of the state to the context of the city, failing to take into account the uniqueness of the city as a political system different from the state. There's a philosopher who avoided this trap, and it was Iris Marion Young. In the final part of her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990),¹ she even proposes *city life* as a normative ideal for the state. The city is the place where individualism and communitarianism are intertwined, retaining the virtues of both. The city is large enough to allow individuals to be different from others and to live their lives outside community norms, offering plenty of space for creating communities of diverse people. There are many different types of communities in the city, and people can move from one to another, resulting in social differentiation without exclusion. Of course, for this to succeed, the city has to offer a variety of accessible public spaces that facilitate numerous varied interactions. This variety will lead to new, unexpected and exciting encounters, the *eroticism of the city* as Young would put it, that increase our enjoyment in the diversity of life. For Young, *city life* represents individual freedom of identity and the possibility to build communities based on personal choice, thus embodying the normative ideal of life in a just community as social differentiation without exclusion, as a space of individual freedom and collective affiliation.

Recently, there has been a substantial growth of interest among political philosophers in studying justice in the city and identifying the distinctive characteristics of the city as opposed to the state. In *The Spirit of Cities* (2011), Avner de-Shalit and Daniel Bell use examples of big cities around the world to show that cities possess a distinctive *ethos* – a unique way of life that embodies their character and shapes the identity of their residents. These *ethoses* can be more egalitarian or less egalitarian, which, according to de-Shalit and Bell, is observable in urban planning, policies, and, chiefly, in conversations with the city dwellers on the streets. The ethos of a city is best revealed

¹ Young also addresses the city in her book *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000), where she focuses on the discussion about spatial (de)segregation, defending voluntary segregation as a means of protecting one's own identity and being different from the majority.

in street interviews and the way that the residents perceive their own city. Avner de Shalit's book *City and Immigration* (2018) also examines the city, not the state, as the place where immigrants go. This book clearly shows that cities can exhibit different attitudes towards immigration than their countries, as evidenced by the debate in Munich, most heavily affected by Germany's open-door policy, or some U.S. cities that opposed Trump's border wall policy. This approach raises the question of whether cities can introduce visas independently of their country or grant some political and voting rights to their residents even before naturalization? Here as well, de-Shalit explores the attitude of cities towards immigrants based on their ethos revealed in interviews with city dwellers on the street. Using the example of Thessaloniki, he presents the ethos of *philoxenia*, the opposite of xenophobia, which largely depends on the way the residents perceive their city's history and identity.²

The latest work focusing on the topic of justice and the city is Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit's *City of Equals* (2024). In this book, by exploring the specific features of city life and the constraints faced by city authorities in implementing various egalitarian policies over which the state has much broader and more effective authority and powers, Wolff and de-Shalit seek to understand how the city can achieve an egalitarian character. As in de-Shalit's earlier works, the method used in this book combines interviewing people on city streets with developing a theoretical approach based on the experience of living in the city. The focus is not on the standard approach to justice viewed through the lens of distribution of income and wealth, but on the question of how people feel in the city, what they can do in the city and how they are treated by others. In philosophical terms, their approach is perhaps closest to recognition theory, with injustice being understood as non-recognition of a person's inherent dignity and right to respect. This can include both social (attitude toward groups based on gender, sexual orientation, race) and economic injustice (class bias), which are often intertwined. This shows why one-dimensional views of equality (material or economic) are wrong and narrow. In other words, instead of viewing justice only through the lens of resource distribution, recognition theory focuses on mutual acknowledgement, respect and status.³ Using this approach, Wolff and de-Shalit seek to identify the components of the egalitarian spirit of the city that gives its residents a secure sense of place. Their discussion is the most extensive exploration of justice in the city hitherto, and I will often rely on their insights in this paper.

² See de-Shalit (2018: 58-72).

³ Of course, the question of distributive justice is not excluded here but viewed through the lens of respect and status. The best overview of this theory and the discussion on the relationship between distribution and recognition can be found in Fraser and Honneth (2003). In this work, Nancy Fraser puts particular emphasis on the two-dimensional aspect of justice, integrating recognition and distribution as complementary rather than mutually exclusive requirements.

However, in the first part of this paper, I will depart from their method and attempt to show how the theory of justice developed for the state can be applied to the city. I will explore how certain aspects of Rawls's theory of justice as fairness, particularly one of its key aspects, the difference principle, can be modified and adapted to the context of the city. Following that, I will examine another theory of justice, Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, to see how it can be applied to the city. Essentially, this is what Wolff and de-Shalit do, and this part of the paper is more of a presentation of their approach, albeit with some modifications. But first, we must examine what distinguishes the city from the state, and what makes the city special.

The Difference Between the City and the State

Wolff and de-Shalit start by identifying several defining features of the city in their book (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2024:8-10). First, the city has a single jurisdiction and the authority to adopt policies different from those of other cities. This is evident in the immigration debate; cities can organize the reception and integration of immigrants in different ways. Second, cities have their own distinctive cultural-political identity, which may have different characteristics than the national identity, their own unique character or, as Bell and de-Shalit would put it, ethos. Third, cities are densely populated, which means that inequalities are much easier to notice. And fourth, ever since Aristotle's time, the city has been the smallest political unit where people can pursue the way of life they aspire to and the place where they carry out various activities they consider valuable. Three fundamental characteristics of the city will play an important role in the discussion on justice as well – population density, diversity and openness.

There is an extensive body of literature dedicated to national and religious affiliation as important determinants of identity. But, more recently, there has been a growing interest in the importance of belonging to a particular city.⁴ Belonging to a city does not have to be less important than belonging to a state. Indeed, “at the end of the day, the city is one's immediate environment, and it won't help much if one feels one belongs to the state, a rather abstract political body, while not belonging to one's immediate and concrete environment, the city” (de-Shalit, 2018: 101).

The immediate environment de-Shalit writes about can be recognized by the fact that it is significantly affected by our everyday actions. When we clean a park, we affect our environment; when we decide on the route to take to work, we affect traffic flow, making it easier or more difficult for others to travel; when we choose a café terrace to sit and enjoy a cup of coffee, we affect the visual appearance of the respective square or street. In other words, the impact of our direct everyday actions on the city where we live is much stronger and more visible than on an abstract political entity, like

⁴ See Baubock, 2010; Cunningham, 2007; de-Shalit and Bell, 2011; de-Shalit, 2018.

the state. Of course, if this is true for our everyday actions, it is even more true for political engagement or civil society action. For us as political animals, the sense of belonging to our local environment is the first aspect of belonging to a community. There is another important aspect which distinguishes such communities from the state. States necessarily have borders and a historical narrative that forms the basis of national identity or affiliation. However, cities are susceptible to rather frequent fluctuations and population changes, and unlike states, have no borders. Furthermore, belonging to a local environment is not manifested as belonging to a historical entity, such as the state, but rather through a certain *ethos*, a way of life. Being a member of a local community entails sharing values rather than history. When we talk about the city as a community, we primarily think of all the things that take place in that city, the festivals, small parks, people's habits, the local market or a sports club. The pillars of affiliation with a community, such as the city, are founded on activities, encounters and events rather than grand national victories and achievements.

If we simply apply one of the theories of justice to the city, we may lose sight of the city's distinctive character. Theories of justice have been developed for the state, and the extent to which their principles can be applied to the city is uncertain. This problem is best illustrated by the measure of inequality at the state and city levels. Income inequality at the state level is measured using the Gini coefficient – the higher the coefficient, the larger the income gap and material inequality; hence, we can conclude that countries with a higher Gini coefficient are unjust.⁵ However, if we apply this to the city, it may lead to the wrong conclusion. In contrast to the state, the city's population is less stable; it's easier for people to move to another city than to another country. Therefore, a city can have a lower Gini coefficient, that is, it might appear more egalitarian, but this might be the result of policies that make life difficult for the poor and force them to leave. Wolff and de-Shalit (2024: 16) use the example of the Giuliani administration in New York City (1994–2001) to show that such a situation is more than just a theoretical possibility. If a large number of poor people leave the city and the middle- and upper-class population increases, this lowers the Gini coefficient, but it does not mean that the implemented city policies were egalitarian; on the contrary. The opposite is also true: a city can pursue pronouncedly egalitarian policies and attract a great number of poor people, thus increasing its Gini coefficient. In contrast to the states, as in the previous example, it would be wrong to conclude, on that basis, that such a city is unjust. Namely, the city doesn't have the authority to implement redistributive policies available to the state. On this basis, Wolff and de-

⁵ The Gini coefficient is an indicator that quantifies inequality in the distribution of income and wealth in a society. The values of the Gini coefficient range from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating perfect equality (everyone has the same income or wealth) and 1 indicating extreme inequality (one person possesses everything, while others have nothing). It allows for comparisons across countries and is often employed in analyses of social inequality and the assessment of social policy effectiveness. In philosophical theories of justice, like Rawls's, such empirical indicators allow the linking of normative ideals with specific political and economic practices.

Shalit conclude that, rather than income and wealth gap, it is more important for a city's egalitarian spirit that "city dwellers are able to build valuable lives for themselves and have a secure sense of place, independently of their economic success" (2024: 17).

Theory of Justice for the City

As previously mentioned, in this section, I will attempt to provide a theoretical outline of how the principles of the theory of justice developed for a much larger system with significantly broader authority over redistributive policies could be applied to the city. I will start from a very influential, if not the most influential, theory of justice of the 20th century, John Rawls' theory of *justice as fairness*. According to Rawls (1971), there are two principles that should regulate the basic structure of society – its main economic, social and political institutions:

- 1) Each person has *equal* rights and liberties compatible with similar liberties for others (the principle of liberty).
- 2) Social and economic *inequalities* are to be arranged so that they secure i) fair *equality* of opportunity (the principle of equality of opportunity) and so that they are ii) to the greatest benefit of the *least advantaged* (the difference principle).

The principle of liberty means that in a just society, everyone is guaranteed equal freedoms and rights and primarily refers to the absence of discrimination. The first question that arises in the context of the city is whether to grant the right to vote in the local elections to immigrants who live and work in the city, but have not yet obtained citizenship. As already noted, the city is a political community characterized by high population density and strong connections among its residents. Immigrants are part of our everyday lives; they often perform important jobs related to the maintenance of the city, public and private spaces. In the city, much more than at the state level, encounters with people who live and work like everyone else, but do not have equal voting rights and opportunities to influence the policies that determine important aspects of their lives, are common and occur on a daily basis. In other words, political segregation and power asymmetry are very visible in the city and present in our immediate environment. Rawls's principle of liberty can be easily applied in this context by giving permanently settled immigrants local voting rights, that is, by granting them, on this level at least, equal political rights and freedoms compatible with similar liberties enjoyed by others.⁶

⁶ Of course, additional criteria can be introduced – e.g., degree of integration, knowledge of the language, duration of stay in the city – as a condition for obtaining the right to vote, but these requirements should not be too strict nor require more from immigrants than from nationals residing in the city. This applies especially to the frequently mentioned criterion of political literacy; if such a criterion is to be introduced, there is no reason why it should not be applied to all voters.

The second principle, which pertains to egalitarianism or, alternatively, prioritarianism,⁷ is more relevant to justice in the city. According to the first part of the second principle, i.e. fair equality of opportunity, economic inequalities are justified when everyone enjoys fair equality of opportunity. The concept of *fair* equality is particularly important here because it goes beyond formal equality of opportunity, where no one is discriminated against by law, but where many opportunities remain inaccessible to many due to significant inequalities. Fair equality of opportunity entails truly equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of the social lottery, i.e. the socioeconomic status of the family we were born into, and cannot be achieved by the absence of legal discrimination alone. This principle has a direct bearing on some city policies, like preschool education, that fall within the scope of powers of city authorities. Also, in many countries, cities are responsible for establishing primary schools, which means that cities exert a degree of influence over the effectiveness and functioning of primary education. However, the second part of the second principle, the difference principle,⁸ is of a much greater interest for the present discussion. It holds that material inequalities in a society should be arranged so as to facilitate the maximum benefit to the least advantaged or that inequalities are justified if they achieve this. Of course, the first question that arises is how inequalities could possibly help improve the situation of those worst off. For Rawls, perfect material equality is the starting point for a discussion about justice; however, if society could be arranged so that inequalities make the situation of the least advantaged better than it would be in a society of perfect equality, it would be irrational not to accept it.⁹ For example, different incomes are justified if they result in a surplus of goods that can be distributed so as to improve the situation of the least advantaged. Society is just when the situation of the least advantaged is better than in any other alternative arrangement. Therefore, for Rawls, perfect material equality is not a requirement of justice, but it should be noted that the ideal of justice is attained when the situation of the least advantaged is maximally improved. This means that small improvements in the situation of the least advantaged cannot justify huge gains for those who are already in a better position. Also, the requirement of maximum improvement cannot be satisfied if the situation of the better off improves while the situation of the least advantaged stays the same. Increasing inequality, even without making anyone worse off, produces certain social norms and standards that

⁷ Debates in the field of political philosophy distinguish egalitarianism and prioritarianism. For egalitarianism in the narrow sense, the just distribution means that everyone receives an equal share, whereas prioritarianism holds that the interests of the least advantaged have priority over the interests of others. In this sense, Rawls's principle of difference is a prioritarian principle.

⁸ I will focus more on the application of Rawls's principle to city policies here; for the application to urban planning theory, see McConnell (1995), McKay; Murray and Macintyre (2012), Feitosa et al. (2021), Moroni (2023).

⁹ Rawls's method of justifying these principles goes beyond the scope of this paper, but let us just note that Rawls holds that we would choose this situation if we were not aware of our contingent characteristics. Under such circumstances, according to Rawls, it would be irrational to insist on strict economic equality if being among the least advantaged members of society could actually improve our situation.

we expect to apply to all citizens, but remain out of reach for many. In other words, it is not possible to produce inequality without making the situation worse for someone. Brian Barry illustrates it clearly using the example of teeth.¹⁰ Before the development of modern dentistry, everyone had the same “bad teeth”, depending on genetics and personal hygiene. After the *Hollywood smile* was invented, the teeth of those with higher incomes, who could afford such procedures, improved, while the teeth of the poor did not become worse. However, this new aesthetic standard has worsened the position of the poor because having unattractive teeth now goes against social norms and standards for public appearance. As the standard of service increases, the costs increase for everyone, which is why inequality must always be viewed in relative, and not absolute terms. A worsening of our position relative to others also worsens our absolute position in relation to many possibilities and social status. That is why we need the principle of fair equality of opportunity and maximum benefit for the least advantaged.

The application of the difference principle involves potent redistributive policies, including a strong tax system, capping wealth instead of just raising the poverty line, and even reorganizing the entire system of ownership to reduce not only the income gap but also the wealth gap. In general, the principle of difference is focused on regulating major state institutions. Ultimately, the realization of the difference and fair equality of opportunity principles requires a social arrangement alternative to both capitalism and state socialism. Rawls proposed the socio-economic model of *property-owning democracy* as a normative alternative to welfare state capitalism, not only in economic, but also deeply political and moral sense. Although both models aim to reduce social inequalities, the fundamental difference lies in their approach to the structure of distribution itself. Welfare state capitalism allows the concentration of wealth and control over the means of production in the hands of a small minority, and tries to achieve social justice *afterward* – using redistribution through taxes, social assistance and other corrective mechanisms. By contrast, property-owning democracy aims to shape social and economic institutions so as to *prevent* the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few. In such a society, ownership of capital, education and political influence is distributed widely among all citizens to secure genuine rather than just formal equality of opportunity. Rawls criticizes welfare capitalism because, although it can alleviate poverty, it doesn't prevent the reproduction of privilege and hierarchies that undermine the fundamental principles of justice as fairness. Policies that are characteristic of this model are universal basic income, a system of robust taxation of wealth rather than income from work, various forms of citizen's dividends, changing the education system and introducing various models of workplace democracy.¹¹

¹⁰ See Barry 2005: 173.

¹¹ For more detail, see O'Neill and Williamson (2012); for a more concise overview: Chandler (2024), chs. 7-8.

Many of the institutional changes that the application of this principle would require are out of reach for cities and city policies. Clearly, this is the problem with applying the principles of justice, like the difference as well as equal opportunity principles, in the context of the city.

Yet, it may be too soon to conclude that we should abandon the principle of difference altogether when discussing the city. It may be possible to apply a similar principle, a variation, to the city. To learn if this is possible, we must first note that the principle of difference is based on the notion of reciprocity. Reciprocity requires that inequalities be structured so as to benefit everyone. The idea of reciprocity lies between absolute impartiality, understood as altruism focused only on the general good, and mutual advantage, where everyone benefits with respect to their present situation (Rawls, 1993: 16-17). This means that reciprocity does not require sacrifices on the altar of an abstract idea of the general good (unlike utilitarianism) but accepts the rational desire to benefit in some way. Likewise, not every gain is justified; reciprocity does not mean that the situation where everyone benefits is just if some gain very little while others gain a lot. The principle of justice based on reciprocity requires that everyone involved benefits, not based on their current bargaining power, but on a fair starting point. The principle of difference interprets the notion of reciprocity in strong terms – the situation of those who benefit less must be better than in a system where everyone benefits equally, while the improvement of their situation must be maximized compared to any other alternatives. As noted, cities lack mechanisms for realizing this principle; economic inequalities in the cities are a product of national and global institutions. However, the cities manage many public goods and services that can significantly reduce the effects of inequality, and their distribution can be managed according to the principle of justice based on reciprocity. We can say that the city may adapt the difference principle to its scope of powers, to read as follows:

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they maximize the provision of accessible, affordable and high-quality public services, space and goods provided by the city.

Of course, like the difference principle, accessibility and affordability primarily concern the least advantaged city dwellers. Economic inequalities are not the product of city policies but are determined outside city mechanisms. Reciprocity as a requirement for justice to be achieved through city policies means that no one should be excluded from access to the goods and services provided by the city, and that their quality has to be high.

This requirement can also be observed in Wolff and de-Shalit, who posit, as the first among the values associated with a secure sense of space, that accessibility to the city's services and space is not to be constituted by the market, i.e. purchasing power. Exclusion can be understood as the opposite of reciprocity. A city dweller might feel as

follows: “The city is not for the benefit of the likes of me, but only the wealthy and privileged. If I cannot make use of the things the city is famous for, I am not part of its story.” (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2024: 137) Certainly, the goods and services that the city should provide to everyone include high-quality subsidized housing or another model of affordable housing; high-quality preschool and primary education (as well as secondary education, if high-schools fall within the city’s scope of powers); urban transport, which should be high-quality, accessible and affordable; health care services within the scope of city policies; access to cultural institutions and, in general, an adequate physical environment for all city dwellers. This is just a provisional list, and we could add more goods and services here. Of course, the city can do more and go beyond the strict scope of its powers – it can set higher standards in various segments, and a just city will surely provide services and the goods that the state fails to provide adequately, even if such goods and services might not be strictly within the scope of its powers.

To achieve reciprocity as described here, public services provided by the city should create an institutional infrastructure that offers the chance for people to meet and feel that the city is their joint project. This does not refer only to public physical space, which will be addressed shortly, but also to services like transport. Public transport should be seen as more than a way to move from point A to point B, although this is important too. Public transport should also be perceived as a space and service used by all, regardless of economic status. Promoting public transport as the primary means of urban transport is not just an environmental matter; it also involves creating a service to be used by everyone, which thus becomes a matter of common interest and whose efficiency affects the lives of all city residents. Collective provision of universally accessible services promotes cooperativity and a positive attitude toward others.¹² Public city life characterized by reciprocity is based on universal services, with all of us sharing the same fate. This is why the requirement of quality services is not only relevant to those worst off, even though they are the ones who will benefit the most since others can find some of these services on the market. The goal is not to have the rich finance quality services for the poor; on the contrary, the situation of those worst off will be improved if these services are used by everyone – by providing services of sufficient quality to be used by all and making them accessible to everyone regardless of their economic situation. Of course, the sustainability of these services largely depends on taxes levied by the city, and justice requires these taxes to be progressive, so that those who have more pay more, to ensure high-quality services and their accessibility to those with lower incomes. This can present a problem for the cities, because the better off might move to smaller towns with lower taxes, but continue using the infrastructure of the big city where they work or go to cultural or entertainment events. Suburban municipalities benefit from their proximity to large cities, but their administrative autonomy ensures that they don’t have to pay for these services through

¹² See more in Barry, 1989.

municipal taxes.¹³ This problem certainly presents an obstacle and needs to be taken into account when adopting administrative measures concerning the boundaries of cities and urban areas.

In addition to goods and services, the principle of justice should also be applied to physical space and the way it is managed. Gentrification is a classic example of the exclusion of certain groups from the use of space due to economic inaccessibility. In the process of gentrification, certain streets or neighborhoods become more attractive to people with greater purchasing power, who start moving in, driving up rents and house prices to levels that are unaffordable to the original residents. Also, new amenities introduced in the area are not affordable for all, and many people find themselves excluded from cultural and entertainment opportunities in their neighborhood. Turistification of neighborhoods or entire cities can have the same effects as gentrification. Much has been written about gentrification from a philosophical perspective, but the emphasis here will be on the aspect of responsibility (Kohn, 2013).¹⁴ Can wealthier people looking for better accommodation and thus contributing to gentrification be held responsible, or does the problem lie in the city itself and the urban planners who make some areas more attractive, e.g. through urban renewal, creating the conditions for gentrification? From the perspective of justice, the answer should focus on city institutions, not individual behavior. Justice is primarily the responsibility of institutions that set rules and norms, and it would be wrong to lay the blame for gentrification on individuals. This is why city planning should not be guided by market-driven principles; this can bring in more money to the city treasury, but the price of justice may be too high. In his book *Capital City* (2019), urban planner Samuel Stein addresses this issue, noting that planners face the problem of how to improve urban spaces, make them more attractive, sustainable, efficient and inclusive, without increases in land prices and rents and, finally, displacement of residents? If the city focuses primarily on investment and real-estate business, this result is inevitable. Stein describes talking to a group of kids after the city decided to invest in their neighborhood. One kid tells the others: „You see, I told you they didn't plant those trees for us.” Stein continues: „It was painful to realize how even a kid could see in every new building, every historic renovation, every boutique clothing shop, indeed in every tree and every flower in every park – not a life-enriching benefit, but a harbinger of his own displacement. In the real estate state, planners can create marvelous environments for rich people, but if they work to improve poor people's spaces, they risk sparking gentrification and displacement” (Stein, 2019: 26).

All services, goods and space that are a matter of justice should be guaranteed to the citizens as a right, not a desired result of market mechanisms. In contrast, libertarian thought argues that a market-driven approach to land and maximizing land value

¹³ Iris Marion Young holds that administrative capacities of metropolitan regions should be strengthened and that the autonomy of small-scale suburban communities should be reduced (Young, 1990: 247).

¹⁴ Other perspectives on gentrification from the standpoint of political philosophy can be found in Zukin (2010), Stilz (2013), Putnam (2021), Lloyd (2023), Hoover (2023), van Leeuwen (2024).

increases the total amount of wealth in the city, benefiting everyone. It is often illustrated using the famous quote “a rising tide lifts all boats”. This model does increase the city’s total wealth but fails to address the interests of all its residents. It even risks completely ignoring the interests of the least advantaged, who are most affected by the consequences of inadequate services and gentrification. The difference principle in any form, including the present variant, adapted to the city context, should not be viewed as a tide that lifts all boats. It’s a prioritarian principle, primarily concerned with the interests of the least advantaged, not the general level of the city’s wealth. It cannot be realized by increasing inequality and the wealth of some, even if those at the bottom get something in the end. The point is that justice in the city is measured by the situation of the worst off, in the context of the city – the adequacy of services and space. Even empirically, the argument that city policies focused on rich landowners or attracting wealthier people will have a positive impact on the least advantaged does not stand. In contrast, Wolff and de-Shalit cite various empirical studies that cast doubt on the idea that focusing on attracting the rich results in material benefits for the poor:

“For example, the urban economist Glaeser found that often, especially in recent years, the richer the city is, the higher its inequality. More precisely, he found that the idea that the higher average income in the city is, the less unequal it is, worked only in the 1980s. By the 2000s this has ceased to be the case. Glaeser found that 241 out of 242 metropolitan cities in the United States became more unequal, materially speaking. The main reason for this was the different kinds of skills and human capital that city-zens had, and the very different returns to skills, especially rapidly growing income rewards in certain sectors such as finance and IT (Tonkiss 2015; minute 36:20). Also, according to OECD research (2018) income segregation, that is, the uneven geographic distribution of income groups within a certain area (Reardon and Bishoff 2011), in our case, the city, increases the higher household disposable income is in a city, and the higher a city’s GDP. So it seems that attracting rich people to cities and allowing inequality does not automatically result in more money and services flowing to the poor.” (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2024: 32).

In *Cities and the Creative Class*, where he explains all the upsides of revitalizing post-industrial cities by attracting the creative class, Richard Florida still points out that, although the process has its upsides, like promoting tolerance and creative liveliness, it results in increasing social and economic inequality, not the other way around (Florida, 2005: 171-172).¹⁵

¹⁵ Although Florida, like I noted, identifies the problems with his theory, in his later works, especially *The New Urban Crisis* (2017), he changes his stance, acknowledging the limitations and unintended consequences of his earlier theses. Namely, the rise of the creative class in the cities, contrary to his predictions, did not lead to general prosperity, but a new urban crisis: extreme inequalities, gentrification, increasing housing costs and spatial segregation. In his later works, Florida advocates stronger interventions through public policies, including progressive taxes, investments in social infrastructure and affordable housing.

Of course, the city should be open, and it's a good thing for the city to be attractive to people who make up the creative class and have higher incomes. In the end, the city generates significant revenues from taxes, surtaxes, fees and consumption. But it should not rely only on this source of revenue. Even when part of capitalist state systems, the cities can still independently strive towards models with fundamentally different properties. *Community wealth building* (CWB) is one of the most well-known models in this context. CWB is a model of democratizing the local economy, with the English city of Preston being the most famous example in Europe.¹⁶ The Preston Model of community wealth building starts by identifying big institutions in the city and anchoring economic activities to them. This primarily includes city institutions and companies, kindergartens, schools, universities, the police, and so on. The next step is to organize local public procurement for the services and goods that these institutions purchase on a regular basis. The intention is to have the institutions use their purchasing power so that wealth stays within the city. In the end, the aim is to foster worker cooperatives and social entrepreneurship as providers of such goods and services. The model is designed to include as many people as possible in the ownership of such companies and to ensure that the companies are inclusive, if possible, that they organize workers' education programs and training for those who need jobs the most and are characterized by lower levels of employability in the labor market. Also, working conditions in cooperatives and social enterprises are different and better than in many private companies that get contracts for goods and services through outsourcing. This results in an institutional shift in the understanding of ownership and work at the local level. Guinann and O'Neill describe it in the following way:

“Individual workers are also members of the community, entitled to being treated with respect, and to terms of employment that give them dignity and security. Individual service providers are not merely a cost to be minimised, but, just like those to whom they provide services, members of the broader community” (Guinan and O' Neill, 2020:42).

Evidently, reciprocity, where the position of the least advantaged is improved compared to the market alternative, is achieved in this model. Guinan and O'Neill also note that this constitutes a change in the role of public institutions themselves:

“The ambition of a local authority in procuring social care services, then, should not just be the low-cost provision of a kind of fictitious commodity to those who need it, but instead the creation of a public institution in which both those receiving the services and those providing them are treated with care and respect, and where that public institution has a crucial role in creating the conditions in which mutual relations of care, recognition, and respect can develop and flourish. Of course, this is not an easy goal to achieve, and austerity policies and slashed budgets can make achieving it much

¹⁶ <https://www.preston.gov.uk/article/1339/What-is-Preston-Model>

harder. But this is the kind of ambition that local authorities should have, and there is a real loss when inadequate budgets make its realisation impossible” (Guinann and O’Neill, 2020:43).

The difference principle understood as reciprocity in the city context is the principle of justice that pertains to various aspects of city policies, from services and space to the economy. It tells us that the city can work on achieving certain aspects of equality, that it is not just a place for technocratic, municipal matters. Some might criticize this understanding of justice, noting that reciprocity, as discussed here, focuses more on inclusion than on reducing material inequality, which is the focus of the difference principle itself. Talks about inclusion often ignores economic injustice, like some kind of newspeak that allows us to stop talking about material inequalities and start talking only about including everyone in city life, as though the very system that produces such inequalities was relegated to the background. There is certainly a lot of truth to this criticism, but it misses the mark here. Since cities have limited space for addressing the fundamental cause of economic inequality, the focus of the problem of justice shifts when discussing the city in relation to the national or global context. Inclusion will also be the focus of the theory of justice that we will discuss next.

The Capability for Affiliation

The second approach to justice, the focus of this section, is not based on reciprocity but on the idea that we owe people a certain level of development of the capabilities they already possess as human beings. The most significant proponents of this theory, known as the capability approach, are Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. I will focus only on Nussbaum since she, unlike Sen, provides a list of capabilities that society should secure for its members. Nussbaum’s list of ten central human capabilities is a thick but vague theory of the good. Its fundamental characteristics are implied in its name. First, the theory is thick because it is normative, framing the substance of good human life in clear terms. Second, it is vague because the list only constitutes an outline of the good life, not a theory that imposes fixed homogenous values. Finally, vagueness indicates an openness to revisions and adaptations due to cultural or personal differences. Possible reasons for revising the list include, first, becoming aware of the hitherto unknown functionings of society and, second, identifying certain characteristics as more or less marginal than previously thought (Nussbaum, 1992; Gavran Miloš and Ribić, 2025). The theory focuses on capabilities, arguing that justice requires that the conditions for capabilities be secured, and it is the people who decide which capabilities to realize and how, or, in Nussbaum’s own terms, to transform into their own functioning.

One of the most important capabilities on the list, as relevant to the context of the city, is affiliation. Nussbaum will describe it like this:

- a) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship.
- b) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails, at a minimum, protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity, or national origin. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.” (Nussbaum, 2000: 79)

Wolff and de-Shalit use the theoretical framework of the capability approach in their previous work and also rely on Nussbaum’s theory when discussing the city, especially the capability for affiliation. However, they note some distinctive characteristics of the city when developing the concept of this capability, which they call “a sense of place”:

“There is, however, an important difference between ‘affiliation’ and ‘having a sense of place’, which is in one way narrower and one way broader than affiliation as Nussbaum understands it. The narrowing of our conception, or perhaps better to say further specification, is that whereas affiliation is about belonging in the context of relations to other people, but without geographical connection or restriction, a sense of place focuses on belonging in a particular space, describing the relationship with artefacts located within it (buildings, streets, pavements, parks, etc.) as well as the people who use them. In this way, then, the set of relations with others that partly constitute a sense of place is narrower than those that generate affiliation in Nussbaum’s sense, which will include connection to friends, family members, and others one has a connection with, living a distance away” (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2024: 129).

Hence, the sense of place in the city does not concern only relations to others, although they are important and we will discuss them later, but also the relationship with space. While Nussbaum views affiliation at the state level in the framework of laws and policies, Wolff and de-Shalit understand the sense of place in the city as that special meaning that an urban space has for us, our identity, our sense that it is our place. It refers to the experience of living in a place that includes both the physical and social environment. The place is not just an object, but also a way of life filled with meaning and emotional ties. It includes the way in which the neighbors, the community and the entire city perceive a place. „In the city the sense of place includes the opportunity to be amused, entertained, and even astounded or amazed by the things around us. ... In the city we have so many opportunities to be astounded with what humans can do, marvelling at human achievements and excellence“ (Wolff and de-

Shalit, 2024:134). Spatial planning will play an important role here. In fact, Jacobs, mentioned in the introduction, advocates urban planning with mixed-use developments and small local parks so that people can meet and build a sense of belonging to a space together and give a shared meaning to it. If not heavily regulated, public spaces allow people to engage in noisy, loud and playful activities.

In addition to the cited requirement that access to services not be constituted by the market, Wolff and de-Shalit specify three more conditions for an egalitarian city that, in their opinion, enhance the sense of place. The first is a sense of meaningful urban life focused on building a place where people meet and develop activities that shape individual lives, but also the lives of the neighborhoods. „There will be many aspects to this, from giving licences to restaurants and bars and encouraging independent small businesses, to keeping the streets safe and secure, to providing community centres, night classes, good transport into the late evening, and libraries” (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2024: 142). Of course, encouraging different forms of participation in local decision-making, with participatory budgeting being most widely recognized, also plays a major role. The second requirement is diversity or social mixing. The sense of place is closely linked to inclusivity with respect to gender, age, race, religion and so on. The important question here is how to encourage social mixing. On the one hand, in the interest of integration, we want to avoid spatial segregation of immigrants and other minority groups, meaning that planning policies that promote mixing may be justified. On the other hand, members of cultural minorities might view their cultural identity as frail and prefer to live with similar people precisely to be able to develop a secure sense of place. There is no simple answer to this question, and the right answer probably depends on the specifics of individual cases. Third, inclusion in the community of a neighborhood or a city should not be conditioned on the rules of others, nor involve a special feeling of gratitude for being *accepted*. The sense of place means that all of us, under the same conditions, define the meaning of the space we live in.

Although Wolff and de-Shalit stress that the main difference between their approach and Nussbaum's lies in the fact that they insist on the relationship with the space where our relations with other people take place, the relations with others still play an important role in the sense of belonging. We already pointed out that justice was a virtue of institutions, not individuals. Still, if we focus on the affiliation capability as one of the conditions of justice, it is very difficult to avoid focusing on our behavior towards others. The problem of justice then shifts from the virtues of institutions to the virtues of individuals. Although the authors offer a framework and underline the need for such a perspective, they do not elaborate on it in more detail. Reflections on justice need to be more closely linked to the ethics of interpersonal relationships in local communities. Here, Scalet's description of the virtue of *neighborliness* (Scalet, 2023) can be useful. According to Scalet, neighborliness is not just a matter of courtesy or politeness, but a morally rich practice of mutual acknowledgement and responsibility

in a shared space. Writing about migration and the relationship between long-term residents and newcomers, Scalet describes neighborliness as an “intermediate state between hostile indifference and over-solicitation in ways that avoids these extremes which are grounded in mistaken perceptions” (Scalet, 2023: 226). It neither ignores nor imposes on others but finds a balance that respects privacy while acknowledging shared space and mutual care. The problem of indifference is clear – newcomers can feel unwelcome in the neighborhood and struggle to build a sense of belonging. The problem of excessive cordiality is more interesting. Namely, Scalet insists that we should avoid building overtly intimate relationships with our neighborhood and treating it as our own house. Unlike our home, the neighborhood is a public space and should be treated as such. *Neighborliness* entails our readiness, as long-term residents, to be the first to make contact with new neighbors, but not as if they come to a place which is ours and thus, naturally, subject to our rules, but as new residents of a public space with whom we have to arrange that space together and give it a meaning suitable for everyone. “Neighbourliness is a virtue that entails a specific shared desire: to avoid extremes and find a proper amount of change for creating belonging, with negotiations shaped by the community’s ethos” (Scalet, 2023: 229). Someone might object that this cannot be presented as a requirement of justice since justice pertains to institutions, not personal behavior. But, to respond, we could go back to the difference between the city and the state discussed earlier and note that the city is a community where the network of our behaviors towards each other is much denser and where the way we behave shapes the perception of our belonging to the community perhaps even more than the just functioning of city institutions. The virtue ethics advocated by Scalet shifts the focus from abstract rights to practical conditions of living together in the city, with one of the key insights being that the sense of belonging, as an important aspect of justice in the city, is not bestowed but built – through everyday interactions.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on the multidimensional issue of justice in contemporary urban space, starting from the assumption that a city should be understood as a distinct and specific space of various social relations. By analyzing different approaches to justice – from Rawls’s theory of justice to the capability approach to Scalet’s neighborhood ethics – it demonstrates that justice in the city involves institutional, symbolic and affective dimensions simultaneously. The first part of the paper discusses Rawls’s conception of justice, focusing on just arrangement of institutions, distribution of goods, and equality of opportunity. It shows that this approach, when applied to the city, needs to consider institutional constraints and distribution matters within the authority of city institutions, but that it can still be used, with some modifications, as a normative guide towards justice in the city. However, it also shows that such an approach – though powerful in a normative sense – remains limited when it

comes to its application to the actual dynamics of urban life and symbolic exclusions characterizing the daily life of marginalized groups. This has created space, in the following section, for a contribution by the capability approach, which views the capability for affiliation as the key aspect of justice in the city: a just city must offer a secure sense of place to everyone. This, of course, includes the distributive aspect of justice, but it also offers a much wider view through an analysis of the importance of the relationship with space in everyday life and inclusion in city life. This theoretical approach goes beyond institutional arrangements and allows for a view of justice where redistribution and mutual acknowledgement or acceptance are inextricably linked and cannot be considered separately. Finally, to explore justice in such a broad sense, we need to go down to the street, to our everyday encounters and relations in the neighborhood. The description of the virtue of neighborliness can bring attention back to the micro-ethics of everyday life. Affiliation and inclusion understood as a secure sense of place are partly also achieved through direct mutual relationships in the encounters in the neighborhood. Including this aspect in the reflections on justice in the city underlines the importance of the relationships that are often considered apolitical, but form the basis of community in everyday life.

This entire theoretical journey, from the abstract difference principle focused on institutions to the description of street encounters as the virtue of individuals, shows that achieving justice in the city is a multilayered normative task that requires structural reforms, specific spatial and political interventions, and an ethical approach to everyday relations. A just city is not just the result of institutional design, but the product of social imagination that includes and accepts differences, allowing all its residents – regardless of their origin, class, ethnicity or status – to recognize that they are equal subjects of a shared space. Of course, the question of how to meet the requirements of justice is beyond the scope of political philosophy. Urbanists, city planners and economists can contribute much more to the debate on how to best combat gentrification, improve infrastructure for services, design new economic models and so on. The task of political philosophy is to present arguments and outline values to guide them.

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Pravednost u gradu

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Sažetak

U gradovima danas živi više od polovice ljudi na planeti. Samo ova činjenica ukazuje na to da trebamo gradovima u filozofiji politike, posebno u teorijama pravednosti, pridati veću pažnju nego što joj se do sada davala. Slijedeći Wolffa i de-Shalita (2024) možemo kao glavne karakteristike grada navesti institucionalnu jurisdikciju nad određenim teritorijem i ograničene ingerencije; gustoću i pluralnost populacije na tom teritoriju; poseban kulturno-politički identitet u odnosu na državu i cjelovitost sadržaja potrebnih za razvoj kreativnosti i ispunjenja raznih načina življenja. Zbog svih karakteristika nije moguće na adekvatan način teorije pravednosti zamišljene za državu samo primijeniti na gradove.

U ovom tekstu fokusirat ću se na dvije vrlo utjecajne teorije egalitarne pravednosti i pokušati vidjeti kako se one mogu prilagoditi na posebne karakteristike grada. Prva je pravednost kao pravičnost Johna Rawlsa koja sadrži *načelo razlike* koje kaže da su ekonomske i društvene razlike opravdane samo ako maksimalno poboljšavaju položaj najslabije stojećih u odnosu na alternativna uređenja. Budući da se ovo načelo primarno odnosi na prihod i bogatstvo ono je problematično kao takvo za stupanj grada jer distribucija prihoda i bogatstva prvenstveno ovisi o državnim politikama i zakonima. Ipak, ingerencija grada je pružanje mnogih javnih službi i distribucija javnih dobara. U tom smislu je potrebno mijenjati načelo razlike, da se položaj najslabije stojećih poboljšava ne samo distribucijom materijalnih dobara već kvalitetom i dostupnošću javnih službi.

Druga teorije jest ona Marthe Nussbaum utemeljena ne na dobrima već na sposobnostima. Pravednost u ovom slučaju od nas zahtijeva razvoj raznih sposobnosti koje utječu na dobrobit građana. U ovom kontekstu posebna je važna sposobnost koju Nussbaum spominje, a to je sposobnost pripadanja. Na nivou grada ona označava osjećaj mjesta, osjećaj da se u gradu mogu razviti razni potencijali koje ljudi imaju. Grad je više zajednica nego što je to država, zbog gustoće naseljenosti radnje drugih ljudi puno direktnije utječu na naše svakodnevne živote. Osjećaj pripadnosti gradu kao osjećaj vlastitog mjesta drugačiji je nego osjećaj pripadnosti državi i zahtijeva drugačije gradske politike i prema prostoru i prema javnim servisima.

Ključne riječi: pravednost, grad, egalitarizam, sposobnosti, javne službe, vrline.