

Inequalities and Local Infrastructure: The Challenges of Post-Covid Recovery Investments

by Filippo Barbera

Rather than being mere “productive environments”, localities embedded in infrastructure are distinctive *living places* in which communities of people live and establish a greater part of their daily social relationships. As a result, infrastructure represents the backbone of citizenship rights and strongly affect territorial inequalities.

Infrastructure is chiefly understood in physical terms as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires or cables. This physical reductionism is by no means sufficient to encompass the multiple facets of the concept or to make sense of the many ways infrastructure affects socio-political inequalities. Knowledge infrastructure, for instance, may indicate robust networks of people, equipment and institutions that generate, share and maintain specific knowledge about the human and natural worlds. Infrastructure furthermore refers to the interplay between information technologies,

transportation and other intermodal transport devices. All of these kinds of infrastructure affect inequalities in different ways.

To understand this point, let us consider infrastructure as the pipes through which *places construct people*, feeding them with the goods and services needed to put into practice their daily citizenship rights.¹ Infrastructure as diverse as transport systems, utilities, welfare services, schools, libraries, hospitals, public parks and so on always and invariably connect people to places, giving them opportunities to exercise their material freedom which is a backbone of citizenship rights.

This reading is paramount in connection to the concept of “social infrastructure”, which has gained

¹ Filippo Barbera and Ian Rees Jones (eds), *The Foundational Economy and Citizenship. Comparative Perspectives on Civil Repair*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2020.

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increased popularity in recent years thanks to the work of Erik Klinenberg.² When this infrastructure is robust, the civic quality of societies is safeguarded; when it is weak, individuals lose the ability to help and sustain each other.

One example is given by Chicago's fatal 1995 heat wave. Klinenberg highlights the fact that neighbourhoods with both the highest and lowest death rates were highly segregated with conditions of poverty and violent crime. A key difference between the two was the divide in social infrastructure: some areas had spaces to encourage local, face-to-face interactions and mutual support. During the heat wave, some people could leave their hot apartments to congregate with others in an air-conditioned café and check on the neighbours they knew. Others could not, as their social infrastructure was lacking, discouraging interaction and mutual aid and thereby resulting in more casualties and fatalities.³

The idea of social infrastructure can be generalised in connection to the concept of "Foundational Economy".⁴ As illustrated by this concept, infrastructure is necessary for everyday life and consumed by all citizens whatever their wealth or income. Citizen well-being is mainly based on

² Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People. How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, New York, Crown, 2018.

³ Richard E. Ocejo, "Palaces for the People..." (book review), in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 125, No. 2 (September 2019), p. 601-603.

⁴ See the Collective for the Foundational Economy website: <https://foundationaleconomy.com>.

the contingent role of foundational infrastructure. They include welfare services (social policy), grounded services (housing, utilities, health, education and care), mobility networks (transport systems), social spaces (libraries, community centres) and green infrastructure (parks, outdoor opportunities and nature-based solutions).

Foundational goods and services are brought to people through networks and branches which are structured through a mix of institutional arrangements and regulatory principles. By being part of the daily life of people, foundational infrastructure is part of the social contract that supports exchanges between citizens and institutions. Daily life is always spatially grounded: people and households have access to the essentials of the foundational economy in the places they live. This means that the ways through which *places construct people* underscores the spatial nature of the social contract.

A foundational economy perspectives thus underscores that human freedom and well-being is realised in systems that are collectively produced and governed by a set of formal and informal political agreements that are spatially grounded.⁵ This spatial significance may be concerned with inequalities between and within cities, as well as broader regional disparities.⁶

⁵ Alex Schafran, Matthew Noah Smith and Stephen Hall, *The Spatial Contract. A New Politics of Provision for an Urbanized Planet*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020.

⁶ Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Tobias Ketterer, "Institutional Change and the Development of Lagging Regions in Europe", in *Regional*



Infrastructure is hence a reliance system that cuts across administrative boundaries and requires a new “spatial contract” free of an urban-centric mindset or *metrophilia*. This namely refers to a sense of self-appointed superiority by a restricted circle of self-perpetuating urban-centred decision makers that has ended up pursuing uniformity in policy frames, promoting homogeneous, error-prone public agendas.⁷

Several factors can be outlined as possible causes of *metrophilia*.⁸ On the one hand, on-going economic restructuring, changes to social protection systems and the shifting structures of governance have deeply affected weaker areas. On the other, the “global beauty contest” in which core cities and regions compete for investments has strengthened their brand and accumulation capacity, but often at the expenses of other places, both within the same nation and between countries.

The combination of these two agendas has contributed to a further fragmentation of the territorial structure, widening the gap between more or less favoured regions. To close

Studies, Vol. 54, No. 7 (2020), p. 974-986.

⁷ Costis Hadjimichalis, “Uneven Geographical Development and Socio-Spatial Justice and Solidarity: European Regions after the 2009 Financial Crisis”, in *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 2011), p. 254-274.

⁸ Loris Servillo et al., “Inner Peripheries: Towards an EU Place-Based Agenda on Territorial Peripherality”, in *Italian Journal of Planning Practice*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 2016), p. 42-75, <http://www.ijpp.it/index.php/it/article/view/68>.

this gap, so called “tailor-made” policies are key. Policy-makers are increasingly paying attention to these topics, not least in light of the new resources available for the post-Covid recovery, including notably major investments in infrastructure and connectivity.

The Welsh Government, for instance, has launched a new programme operationalising the concept of a foundational economy.⁹ Here, the concept is defined as “how we spend money in Wales and how we can make better decisions on how to spend it. More than half of the Welsh Government’s budget is spent on health and social services. We want to ensure that we spend this money in a way that will benefit our people and our economy.”¹⁰

The Welsh programme for a foundational economy thus focuses on the direct goods and services citizens buy, the workforce directly employed, how the location and co-location of services affects communities and how they can access these services.

In Italy, the National Strategy for Inner Areas has set out a territorial map of the country, which measures the traveling distance to and from essential services. Inner areas are those localities far from primary and advanced essential service centres, which amount to 60 per cent of the country’s landmass, 52 per cent

⁹ Eluned Morgan and Vaughan Gething, *Written Statement: Approach to the Foundational Economy in Health and Social Services*, 22 November 2021, <https://gov.wales/node/43714>.

¹⁰ Welsh Government website: *A Healthier Wales Foundation Economy Programme*, <https://gov.wales/node/43482>.



of its municipalities and 22 per cent of the population. As such, the National Strategy for Inner Areas explicitly addresses the social infrastructure of marginalised places, focusing on the provision of public services in a tailor-made way. To support territories as living places, development strategies should not be space-neutral, but rather carefully tailored to the specific needs of the region or city.¹¹

In academic debates, territorial marginality is often referred to by using the concept of “left behind” localities. This term “has become a loose, catch-all signifier grouping together different kinds of peripheral places, and potentially stigmatising their residents as passive, immobile and impoverished”.¹²

Despite different definitions, what these concepts share is the idea that context matters in terms of its social, cultural and institutional features, while power and knowledge matter as key dimensions of local planning. Accordingly, the planning of formal (social) infrastructure should be based on the mobilisation of local

knowledge and on the displacement of *rentiers* or extractive élites in favour of innovators.¹³

Tailor-made, place-based planning to support foundational economy infrastructure requires both formal institutions like the local authority and community organisations and initiatives. These are needed to coordinate infrastructure provision, with schooling, business development and the promotion of economic and social innovation being integral parts of this packaged effort to reduce inequalities.

All in all, as suggested by Bentham et al.: “local and regional government need to be reinvented, empowered and reskilled as appropriate to use micro-level knowledge to develop textured and context specific understandings of the foundational economy”.¹⁴ Policies such as these are directed towards reconstructing the nexus between local economic development and the social reproduction needs of citizens, via the maintenance of the foundational infrastructure of daily-life.

The post-Covid European recovery plan and the billions of euro that will now be made available for investments in various states provides an opportunity to address these issues. These investments need to

¹¹ Fabrizio Barca, Philip McCann and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, “The Case for Regional Development Intervention: Place-Based Versus Place-Neutral Approaches”, in *Journal of Regional Science*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (February 2012), p. 134-152, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9787.2011.00756.x>.

¹² John Tomaney, Lucy Natarajan and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Sacriston: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Place*, London, University College London, 2021, p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.14324/000.rp.10126028>; Lucy Natarajan, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and John Tomaney, “Social and Community Infrastructure: Lessons from Co Durham”, in *Renewal*, Vol. 29, No. 29 (2021), p. 84-90.

¹³ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, New York, Crown Business, 2012.

¹⁴ Justin Bentham et al., “Manifesto for the Foundational Economy”, in *CRESC Working Papers*, No. 131 (November 2013), p. 19, <http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/cresc/workingpapers/wp131.pdf>.

close the gap between the concept of “infrastructure without territory” and “territory without infrastructure”. This will depend on whether the strategy is designed so as to overcome sectoral silos and to address the intersection of different inequalities (relating to class, gender, ethnicity and geography) as well as the specific ecological and social dimensions of a given locality; whether a place-sensitive (instead of a one-size-fits-all) approach prevails; whether a mission- and method-setting role of central authorities is combined with adequate administrative capacity by local governments; and ultimately whether citizens, communities, trade unions and employees are engaged and included in a genuine public debate.¹⁵

With regards to the concept of “infrastructure without territory”, this relates to infrastructure that does not entail a key relationship with the territory in which they are developed. Instead, they are one of the levers through which public intervention can correct market failures, supporting new growth dynamics that can feed citizen needs and simultaneously diminish inequalities within states and regions. In this respect, the concept reflects a centralised model that pursues a *one-size-fits-all* approach

¹⁵ These governance requisites are clearly spelled out in the 2021 report of the Progressive Society *The Great Shift*. The analysis of national recovery plans is at the core of a research group in which the author is actively involved, coordinated by Fabrizio Barca on behalf of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). For more on the 2021 report, see, Independent Commission for Sustainable Equality, *The Great Shift: From a Broken World to Sustainable Well-Being*, October 2021, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/progressivesociety2021>.

to the development of regions and cities, requiring some revision for contemporary realities and challenges.

The second concept, that of “territory without infrastructure”, is at the basis of the spatial inequality that undermines citizenship rights. As outlined above, today there is an urgent need to focus on a foundational and polycentric infrastructure framework, adopting tailor-made investment and development policies for specific regions and areas in order to pursue more equal and sustainable growth. The enormous amounts of resources now available to national and local governments to pursue post-Covid investments in infrastructure should fully integrate these considerations, thereby also countering the growing inequalities within and among states and regions.

Concretely, this implies a shift from an idea of infrastructure as simple “points” and “lines”, to a networked matrix that is better tailored to territories involved, allowing for a better complementarity between material, environmental and welfare dimensions and those related to human settlement and wellbeing. In this way, the concept of infrastructure is expanded (as it includes more objects, materials, areas, sectors, spaces, places, etc.), while its meaning extends beyond its mere technicalities and physical outputs to also concern the material backbone of citizenship and citizen rights.

A crucial consequence of this way of understanding infrastructure is the transition from an idea of welfare as an individual endowment of de-

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commodified rights or public coverage of the risks of unemployment, ageing and sickness on an individual basis, to welfare as a spatial scaffolding, capable of guaranteeing the concrete exercise of citizenship rights in whatever kind of settlement or locality in which infrastructure investments are directed.

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