

Jens S. Dangschat

Disparities, spatial



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The reduction of spatial disparities has constitutional status both within the European Union (EU) and within the nation states. Nonetheless, the disparities have increased (again) on almost all levels in the last few decades. The reason for this is the tension between the growth and equalisation policy or rather the contradiction between the objectives of individual specialist policies and the rather weak instruments of the cohesion policy.

1 Objectives and contradictions

Every city (▷ *City, town*) and every ▷ *Region* has its own characteristics that make it more or less worth living in. Some places offer more training opportunities, others have a larger number of social facilities (▷ *Social infrastructure*) or natural recreation areas. These special features are relative strengths or weaknesses that represent challenges for development (▷ *Spatial development*). Despite all the differences, however, there should be a certain ▷ *Equivalence of living conditions* between all districts, municipalities and regions, but also nation states, or at least minimum standards should be observed regarding the provision of public services, which the state ultimately has to guarantee (cf. ARL 2016: 2 et seq.). One of the main goals of ▷ *Spatial planning (Raumordnung)* and federal state spatial planning (▷ *Federal state spatial planning, federal state development*) in the Federal Republic of Germany is therefore to create and ensure equivalent living conditions. This mandate is derived from Article 20 and Article 72(2) of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz, GG*) in its unification-related revision in 1994 (until that point, the objective was based on ‘uniform living conditions’).

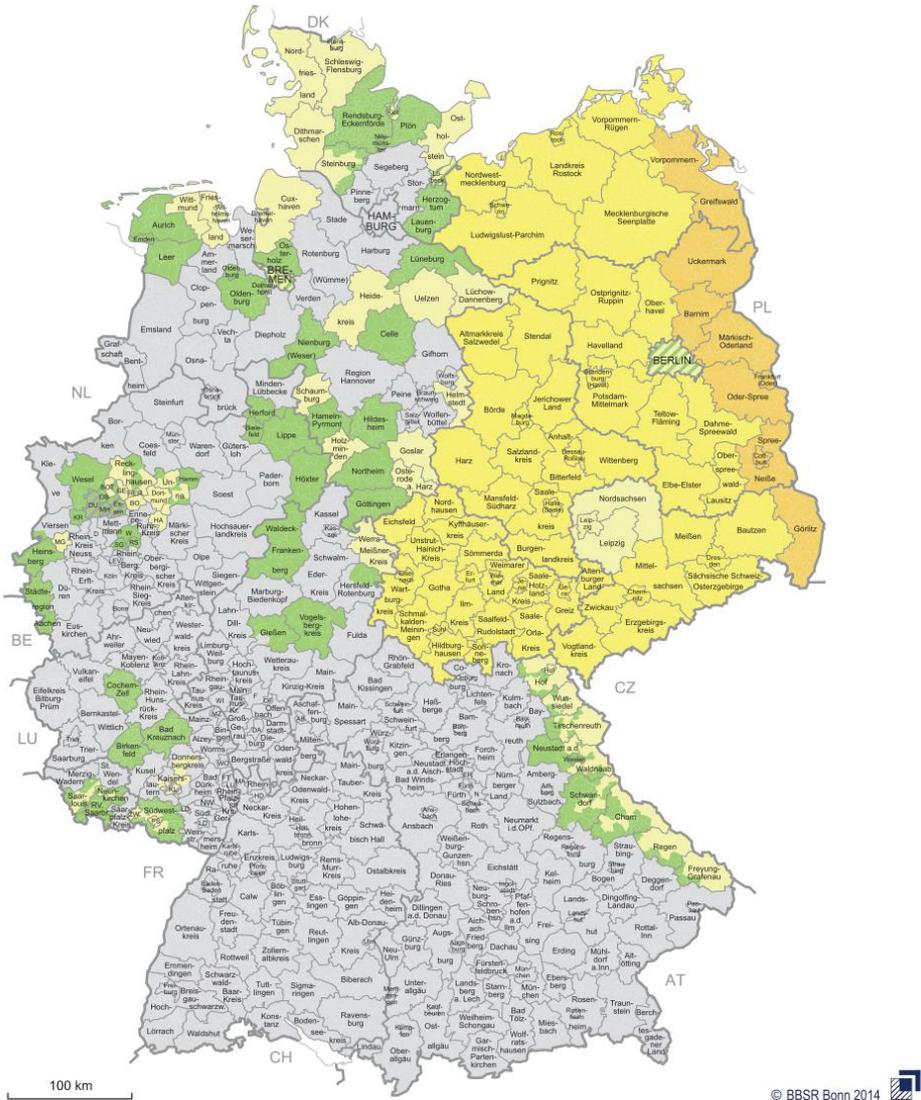
The Federal Spatial Planning Act (*Raumordnungsgesetz, ROG*) in section 2(2) no. 1 therefore provides that ‘balanced social, infrastructural, economic, ecological and cultural conditions should be pursued across the entire area of the Federal Republic of Germany and its constituent territories [...]’. In order to achieve this goal, spatial planning has the task of using its instruments and measures to help reduce existing spatial disparities or prevent new ones from arising in the first place in the respective areas (equalising function). This task was specified in the Federal Spatial Planning Programme (*Bundesraumordnungsprogramm, BRÖP*), which was passed by a majority of the German Federal Parliament (*Deutscher Bundestag*) on 23 April 1975. The aim was to trigger development stimuli in areas with particularly pronounced structural weaknesses, especially by means of ▷ *Infrastructure policy (▷ Infrastructure)* to help reduce spatial disparities.

In addition, within the subsidiarity system of Europe (▷ *Subsidiarity*) there are a number of strategies (European Spatial Development Perspective [*Europäisches Raumentwicklungskonzept*] – ESDP and the Territorial Agenda [*Territoriale Agenda*] – TA), laws and instruments such as structural funds (European Regional Development Fund [*Europäischer Fonds für Regionalentwicklung*] (ERDF), European Social Fund [*Europäischer Sozialfonds*] (ESF) and Cohesion Fund), and URBEM programmes or Interreg programmes. Since 2007, the separation according to structure-related target areas has been abolished in favour of a combination of three objectives – convergence, regional competitiveness and employment as well as territorial cooperation (▷ *European spatial development policy*). Even though the (spatial) cohesion policy is largely assigned to the DG Regio, the framework agreements (Maastricht Treaty, Lisbon Treaty and Europe 2020 strategy) are anchored at the highest level of the European Union (EU, ▷ *European Union*), while ‘success’ is measured and analysed in the DG for Economic and Financial Affairs using a scoreboard.

At the national level, in addition to specialist policies (regional structural policy), equivalent living conditions are pursued above all through Joint Tasks (in accordance with Article 91a, b and Article 104a IV of the Basic Law, e.g. to improve the regional economic structure or to improve the agricultural structure and coastal protection), which became particularly important after German unification (cf. Fig. 1). As an essential part of the Joint Tasks to improve the regional economic structure, the ‘reconstruction of the East’ is connected to the objective of achieving self-sustaining economic growth in the new federal states in order to reduce high unemployment and the dependency on transfer payments (*Grundsätze und Richtlinien für Wettbewerbe auf den*

Gebieten der Raumplanung, des Städtebaus und des Bauwesens, GRW [Principles and guidelines for competition in spatial planning, urban development and the building industry]].

Figure 1: GRW-assisted areas 2014–2020



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Assisted areas for the Joint Task 'Improving regional economic structure', 2014 - 2020 demarcated by municipality

- Predefined assisted area C
- Predefined assisted area C with border premium in accordance with para. 176 regional guidelines
- Non-predefined assisted area C
- Non-predefined assisted area C (partly with cities/municipalities)
- Assisted area D
- Assisted area D (partly with cities/municipalities)
- Partly non-predefined C, partly assisted area D
- Non-assisted area

Database: BMWi (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy) Geometric basis: BKG (Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy), local authorities, 31 December 2011 Editing: G. Lackmann

Rural district name
 Name of urban district (if there is not enough space, the city-specific letter of the vehicle registration number is given instead)
 — Border rural district or urban district
 — Federal state border

Source: BBSR (Federal Institute for Building, Urban and Spatial Research) 2014

Some of the reasons why this goal has not yet been achieved and will not be achieved in the foreseeable future are, on the one hand, that some specialist policies have decidedly different goals, and on the other hand, contrary goals are pursued within spatial development policy: in addition to the goal of regional balance and stability (the concept of balanced functional areas), the principle of competition, i.e. the growth principle (the functional and spatial division of labour concept), has increasingly been set (cf. Domhardt/Benzel/Kiwitt 2011: 219 et seq.), as a result of which the disparities tended to be accelerated.

Within Europe, the economic gaps between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ member states have narrowed, but at the same time the north-south disparity between member states has increased. Furthermore, the gaps between and within the regions have predominantly increased at the NUTS-1 to NUTS-3 as well as the LAU-1 and LAU-2 levels (cf. Kramar 2006). The same applies to Germany – including beyond the structural differences between West and East (cf. Kersten/Neu/Vogel 2015a; Krause/Schneider/Stilling 2015), which ultimately leads to considerable differences in the burden on local authority budgets (cf. Bertelsmann Foundation 2015).

Above all, this is due to the strong political orientation towards the principle of competition, which is gaining in importance across the EU as a result of the ‘appropriate’ required response to the challenges posed by globalisation in competition with North America and Southeast Asia. The cohesion policy is clearly inferior as compared to specialist policies in terms of methods and instruments (cf. Kunzmann 2014). These developments eventually led to discussions about whether, by what means, to what extent and by whom spatial compensation for what kind of disparities can and should still be guaranteed by the state (cf. the debate on this in ARL 2016).

2 Definition

Spatial (or regional) disparities are understood to mean all divergences between territorial units, for example the federal states or districts, compared to the value of the superordinate level on the scale (‘parity in reference distribution’), e.g. the nation state. The divergences are usually represented numerically in statistics and descriptively in maps of classes with corresponding designations. For (comparative) analysis, corresponding distribution analyses are used (variance analyses on the basis of scattering, Gini coefficients, differences between upper and lower quantiles – usually quartiles, quintiles or deciles – as well as the intervals between the extreme values) or the deviation from the arithmetic mean.

Individual indicators are frequently compiled into indices (quality of life, ▷ *Sustainability*, smartness) in order to achieve a more pointed result. Such complex measurements are relevant to the political discussion (especially in rankings), but hardly give any information about necessary changes in governance. However, indices on sub-dimensions and information on steerability in ratings and benchmarks are more relevant.

In consideration of the various methodological approaches to analysing territorial cohesion, Chilla and Neufeld (2014: 18), however, came to the conclusion that the development within Europe with regard to increasing or decreasing cohesion ‘depends largely on the indicators selected and the underlying measurement methods’. However, it is not possible to distinguish whether this is the result of a certain methodological intention or the fact that the indicator values

do not follow a standard course. Therefore, spatial observation must be expanded, standardised and placed on a stronger theoretical basis.

This logic of describing and analysing the facilities within the spatial units corresponds to traditional input-output considerations, whereby it is assumed that relatively similar facilities (based on the number of residents or employees) can also be assessed as similar living conditions. However, this is disputed, because how the indicator values of the structural and infrastructure attributes actually become effective (outcome) differs from a social and spatial point of view (cf. ARL 2016: 6 et seq.). On the one hand, the discrepancy between output and outcome can be measured in different forms and degrees of effectiveness of \triangleright *Governance*. On the other hand, the same 'objective' facts are perceived and assessed differently by social groups (subjective living conditions). Therefore, qualitative information is also processed, especially in case studies (cf. Pohl 1998).

Furthermore, the interpretation of the formal statistical definition is critically discussed with regard to two aspects. First: why is the distribution of the superordinate level on the scale a point of reference? An adjustment to the average of the reference level would mean an equal distribution on the lower level of the scale. This has never happened historically, is likely to be undermined by the driving social forces and is likely to be seen as undesirable in the first place (cf. Mäding 2010: 197). Hence the second question: what level of divergence is tolerable or functionally sensible? And which minimum standards are necessary, desirable and with which combination of stakeholders (state, market, civil society) and activities/measures can they be achieved (absolute or relative divergence from the point of reference)? Here, it quickly becomes clear that normative standards of equity (distribution, protection of vested rights or performance-related equity?) as well as pragmatic arguments are at play. However, putting these normative standards into practice is often quite impossible as funding is limited and instruments are scarce or, if available, not used at all.

Threshold values have been pragmatically set at the EU level. Accordingly, regions with a GDP per capita 25% below the European average are entitled to be classified as Target Area 1. However, this adjustment is not intended as a cap for the most successful regions, but rather as a 'catch-up programme' for those 'at the bottom of the league'. For the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP) scoreboard, an acceptable range of regional differences was determined by defining lower and upper limits for the respective development (cf. Chilla/Neufeld 2014: 17).

3 Dimensions and measurement levels of spatial disparities

Fundamentally, all available statistics can be represented in their spatial distribution. However, structural and historical data relating to the dimensions of economy, infrastructure, building structure, environment and social issues are particularly relevant for questions of spatial disparity. Of particular relevance to the economy is the data on economic strength (measured using the controversial GDP), tax and purchasing power, employment and unemployment. With respect to building structure and infrastructure, it is the facilities and utilisation levels as well as accessibility (measured in isochrones), with regard to the environment it is the quality of the media

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of water and air and the extent of soil sealing. The social dimension is represented according to comprehensive data (population, ▷ *Migration*, natural population balance), socio-economic data (income, education, unemployment, receipt of social welfare benefits), socio-demographic data (currently especially the age structure, proportion of foreigners or the proportion of people with a migration background, birth rates and death rates) as well as health indicators (ongoing spatial observation). In order to be able to compare territorial units of different sizes with one another, the data is correlated to the relevant population (number of inhabitants, working population, people of working age, women of childbearing age, etc.).

For the assessment of spatial disparities, the spatial scale is also relevant; for the level of the federal states and the local authorities the ▷ *Fiscal equalisation between the states* is of particular importance, as this is supposed to give each federal state and local authority the opportunity to set their own framework conditions so that they can develop in a similar way (equal opportunities). Due to the different composition of the sectors and the different modernisation processes, a south-north disparity was developed in the old Federal Republic of Germany (cf. Sinz/Strubelt 1986), onto which a west-east disparity has been superimposed after reunification that continues to this day (cf. Gornig/Häußermann 1993; for regional disparities within the new member states of the EU cf. Krätke/Heeg/Stein 1997). Currently, the disparities between the centre and the peripheries have also increased. However, due to the extent and persistence of spatial disparities as well as the increased growth competition among the regions of Europe, this balance in the name of solidarity has been called into question for some time.

Accessibility and facilities are of great importance for assessing disparities within regions (▷ *Central place*), whereas within the regions surrounding the major cities in particular the unequal distribution of the residential areas of social groups, predominantly of foreigners and migrants, but also of households with low education, low and insecure income, is of particular relevance (▷ *Segregation*). However, the approach to spatial disparities in the sense of describing unequal distribution according to structural characteristics in space and their interpretation with regard to social cohesion is heavily criticised (cf. Dangschat/Alisch 2014) because this is associated with an inadequate understanding of ▷ *Space* from a social science perspective and because structural data say little or nothing about coexistence in the place itself (cf. Blasius/Friedrichs 2009). The local political culture, social networks and the expectations of social groups are considered to have more explanatory power (cf. Anhut/Heitmeyer 2000), which can primarily be explained by the fact that these belong to a social ▷ *Milieu*. In order to be able to properly classify the concentration of social groups in space, qualitative approaches (by constructing socio-spatial units) and a typology based on mostly overlooked socio-cultural characteristics (*habitus*, social milieu, ▷ *Lifestyles*) are required.

A descriptive analysis of the spatial disparities in Germany is provided by the online atlas on regional statistics created by the Federal Statistical Office (*Statistisches Bundesamt*) (Statistical offices of the federal government and the federal states [*Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder*] 2015). The current maps can be found here, including those for population development, education, gainful employment and unemployment, the environment, public budgets, earnings and income, gross domestic product and gross creation of value as well as sustainability and social indicators (disposable income, risk of poverty). Generally, the maps reveal three overlapping disparities: west-east, south-north, urban-rural areas; the same applies to Europe.

4 Approaches to explaining the emergence of spatial disparities

Theories and analyses of empirical regularities aim to describe, explain and potentially forecast the differences in regional growth (▷ *Regional economics*). While a balanced approach was originally assumed (cf. Hirschman 1958, 1967), the thesis that barely regulated competitive strategies actually intensified economic spatial inequality prevailed with Myrdal (1957) at the end of the 1950s. It was only later that mediating factors such as transaction costs, local political culture as well as management culture (of innovation), communication, technical and organisational conditions were included. Friedmann (1972) was the first to focus explicitly on attitudes towards economic and social change (▷ *Social change*) and the political and management styles derived from them, as well as the forms of organisation. This led to the demand to determine the endogenous potential of regions and to strengthen it in a variety of ways (cf. Friedman/Forest 1988).

The work of Roberto Camagni, Head of the GREMI Institute, had a major influence on regional structural policy (cf. Camagni 2002, 2008, 2009; Camagni/Capello 2013). Based on studies on regionally anchored ‘innovative milieus’, he assumes that the local/regional potential can only be exploited for the benefit of optimising economic competitiveness if traditional positions are overcome.

To this end, the comparisons and competition between public and private goods must be abolished in favour of owner networks (club goods) and the joint use of collective goods (cf. Table 1). This would have the advantage that the respective holders of ▷ *Social capital* (reputation and trust in and between the institutions, institutional goals) and human capital (entrepreneurial thinking, creativity, expertise and other soft skills) would interact, cooperate, act in concert and develop a collective competence from doing so i.e. acquire ‘relationship capital’. In addition, material and immaterial goods should enable agglomeration advantages through networks (▷ *Networks, social and organisational*; ▷ *Agglomeration, agglomeration area*). Research is of particular importance, as it not only has to put its results into practice, but should also enable start-ups.

Table 1: A theoretical taxonomy of the components of territorial capital

Rivalry/materiality	Tangible goods (hard)	Mixed goods (hard & soft)	Intangible goods (soft)
Private goods	Private fixed capital stock: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pecuniary externalities (hard) • Toll goods (excludab.) 	Relational private services operating on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External linkages for firms • Transfer of R&D results • University spin-offs 	Human capital: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurship • Creativity • Private know-how • Pecuniary externalities (soft)
Club goods 'Impure' public goods	Proprietary networks/collective goods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landscape • Cultural heritage (private 'ensembles') 	Co-operation networks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic alliances in R&D and knowledge • Public private partnerships in services and schemes • Governance on land and cultural resources 	Relational capital (associationism): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-operation capability • Collective action capability • Collective competencies • Interest group
Public goods	Resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural resources • Cultural (punctual) resources • Social overhead capital: Infrastructure 	Agencies for R&D transcoding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receptivity enhancing instruments • Connectivity • Agglomeration and district economies 	Social capital: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions • Behavioural patterns/values • Trust, reputation

Source: Camagni 2009: 123

At the centre of the 'innovative cross' (highlighted in grey in Table 1) are cooperative networks from strategic alliances of research and development, various forms of *Public-private partnership* and governance that uses the respective local/regional cultural resources.

5 (How) Can spatial disparities be reduced through spatial planning?

The infrastructure policy – that comprises ‘all efforts, actions and measures of political decision-makers that aim to organise, influence or directly provide the basic functions of economic activity in a region that are necessary for growth, integration, supply and disposal’ (Jochimsen 1994: 495) – is considered to be the central field for reducing existing spatial disparities.

A regional structural policy usually has three objectives: growth, stability and balance (cf. Eckey 1994: 816). While each region primarily pursues the first, or at least the second objective, it is predominantly the responsibility of the political-administrative system at the higher level to set the balancing objectives between the regions, to provide the corresponding instruments, to take measures via recommendations, information and via establishing the framework conditions through incentive systems, rules and prohibitions.

Whether, to what extent and with regard to which dimension spatial disparities are to be reduced or pro-actively prevented depends, in addition to their extent, on the existing strategies, instruments and measures and on the preferences of the respective political-administrative systems, which can be seen above all in the focus of specialist policies – and thus is ultimately a normative question. Two arguments are usually given for the need to reduce (excessively) large disparities. First, costs would arise in both the growth regions and the shrinking regions due to overburdened and under-utilised infrastructure. At the same time, prices (e.g. for building plots or housing) would rise unnecessarily in growth regions and decline in shrinking areas (cf. Dangschat 2009). Secondly, large disparities lead to social unrest, a loss of social cohesion and a loss of confidence in politics and (planning) administration, which not least of all has a negative effect on productivity.

The first argument ultimately also depends on the extent to which competing spaces are found in a shared, common-good oriented context – if this is not the case, the model of competition between the regions currently dominates. In Germany, the second argument is also of increasing importance as the regional disparities in Germany are widening and the feeling of being marginalised or overlooked, especially in the structurally weak regions, is growing and at the same time the identification with one’s home is being lost (cf. Barlösius 2009, Bernt/Liebmann 2013).

In order to ensure a sensible distribution of public infrastructure and services, a hierarchical system of the central places was introduced and settlements (\triangleright *Settlement/settlement structure*) were arranged according to the principle of decentralised concentration (cf. Domhardt/Benzel/Kiwitt et al. 2011: 206 et seq.), which was supplemented at the beginning of the 21st century by the principle of ‘inner development before outer development’. However, in the last 20 years, it has become clear that the centres have benefited considerably more from these principles than the surrounding areas.

Due to the concepts of the metropolitan region and of the functional/spatial division of labour, the principle of equivalent living conditions and balanced functional areas was abandoned in favour of the principle of equal opportunities. As a result of this shift, competition between the regions was further intensified on a higher scale, the settlement pressure on the attractive centres

increased and rural areas were further devalued. As the ESPON 1.1.1 study showed, increased polycentricity throughout Europe goes hand in hand with an increase in the gross creation of value, but also with an increase in social inequality and a greater burden on the environment (cf. Nordregio 2006: 80 et seq.). The ‘competition of ideas’ also increases the gaps between cities and regions because the small and structurally weak units lack the ‘critical mass’ and often the expertise to successfully participate in such programmes (cf. Kersten/Neu/Vogel 2015b).

For at least two decades, the policy of equalising spatial disparities has been characterised by the contradiction between the objectives set out in the preambles of European treaty texts (territorial cohesion) and the preferred and subsidised strategies (cf. Biehl/Ungar 1994: 188; Gatzweiler/Milbert 2006; Eltges 2014: 12 et seq.). The principle of ‘strengthening strengths’ mainly supports the centres and regions that already have a strong economic structure, while it weakens, at the least relatively speaking, the structurally weak ones. As a whole, this increases spatial economic inequalities, since the deprivation effects in the structurally weak regions are greater than the expansion effects, which tend to be hindered there (cf. Myrdal 1974). This means that the collective findings from theories of economic growth are approvingly, if not knowingly, applied in such a way that spatial disparities are (again) increasing at all levels within Europe (cf. Biehl/Ungar 1994: 188).

6 Equivalent living conditions in light of increasing disparities

The then Federal President Köhler initiated the shift in regional political strategy in Germany largely through neo-liberal positions when he said in a Focus interview that those who ‘want to level out the major differences in [regional] living conditions [...]’ would ‘cement’ the subsidy state (Krumrey/Markwort 2004: 22). There are plenty of arguments for turning away from the objective of equivalent living conditions: this has never existed historically, society is increasingly varied in terms of social situations and lifestyles and it is virtually impossible to measure this complex construct in a uniform way, especially since suitable indicators and the offsetting of values are often subjective and led by self-interest (cf. Mäding 2010: 197).

Nevertheless, the dilemma of a lack of information cannot lead to the abandonment of an obligation laid down in the Basic Law, but should instead be used as an opportunity to monitor ‘soft’ social aspects in a better way, especially since they are becoming increasingly important according to all location theories. Mäding (2010: 197 et seq.) also calls for the minimum standards introduced in the EU to be applied to the situation in Germany (cf. also ARL 2016).

Due to the discrepancy between aspiration and obligation on the one hand and driving economic, social and political forces on the other hand, a ‘new European Cohesion Policy’ was discussed and called for at the ARL’s 2014 annual conference (cf. Eltges 2014), upon which the ARL’s Position Paper was created (cf. ARL 2016).

7 Debates about the notion of space

When regional disparities are discussed, the respective notion of space is hardly ever questioned. Originating from the notion of corporate responsibility and on the basis of available statistics (at the level of the NUTS and LAU regions), descriptive analyses are presented and spatial disparities are described with the help of algorithmic systems. Referring to Albert Einstein, this approach is called container space. However, in contemporary geography as well as in urban and regional sociology, this view is rejected as inadequate. Instead, one should start from relational concepts of space, i.e. consider the flows and processes rather than the structures. This is especially true because 'strength' can only be a quality if there is also 'weakness'. Compared to each other, one can at best describe things, but not understand and explain them unless the interactions between the strengthening and weakening processes are made clear.

However, this controversial comparison is an oversimplified black-and-white approach to spatial planning, insofar as there are good reasons for the public administration to represent spatial processes as containers, since they can be harmonised with spatial responsibilities. However, the challenge is to include the 'other' notion of space to a greater extent by developing corresponding data with which the relationships between territories can be mapped.

This also takes into account the fact that the spatial planning field is no longer exclusively an engineering subject, but has been supplemented by social science elements due to the increasing importance of processes of negotiation and the balancing of interests. The increasing importance of 'self-willed' local/regional developments has also led to the fact that structures and processes have to be understood as site-specific and time-specific expressions of socio-spatial conditions, which means that the spatial- and time-independent understanding of engineering and natural sciences should be overcome.

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