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Social space – a perspective for social work research and practice

Sozialraum: eine Perspektive für Wissenschaft und Praxis Sozialer Arbeit

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ABSTRACT

Space, a socially-embedded dimension of human action, has long been insufficiently addressed. Over the last three decades, it has increasingly become the focus of scholarly debates, shaping various research fields (especially those related to education, care and health). This article aims to reconstruct these scholarly discussions concerning space. Against this background, the article proposes a concept of space that fundamentally understands space as ‘social space’, which comprises the constantly (re)produced fabric of social practices. Such a conceptualisation transcends concepts of social space that are absolute and reduced to physical-material dimensions, as well as those that ignore the material dimensions of space, allowing for a relational understanding of space that focuses on the interplay between physical (territorial/geographical) and societal dimensions of spatiality.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Raum - eine lange ungenügend thematisierte Dimension menschlichen Handelns – gerät seit über zwei Dekaden zunehmend in den Fokus sozial – und kulturwissenschaftlicher Auseinandersetzungen und prägt die Fachdiskussionen in unterschiedlichen Feldern, nicht zuletzt der Bildung, Erziehung und Gesundheit. Der vorliegende Beitrag macht sich auf Spurensuche, um die entsprechenden Fachdebatten genauer in den Blick zu nehmen. Vor diesem Hintergrund schlägt er einen Raumbegriff vor, der Raum grundlegend als „Sozialraum“ begreift und diesen als ständig (re)produziertes Gewebe sozialer Praktiken fasst. Ein solches Raumverständnis grenzt sich von absolut und auf physisch-materielle Dimensionierungen reduzierten Auffassungen von Sozialraum ebenso ab, wie von Raumbegriffen, die dessen materiale Dimension ignorieren. Vielmehr rückt ein relationales Raumverständnis in den Blick, dass das Doppelspiel von physischem (territorialem/geographischem) und sozialem Raum fokussiert.

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Introduction: space – influential, but not predetermined. A historical note

In everyday language, at first glance, what the term *space* denotes is clear: When we use the term, we are usually evoking a physical place: a square, a territory, or a specific area. We talk about ‘our living

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space', we generally mean the structural context of our homes or a specific room. If we want to define such a specific place, we measure and calculate its physical dimensions. To do this, we use physical and mathematical categories and instruments to measure spatial and hollow dimensions or count the units that the room encloses in order to be able to render it precisely. Such a physical space then appears to be clearly categorisable, i.e. objectifiable based on calculations of its length times its width times its height.

Nonetheless, researchers in the natural sciences have expressed doubts about such an objectifiable and, in this sense, *absolute* concept of space (see Günzel, 2019, p. 88f.). Fundamental to these systematic doubts are considerations such as Albert Einstein's theory of relativity at the beginning of the twentieth century, which undermined the physical and mathematical determinability of the idea of an 'absolute space' in which a spatial constellation precedes human action. Einstein's work describes 'relative space', which, just like time, cannot be determined as some fixed organisational structures but is only made visible by the respective observer (see also Elias, 1984).

Philosophically, however, the idea of absolute space had already lost favour long before Einstein. As early as the beginning of the modern era, philosophers criticised the previously dominant way of thinking that the cosmos represented a hierarchical spatial order from God's hand. The natural philosopher and theologian Nicolaus Cusanus (1401-64), for example, wrote that God is in both the smallest and the largest, questioning whether the idea of a single centre of order in a universal spatial order, i.e. the idea of an ordering God that until then had been almost omnipotent in the West, could be wrong. This decentring of the one dominant unit of spatial order was tantamount to a cultural revolution in the fifteenth century. Giordano Bruno, who drew on Cusanus' ideas, as well as his contemporary, Galileo Galilei, were made aware of this when the Church's Inquisition opened 'proceedings' against them. Bruno paid for his views with death.

These brief historical references make it clear how long *absolute concepts* of space have remained influential. Many remain in place today, as, for example, the nationalist politics of the twenty-first century show by linking origin to territory to construct the justification of a 'national community'. Just as this construction of a seemingly unambiguous connection between origin and (national) territory cannot be rationally justified, an absolute conception of space is just as unconvincing. Nevertheless, it has been able to withstand spatial theorists' objections up to today. Space – and, thus, inherently, its forms – was therefore often taken for granted and left out of influential academic debates as well as public discussion, or only spoken of in connection with other categories, such as the city, community or nation (Giddens, 1984; Werlen, 2004).

A conception of an 'absolute space' assumes that human action is embedded in specific spaces, such as a nation state, and anchored in specific places, e.g. a neighbourhood or a village (Adams et al., 2001). Although both the nation state and the municipality represent highly relevant spatial units, their concentration on the corresponding territorial context proves to be reductive: when human action is assumed to be embedded in space, it is only considered insofar as that human action is anchored in a specific place. If the nation-state or the village is only considered as a fixed framework for people's everyday lives, there is no need to deconstruct their specific influence on human action. Spatial dimensions, in this understanding, are 'territorialised' and 'containerised' (see Massey, 1993).

But space does not precede social practices as a a-historical and given entity. Despite its structural, design, and territorial influence, it is always constituted and reproduced in social contexts: 'Space has to be understood in the process of his production' (Lefèbvre, 1977/2002; own translation; see Lefèbvre, 2009; Schmid, 2022). Space is therefore an expression of and *also* determines social contexts. If so, the question arises as to how this characterisation of human action can be adequately described and recorded.

Cultural differences, e.g. in the form of language, may be spatially anchored along territorial borders. However, they are by no means only rooted in the spatial markings of the state border. Rather, they are primarily the result of a specific historical 'space-making process'. The state border is, thus, itself a spatial expression of cultural and political processes. 'It is not the land, not the properties, not the city district and the rural district that set one another's boundaries, but

the residents or owners performing a reciprocal action [...]', as Simmel (2009, p. 551) already stated in his own sociological considerations of space. However, if the spatial markings of cultural and political differentiations and demarcations are now traced back to space as a given and concrete place, i.e. a case study that is limited to that piece of earth that marks the national border between France and England, one produces – sociologically speaking – an *ecological fallacy* (see Bulmer, 1986). That national borders today also mark linguistic borders leads to the conclusion that the border itself is the reason for this difference. However, if we look at the historical development of the official languages of today's nation states, we soon realise how inadequate such an interpretation is: both (Middle) English and French were first established as administrative languages in England in the 13th and 14th centuries and in France in the sixteenth century. In England, the administrative area that uses English also included parts of present-day France. In later France, as in later Great Britain, Latin was the language of rule until then. However, the majority of the population spoke neither Latin nor Middle English or French, which had been subsequently installed as the administrative language. The linguistic differences that exist today between linguistic communities along the now valid state borders are therefore the result of political and military battles that took place before and after the state borders were established and are not the result of the state border itself.

Space and spatiality are influential; they determine our actions. However, spaces do not precede social and human practice in the sense that they exist as immutable units of action. The process of EU integration is a recent historical example of the fact that national borders and the associated differences between neighbouring states, which have long been considered valid, can not only be changed but are in fact constantly being changed. It is not that spatial borders are ineffective, but that their tangible influence must not tempt us to take them for granted. We feel their symbolic effect very clearly when we are unable to speak English but want to order something to eat and drink from an English-speaking restaurant employee in Dover. In an analogous situation, however, we can also experience that the process of increased international mobility is one of the reasons why we can use English as a foreign language to communicate with many more people from many more parts of the world than was possible for our ancestors in the nineteenth century.

After critically examining the 'absolute concept' of space, the following section focuses on a relational understanding of space as 'social space'. We will discuss how this can be understood as a constantly (re)produced fabric of social practices and what analytical significance it has. Finally, we analyse the order of social space in contemporary societies on the basis of concrete aspects such as *globalisation*, *spatial segregation* and *local community programmes* in order to highlight their influence on social practices and power relations in the context of social work.

Forgotten and (re)discovered? The so-called epoch of space

Over the past 20–25 years, various authors from different research fields and disciplines have pointed a gap in systematic spatial theoretical reflections and definitions outside the disciplines specialising in space. Such positions have criticised the 'spatial blindness' (Läpple, 1991, p. 16; own translation) of previous debates in social and cultural studies. The boom in spatial theory and spatial research, at least in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, can be understood as a reaction to this criticism, among other things. The social sciences and cultural studies have now embraced a broad research landscape on spatial issues. In this respect, we can now almost speak of an epoch of space (see already Foucault, 1967/2006), in a reversal of the attested situation throughout the majority of the twentieth century.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that early approaches to spatial theory beyond specialised disciplines, which certainly appeared alongside Simmel's work but often existed in a niche, or were not considered in relation to the spatial dimension, are now being rediscovered: In addition to Simmel's 'spatial sociology' (2009), Henri Lefebvre's reflections (1991/1974), in particular, his 'La Production de l'Espace', are undergoing a renaissance as are the urban sociologies of the so-called

'Chicago School' (Park, 1925). In particular the idea of a spatial triad, Lefebvre (1991/1974) recommended, became very influential. But also Foucault's early idea of a heterotopia (Foucault, 1986), as the institutionalised space, controlling the social order – such as the mental institute or the prison – has developed influence. Not least, de Certeaus' (1984) differentiation of place and space can clarify important spatial dimensions: the place as current constellation of fixed points as opposed to the moving spatial constellation, made out of different elements.

Despite this selective reception, an almost unmanageable number of theoretical–conceptual positions and empirical studies on new spatial research or new 'space studies' have emerged in recent years (e.g. Gilmartin et al., 2024; Valentine, 2001). Many of these works are united by an attempt to analyse and understand current social and societal conditions and the prevailing cultural and political practices from a spatial and spatiality perspective (see Massey, 2005). Thereby, a distinction has to be made between theoretical reflections on space and spatiality, and case studies, in which spatial modes for specific social contexts are analysed, e.g. modes in social work and social pedagogical practice. Against the background of the assumption that space and spatiality are subject to continuous transformation as part of political, cultural, and, in all cases, social conflicts. And, as historical conditions simultaneously characterise human thought and action, scholarly attention seems to be focused on the current order of the spatial (see e.g. Peck & Theodore, 2007): How do actors conceptualise spatial context (like social service agency in the community work?); How is space represented in current political programs, public debate or the scientific discourse (like community development programs for social work or health care?); How does space and spatial thinking materialise in everyday life (like everyday usage strategies of public spaces by clients)?

As the examples from the fields of social work and social politics can show, space cannot longer relegated only to traditional research fields like geography and urban planning (Pred, 1985; Thrift, 2006). Instead space and spatiality have become a field of inquiry in sociology, philosophy and cultural theory, educational science, gender studies, literary studies, and social work research, to name just a few examples (Arias, 2010; Bachmann-Medick, 2006; Withers, 2009). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, social and cultural sciences have even reached a level of 'spatialisation' (Gotthard, 2007, p. 19; own translation): there is too much, rather than too little talk about space and spatiality.

While the *spatialisation of society* might seem omnipresent in the academic debates, space has indeed become particularly prominent in the fields of education and care, as well as in healthcare sectors. This also transcends urban and spatial planning, urban development, and mere architecture: schools are to become part of a 'local educational landscape' (*Bildungslandschaften*) or be 'community schools' (Million et al., 2017); social and healthcare service providers should be 'community based' and neighbourhood oriented (Curtis, 2016; Lounsbury & Mitchell, 2009).

But space and spatiality actually play a different role in the everyday than they did a few decades ago: students today grow up in a globalised world as a matter of course, for example, in terms of their everyday communication and consumption practices (Castillo Ulloa et al., 2023). Young people experience diverse transnational origins in their own biography or in their wider social context (migration or binational marriages). Correspondingly, international schools are booming, largely at the behest of social elites (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). In the interplay between these different concepts and the transformative developments in different social fields, space and spatiality are now being taken into account in many different ways. At the same time, we have to understand that it is not spatial connections as such that have become more relevant, but rather that they are coming into focus in view of their change. On the one hand, assumed spatial contexts, such as the nation state, turn out to be politically negotiable. On the other hand, this brings the question of spatial alternatives, e.g. to political regulation, into focus. So it is not just that space has become a much more relevant category in politics as well as in the academic field, but that space has always been essential to historical developments and current constellations. Therefore, we do have to understand that concepts of an absolute space, just as concepts that relativize the relevance of spatiality, cannot be convincing.

However, if space is no longer assumed to be a territory, but rather understood as a ‘social space’ – a constellation that is anchored in societal practice and at the same time shapes it – ‘territorialised’ and ‘containerised’ concepts of space prove to be inadequate. Discussions of spatial theory in the last decades centre on this conviction (e.g. Kessl & Reutlinger, 2019; Löw, 2008, 2016; Schroer, 2019; Werlen, 1993). Accordingly, there has been a shift in spatial theory over the past 30 years, which presupposes that while space can indeed describe a specific territory (e.g. a nation state) or refer to a specific area (e.g. a canton), a specific area (neighbourhood) or a specific place (e.g. a municipality), territories also influence social contexts and human behaviour. This can be illustrated by taking a simple look at the closed or open borders between nation states. This is experienced both by migrating people on the move, as has become clear in Europe since 2015, and by transnational communities in times of closed borders, as was experienced during the months of lockdown in the face of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, reducing the understanding of space to these dimensions (like territoriality) is insufficient as it risks overlooking how spaces are themselves in social and societal contexts (Löw, 2008). As research has begun to explore the degree to which space frames action, the perspective has thus shifted away from the idea that a space only describes a territory to embrace the idea of social spaces.

A relational approach on space and spatiality

On that background we understand space as a social category that comprises territorial and social dimensions and the interplay between them. Analyses of space must consider respective historical discourses on space and the different historical spatial orders. This suggests speaking not only of space, but of *social space* (see Lipietz, 2003).

We understand ‘social space’ as a concept, which comprises the constantly (re)produced fabric of social practices (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022). Such a conceptualisation transcends concepts of space that are absolute and reduced to physical-material dimensions as well as those that ignore the material dimensions of space, allowing for a relational understanding of space that focuses on the interplay between physical (territorial/geographical) and societal dimensions of spatiality. We use the concept of ‘spatiality’ to highlight the processual nature of spatial (re)production processes. At the same time, we argue that the concept of ‘space’ should not be abandoned in spatial theory in order to avoid obscuring its physical-material dimension.

In line with the contributions to spatial theory (see Lefebvre, 1991/1974; Massey, 2005), which systematically incorporates aspects of structure *and* action theory, we understand space as a relation between physical *and* societal dimension of spatiality. In order to characterise this insight conceptually, we recommend – especially concerning the fields of research that focus on questions of everyday spatial reproduction (like social work and social pedagogy as well as public health or education) – to speak not only of ‘space’, but of ‘social space’. Even if this might seem redundant against the background of the spatial-theoretical considerations formulated above, we would like to make it explicit that space should always be viewed as ‘social space’, i.e. as a constellation, in which space is reproduced in everyday life in the interplay of its physical and societal dimensions.

Current perspectives on spatial theory, e.g. in urban sociology and human geography (Belina et al., 2021), therefore emphasise the importance of understanding the relational nature of space: Space and spatiality are always constituted and reproduced. In this sense, Martina Löw (2015, p. 353; own translation) underscores that materiality – like the territory – cannot exist beyond the social; as socialised beings, people ‘also perceive materiality through their own traditional system of meaning and imagery’. For Benno Werlen (2005, p. 29; own translation), space is based on ‘the experience of one’s own physicality, its relationship to the other extended circumstances (including the physicality of other subjects) and its significance for one’s own possibilities and impossibilities of action’. These insights are crucial for social space theory and research, because they indicate that space and spatiality are social categories and historical dimensions that are politically and culturally influenced and change over time.

Our reflections on (social) space are, thus, based on the assumption that although space and spatiality have long been discussed, they overlooked significant aspects of space as spatial conditions were understood as being specific and tendentially fixed constellations – e.g. as national space (nation state) or a municipal space (city) (Schroer, 2019). This, in turn, shaped the questions that were raised about space, with the focus lying on topics such as how the nation state affects its citizens or how a municipal cultural tradition impacts its residents. Thus, questions about the historical constellation or political decisions that constitute and reproduce a particular nation-state space or a particular municipality appear higher on the agenda (Elden, 2007).

Beside the level of political and social regulation the (re)production of space and spatiality in the everyday life of the people has to be focused. People try to (re)design the urban space to ensure that it is a place where they can live. But, of course, these attempts are always struggling with the economic, cultural and political conditions of spatiality. Thus, space, such as the urban space, can function as an area that supports specific practices, like industrial production or consumption (e.g. retail or malls). And so, how these designs are shaped points to political, cultural, and social conflicts. This is precisely why a spatial constellation, like a city, is not just an area or a territory that spatially defines the lives of city dwellers, but always also a community, i.e. the political community and a cultural context with its specific history (Berking et al., 2006). The same applies to the nation-state space, which not only encompasses a geographical area, but also a political, cultural, and social constellation (Sparke, 2005).

However, these references to cultural and political tradition and their influences, and the associated realisation that spaces are always social spaces, should not obscure the insight that the territorial structures of a city or nation state are also relevant. For example: how a city is (and whether it even was) built (e.g. its residential areas and transport routes) impacts on what people do. This is why we also speak of the simultaneousness of *sociality* and *materiality* or of the interplay of physical and societal dimensions of spatiality in everyday spatial constitutions and spatial (re)productions (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022). How structural or territorial aspects impact human behaviour points to the other side of sociality and social space, that is, to the materiality of space and thus its physical dimension.

Historically, it is particularly interesting that there has long been a struggle for an appropriate understanding of space and spatiality, not only academically but also in social practice, as in the fields of social work or education. The protagonists of educational reforms (*Reformpädagogik*) at the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, were already thinking about the structural design and organisation of school space (space as the ‘third educator’). Since then, the field of youth work has repeatedly debated how meeting places and recreational areas ought to be designed for children and young people: e.g. as a central youth centre, as a decentralised space for hanging out, or as a mobile facility. At the same time, professional educators have also realised that no matter how attractively a space is designed, young people will not accept it if it does not fit with their everyday lives or if they cannot or do not want to make it their own. Nevertheless, for a long time all of these disputes had no effect on the dominant thinking of space as a fixed condition – a container or a given territory.

Having that in mind, the question arises, what is the spatial order and the struggle for it in contemporary societies?

Ordering ‘the spatial’ in current societies. Critical reflexive advice for social work and social pedagogy

Contemporary societies are characterised by a fundamental struggle for spatial constellations. In education and care we can identify at least three main aspects, in which the interplay of social and material dimensions of space can be seen: *globalisation*, *spatial segregation* and *local community programs*. In the following, we will describe each of these aspects in more detail.

Being aware of these prevailing logics of spatial order is a prerequisite for a critical-reflexive practice in social work and social pedagogy. This assumption underlies our considerations with which we,

therefore, want to make a contribution to a critical-reflexive professionalism in the field of education and care in general, and social work and social pedagogy in specific. Such a practice always has to be related to concrete historical social relations, as single places. These relations have to be analysed and understood as the condition in which one's own actions must be anchored. At the same time this condition can be changed over a period, and is, in itself, an issue of political struggle. Therefore a critical-reflexive professionalism, as we recommend it, has not only to analyse and understand concrete spatial constellations, but also to come to a position that is committed to the options for action of users. Therefore, in our opinion, this kind of professionalism is translated in a twofold manner of contextualization and positioning: a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the respective socio-spatial context of provision and the positioning of how social contexts are to be regulated and shaped in the concrete context. The decisive factor here is that the coupling of contextualization and positioning should also ensure that the professionals and organisations involved become aware of their own entanglements in the prevailing spatial orders and, as far as possible, do not simply (re-)produce them.

Globalisation as an aspect of the (new) spatial order of the spatial

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the space of the nation state was readjusted as capital was increasingly internationalised and goods and lifestyles were increasingly homogenised across the globe. In April 2019, approximately 6.6 billion USD was traded daily on the global foreign exchange market, a more than tenfold increase over 30 years. A considerable proportion of these sums are made up of what is known as fictitious capital (Marx), as capital is multiplied by itself, i.e. it is not directly linked back to specific production or service processes. Accordingly, economic and financial spheres have become independent, as the so-called financial and economic crisis in the twenty-first century once again made clear and tangible. Additionally, the world of consumption is increasingly characterised by social forms that are comparatively free of content. The American sociologist George Ritzer refers to this homogenisation of goods and lifestyles as the globalisation of nothingness (Ritzer, 2004), which can be seen in the globalised production of clothing, furniture, and fast food, which are produced and consumed around the world relatively independent of the respective local, regional, or national culture. In the context of capitalist consumer structures, cultural sensitivity is mostly limited to a partial adaptation of global lifestyles and the range of goods on offer.

The technical possibilities and the expansion of worldwide transport and communication structures play a decisive role in such processes of internationalisation and globalisation. So-called new media make it possible to overcome large geographical distances with almost no loss of time. Improved social and spatial mobility and the option of maintaining human relationships virtually, even across large geographical distances, have significantly changed social structures (see Castells, 1996).

At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the long-discussed limits to this growth have become an everyday reality and are increasingly influencing social and political debates. International migration more than doubled between 2000-2019. The United Nations (UN) counted 281 million migrants worldwide for 2023. All serious scientific analyses also assume the imminent and worsening global climate crisis that will threaten the living conditions of humans across the globe. It has already become one of the key reasons for migration. Governments have responded to both the migration and the climate crises, albeit in markedly different directions. On a national level, spaces are being increasingly enclosed through tightened or border controls reintroduced, along with new 'walls' (Brown, 2010). Simultaneously, protectionist policies aimed at curbing international trade in favour of national markets are gaining traction. At the same time, international organisations remain committed to securing and further expanding global trade while also striving to address the challenges posed by migration and climate crises.

In both cases, civil society is playing an increasingly prominent role on both national and international levels. On one side, nationalist and authoritarian movements are advocating further

restrictions, exclusion, and explicit protectionist policies – examples include parties of the extreme right in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, like the AfD, FPÖ and SVP.

Conversely, international and socio-ecologically engaged movements, such as, Sea Rescue, Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion, are calling for fundamental economic and political changes transformations to address these pressing global challenges.

Social work is inevitably involved in these debates and struggles, and at the same time has a responsibility to contribute to an accessible and adequate social infrastructure for all people.

Spatial segregation as an aspect of the (new) spatial order

Secondly, the degree of vertical (in the sense of a social ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ based on status, income, power, and reputation) and horizontal (different life situations despite the same vertical position) social inequality has increased in the previous nation states, but also between the states (Hradil, 2001). This has exacerbated the social division which has become increasingly manifest and entrenched in spatial terms over the past three decades. Certain cities and regions as well as the spaces of individual neighbourhoods and districts have an above-average number of residents living in poverty, who experience unemployment or precarious employment compared to other neighbourhoods (spatial segregation). However, this does not mean that urban late 20th – and early twenty-first-century urban poverty is concentrated in certain social hotspots. Although segregation is a growing phenomenon, the majority of poor people still live outside social hotspots. Nevertheless, poverty manifests itself spatially: people are pushed out of certain neighbourhoods, particularly in large Central European cities, because they can no longer afford sometimes massive increases in rents. At the same time, higher-income households are moving to certain trendy neighbourhoods, thereby exacerbating the price spiral (gentrification). This development is an expression of both socio-structural closures and socio-cultural closures. It also reflects developing capitalist dynamics, as evidenced by booms in inner-city housing markets in metropolises. As international capital seeks out investment opportunities and drives up property prices, the distance between property owners and renters grows. This can be seen, for example, in the privatisation of former social housing in German cities. When international investment companies buy up blocks of flats, as was the case in cities in the Ruhr region or large cities in Saxony, tenants face the simple everyday problem of how to contact their ‘landlord’ when they need to make requests for repairs or renovations.

Spatial segregation can only be prevented by a adequate social and housing policy. But social work and social pedagogy can emphasise their necessity, support people in being politically heard and, within the scope of their possibilities, open access to housing and provide housing themselves.

Local community programmes as an aspect of the (new) spatial order

Third, with the transformation of the existing welfare state security system, people are seeking out alternatives to the previous spaces of nation state integration, increasingly turning to their local area as individual members of society who are encouraged to form local communities. Such new small-scale communities are to be created in the family, the neighbourhood, or the club and, thus, also become the point of reference for political and educational programmes. If the welfare state, which has always been a nation-state construct, can no longer realise sufficient state integration programmes and services for its citizens, other levels must act as the state previously did. Although the local level of governance has always been of crucial importance for social work, the twenty-first century has seen an overemphasis on the regional and local level and an associated growing stratification between regions and municipalities.

However, the political programmes or ‘civic engagement’ in the German context or of ‘big government’ in the UK face at least a twofold danger: on the one hand, they encourage an

instrumentalisation of voluntary work (van Dyk, 2018) and, on the other hand, they further manifest existing social inequalities. Instead of guaranteeing social security for potentially all members of society, volunteer care work is being used to address gaps (e.g. in the context of educational programmes where reading mentorships or cultural mediators or navigators take the place of the state apparatus). The socio-structural and socio-cultural conditions that are necessary for such voluntary work in civil society associations were largely ignored at the turn of the millennium and in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Finally, questions about the role of the state point to the inadequacy of welfare state security and care structures. Opportunities for civil society volunteer work, however, are dependent upon people's time and economic resources. In a time of precarious employment and increasing financial insecurity, there is often little time left for voluntary work. Accordingly, it is not surprising that most volunteers are middle-class citizens with a secure income. While people in poverty or precarious living conditions are indeed also found in civil society associations, they are often plight-focused. For example, an above-average number of unemployed people are involved in initiatives for the unemployed or volunteer at the local food bank or social enterprises, while members of the middle class join other cultural or political initiatives.

The three key aspects of spatial reordering – globalisation, spatial segregation and local community programmes – are not mutually exclusive. For example, the socio-structural and socio-cultural closures overlap with spatial segregation in small-scale milieus in which exclusive local community processes take effect, as the userbase of online-based neighbourhood platforms can show (e.g. www.nebenan.de). Alternatively, many people's needs are increasingly singularised societies (see Reckwitz, 2017), for a community foundation promotes the popularity of new means of belonging, such as nationalist and chauvinist movements, e.g. the AfD and SVP in Germany and Switzerland.

Conclusion: towards a systematisation of social space

This article has argued for a relational understanding of space and spatiality, moving beyond traditional absolute and territorialised conceptions. We have emphasised that space is not a pre-given, immutable container, but rather a dynamic 'social space' – constantly (re)produced through the inter-play of physical and societal dimensions. This perspective highlights the inherent political and cultural influences that shape space and spatiality economically, politically, and culturally.

Spatial orders are seen as predetermined structures that precede social relations and human behaviour, but express a ongoing process and struggle of decision-making, designing and regulating spatial relations and concepts. We have systematically explored three key aspects that characterise current spatial orders with regard to education and care: an increased globalisation, an ongoing spatial segregation and influential local community programmes. Each of these aspects demonstrates how space is actively shaped and contested in contemporary societies, influencing the actions of individuals, including professionals and organisations in education, social, and health sectors, as well as those with political responsibility.

Social spaces are part of current power and domination relations. However, this does not imply that people's actions are entirely predetermined by these factors. With globalisation, spatial segregation or the efforts to create local communities are not necessarily given facts that have to be accepted. Instead, they are results of political debates and decision-making and therefore can be re-structured in the future.

Our considerations aim at least immanently on a systematisation of the concept of social space. Understanding space as social space is of fundamental importance for education and care, because only then can it be understood that spatial conditions can be interpreted as such, and at the same time it could be realised that they are changeable. This realisation does not diminish the power of spatial orders – indeed, their influence on individual's lives, depending on their location, is undeniable. Rather, it underscores their malleability based on the desires and will of those involved.

Ultimately, talking about social space and the struggle for its reorganisation is inherently a (socio)-political debate. The question of (re)forming social contexts is always a question of who can shape or influence space and to what degree. When various professional fields, from regional planning to community psychology and municipal administrators, engage in discussions about spatial development and reorganisation, they are actively participating in the 'ordering of the spatial'. Therefore, it is the collective task of (socio)political, (socio)planning and (socio)educational actors to actively expand 'the space' for manoeuvring and contribute to a more equitable and just shaping of 'social space'.

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