This is an important and timely analysis. The recent Irish experience of economic boom and bust with its intensely neoliberal dynamic is most instructive. We can learn much from the anatomy of the crisis spelled out in good analytical depth here, as well as the worst social and spatial injustices. The book does a good job in exploring the core geographical concerns that are implicated in social justice questions, specifically questions about environment, place, and geographic differentiation. All of these need to be addressed in a thoroughgoing analysis of uneven development and the production of spatial inequality. As ever the core explanatory factor behind such unevenness is the logic of capitalism, so it demands hard analytical and political questions. This structural context is well attended to here, namely the production of unequal space as a consequence of capitalism, as well as its neoliberal restructuring in more recent years.

In her classic analysis of the regional debate, Doreen Massey (1979) asked a striking question: in what sense was this a problem of geography? Geographic analyses can tend to miss or obfuscate the real class or gender content. This study provides a good geographic analysis, but it also manages impressive analytical depth revealing most of the really key structural bases of the crises and the processes at work. Maintaining such an impressive analytical balance is perhaps its principal contribution.

The important constitutional context is rightly highlighted here in Gerry Kearns’ introductory overview. The Irish constitution can be criticised as bourgeois, with its enshrinement of private property rights. However, it also seeks to protect the concerns of social justice and the common good, and this is a more hopeful, potentially even radical, dimension, but one that is often missed.

The wasteful dynamics of a construction sector structured around new-house construction is central to the whole sorry mess. These dynamics are even more problematic in its neoliberal setting. National versions of neoliberalism matter, and the Irish version is particularly intense. It could therefore be a laboratory for how badly neoliberalism can play out when it infects cycles of housing production and renewal.
The Irish case, then, is perhaps particularly instructive as to what can happen when an intensely neoliberal project is set in train. The examples of housing reported on here are particularly cautionary, from the production of “ghost estates” to the failures of public-private partnership housing regeneration experiments. These variously disconnected need and production or involved the re-imagining of socio-cultural spaces, re-branding and re-commodifying neighbourhoods leading to displacement of historic communities. The concerns of place justice—or the right to the city—are central to much of what is analysed in this work. Much of what has unfolded has been inevitably exclusionary, leading to displacement not just of individuals and communities, but more profoundly of older values, identities, and attachments.

The book largely succeeds in revealing the geographical dynamics of the economic and social crises in Ireland. We are given a detailed map of to where and to whom costs and benefits are distributed. The analysis of the structures and processes at work draws together critical aspects about finance, planning, equality of opportunity, as well as more complex concerns about identity and attachment. Rory Hearne and his colleagues, for example, isolate the socio-spatial patterns that characterise the structures of crisis, austerity and neoliberalism as evidenced from housing experiences and patterns. These are most clear in the contradictory tensions across social housing (questions arise around access, failing regeneration initiatives, unfinished private estates, and mortgage arrears and negative equity). They do a good job in particular of highlighting the destructive or corrosive effects of neoliberalism as evident in the social housing sector.

Des McCafferty and Eileen Humphreys explore related issues looking at the Limerick case, the largest urban regeneration programme in the history of the state in a city afflicted by multiple complex crises. This raises important considerations on environmental injustice, particularly the negative impact on children, who are especially vulnerable to a hazardous environment. In a related vein, Anna Davies usefully reminds us of the connections between Ireland’s post-boom landscape and global environmental degradation.

David Meredith and Jon Paul Faulkner provide a helpful overview of uneven development from 1991 to 2011, highlighting the unevenness of capital flows into the country, an increasingly core question since the country’s policy embrace of foreign direct investment since the 1950s. They assess the spatial impacts of this integration of Ireland into global and EU flows of capital. This is
particularly important in the unfolding of the advanced manufacturing and financial services sectors.

Ronan Foley and Adrian Kavanagh provide a good interrogation of geography, ill-health and poverty, raising important spatial justice questions in relation to health. Mary Gilmartin offers an exploration of an increasingly vexed question in recent years regarding immigrants and spatial justice, the core questions being distributional and procedural justice. This analysis reveals how Irish immigration policy is spatially unjust, as reflected in where people live and what they do. Immigrants are less likely to have security of tenure and are more likely to be in precarious employment. What we must attend to is immigration policy that relies on and reinforces spatial injustice at multiple scales.

The conversation between John Morrissey and David Harvey on the continuing challenges of spatial justice at a time of crisis is powerful and spirited. It provides much to reflect on and indeed points to several avenues for future critical research. Importantly, it provides some reflections on why social justice and injustice are also immediately spatial concerns, requiring a thoroughgoing critical geographic analysis. The point of the exercise is to achieve an emanciptatory knowledge and this book achieves this, not least by providing insight to the limits and destructiveness of highly neoliberalised policy regimes.

Reference


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