Discontent at the Dutch fringes: Uneven regional development in the Netherlands*

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Abstract
In the last decades a new geography of uneven development and discontent emerged. With the rise of populism, new regional divides in territorial inequality are signaled as prominent sources discontent in rural and old-industrial communities. This study considers long-term regional development from a perspective of spatial justice, specifically distributive injustice, in relation to regional discontent. A spatial reinterpretation of social justice theory provides two key concepts that enable us to measure regional development: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. The former consists of economic indicators such as productivity, income, wealth, and jobs. The latter revolves around shrinkage issues such as depopulation, accessibility of public services, and digital connectivity of areas. Based on quantitative analyses of longitudinal data on NUTS-3 level regions in the Netherlands, this study first reports a classification of regional development: very low, low, medium-high, very high developed. Second, we examine to what extent long-term economic marginalisation and civic deprivation provoke regional discontent. Findings show that relatively less developed regions in the Netherlands are mostly rural areas, and that their inhabitants show higher levels of perceived insufficiency in redistributive support and are less likely to trust government institutions. Yet less developed regions are more likely to appreciate their living environment than more developed regions. The findings of this study contribute to the fields of economic geography and rural sociology, by providing new insights in the injustices coming from long-term uneven development in the Netherlands.

Keywords:
Spatial justice, social justice, relative deprivation, regional inequality, uneven development

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Introduction

In the last decades a new geography of uneven development emerged. From the 1990s onward, a new phase of industrial transformation, state restructuring, and shifting policy preferences rearranged the economic landscapes of subnational regions in the global North (Horner et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2018). Several regions bloom in prosperity while other parts of the same country dwindle in the economic competition of globalisation, the latter are marked as ‘left-behind regions’ (McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018) or ‘inner peripheries’ (Raugze & van Herwijnen, 2018).

Only since the rise of populism, new regional divides in territorial inequality are signalled as prominent sources of resentment towards an urban establishment, who are being accused of ignoring the interests of rural and old-industrial communities (Cramer, 2016; Gordon, 2018; Hochschild, 2017; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Scoones et al., 2018; Wuthnow, 2018). Despite an extensive number of excellent studies pinpointing the role of socio-economic decline or stagnation in the rise of a geography of discontent (e.g. Dijkstra et al., 2019; Guilluy, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), there is little research that critically contemplates the uneven distribution of economic resources and public services over regions as a matter of social or spatial justice. First, discontent may not always express in a populist vote, which therefore might overlook resentment in certain regions. Second, discontent is not rooted in one issue and can have several causes. Therefore this paper takes a step further by unpacking distributive injustices to all the inhabitants of left-behind regions, regardless of their voting behavior.

This paper examines regional development in the Netherlands from a viewpoint of socio-spatial justice. The motivation for investigating this particular case comes from the fact that the Netherlands is a least-likely case, being a traditional consensus democracy (Van der Meer et al., 2019), and one of the smallest and most densely populated countries in Europe. Yet similar to other EU member-states stark economic disparities can be seen between in the economic development of regions (Iammarino et al., 2018), as well as a divergence of cosmopolitan-nationalist attitudes along the urban and rural continuum (Huijsmans et al., 2021), and more support for rightwing populism in the periphery (Hartevelt et al., 2019). Based on a spatial reinterpretation of Nancy Fraser’s philosophy of social justice (Fraser, 2005; Van Vulpen & Bock, 2020), this study critically engages in two types of distributive injustice: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. The former grasps the unequal
distribution of economic resources, traditionally put forward in the field of economic geography (Blažek et al., 2019; Butkus et al., 2018; Iammarino et al., 2018; Moretti, 2012; Odendahl et al., 2019). The latter captures uneven access to public services and depopulation, such issues regarding quality of living that are typically addressed in peripheralisation literature (e.g., Bock, 2016; Dax & Fischer, 2018; Humer, 2018; Lang, 2015; Raugze & van Herwijnen, 2018). Both types of injustice revolve around a question of relative material deprivation: who gets what (not)? This study endeavors to provide a detailed description of a multifaceted geography of long-term regional development in the Netherlands, based on longitudinal data on NUTS-3 level regions. Subsequently we measure to what extent relative economic marginalisation and civic deprivation fuel regional discontent. With that, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1) Which regions in the Netherlands have developed relatively less over the long term according to the principles of economic marginalisation and civic deprivation?
2) To what extent do relative economic marginalisation and civic deprivation provoke regional discontent in the Netherlands?

In contrast to the image of the Netherlands as an egalitarian country, this paper argues that the socio-economic distribution is actually geographically unbalanced. First, we will ground our theoretical understanding of distributive injustice in relation to uneven regional development, defining two types of injustice: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. Second, we will specify our chosen methods and selected statistical data used for analysis. Third, we will present the results of our descriptive analysis of long-term regional development and our multiple regression analysis of the effects on regional discontent. Finally we will conclude with a discussion and conclusion.

Theory

Understanding distributive injustice in regional development

The discontent in rural and old-industrial areas that expressed in a populist backlash came as a surprise to many economic geographers. Recent political shocks coming from peripheral regions has shaken up the Schumpeterian tradition in economic geography, triggering many social scientists to (re)examine a persistent unbalanced economic geography in relation to the rise of populism (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Gordon, 2018; Guilluy, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018). The rise of city-regions as engines of the global economy was, and to certain extend still is, hailed as ‘the triumph of the city’ due to their innovative and
transformative power (Florida, 1996, 2004; Glaeser, 2011). In many European countries this led to a small number of highly favoured city-regions called the ‘national champions’ (Crouch & Le Galès, 2012), with the prognosis of a trickledown effect or a spillover to regions with low economic performance. In contrast to Schumpeterian liberalism highlighting the transformative innovation and drivers of progress in globalisation (Elliott, 1980; Schumpeter, 1942), an egalitarian interpretation of the ‘creative destruction’ is emphasizing the geographically grounded processes in the destruction of communities and their ways of life. Long-term economic decline or stagnation of a region is now highlighted as an important source for resentment, as shown by Rodríguez-Pose (2018, 2020) and Guilluy (2019). Uneven patterns of regional development are pressuring the social solidarity and political stability within countries.

The influential Schumpeterian school of thought rests upon John Rawls’ ‘difference principle’ (2009), which claims that an unequal distribution of economic resources is just if it is to everyone’s advantage, more specifically if it benefits the least well-off. This principle goes beyond the liberals who adhere strongly to distribution by the market. However, Rawl’s principle tends to overlook the tensions that sprout from relative deprivation, a state of observable disadvantage ‘relative to the local community or the wider society or nation’ to which someone belongs to (Townsend, 1987: 125). Through the lens of relative material deprivation, uneven distribution can be considered as unjust. More specifically uneven distribution can be felt as unjust within the perceived primary boundaries of social solidarity, the nation-state. Studies of Cramer (2016), Wuthnow (2018), and Rodríguez-Pose (2018) show that place-bound resentment comes from perceptions of unfair redistribution, anti-government attitudes, and decline of liveability in their local community.

This study focuses specifically on the unequal distribution of economic resources and access to public services. In simpler words, who gets what (not)? To measure uneven regional development, we turn to criteria of social justice from a spatial point of view. In the late twentieth century as a critique, or rather an addition, to social justice scholarship, the concept of spatial justice was introduced, arguing that the bounds of injustices are not only fundamentally interpersonal, such as race, sexuality, and gender, but place also matters in the production of injustices (Harvey, 2009; Lefebvre, 1996; Pirie, 1983). Social justices can differ spatially and spaces can produce social injustice (Marcuse, 2009; Soja, 2010; Fainstein, 2015; Carolan, 2019). Studies of spatial justice are mostly engaged in urban areas (Fainstein, 2015; Harvey, 2009; Lefebvre, 1996; Soja, 2010), and only recent included the countryside (Carolan, 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Shucksmith et al., 2021; Woods, 2019).
Here, we turn to the egalitarian philosophy of Nancy Fraser (2005), which is grounded in the principle of participatory parity: institutional arrangements should make sure that everyone should be able to participate in social life as peers. Two types of distributive injustice are central to this paper: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. The former captures being confined to poorly paid work or being denied access to labour, the latter referring to inadequate material standard of living (Fraser, 2005). From a spatial reinterpretation both concepts can be tied to two bodies of literature in geography: uneven regional development and peripheralisation (Van Vulpen & Bock, 2020).

Evidence in the literature of regional development, shows clear patterns of long-term economic divergence between regions within EU member-states since the mid-90s and early-2000s (Blázek et al., 2019; Butkus et al., 2018; Iammarino et al., 2018; Moretti, 2012; Odendahl et al., 2019; Raugze & van Herwijnen, 2018). Regional development is measured by well-established, traditional socio-economic indicators such as GDP per capita, (un)employment rates, and income inequality, and in a few cases population growth. The reconstitution of subnational regions pulled capital and resources towards a few buzzing poles, and away from spaces with lesser performing economies. While economic inequality between EU member states decreased, economic divergence between regions within countries increased (Butkus et al., 2018; Iammarino et al., 2018). Metropolitans and city-regions in Europe with profuse ties and government support prospered, outgrowing other regions in the same country (Odendahl et al., 2019). With that, globalisation has reached a critical conjuncture of increasing uneven regional development (Horner et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2018). Therefore, we argue, it is necessary to map economic marginalisation on a regional scale, through a critical assessment of disadvantages in economic/material wellbeing and poor access to labour market opportunities.

In peripheralisation literature the development of peripheries is viewed beyond economic growth, including several civic aspects to regional development (Kühn, 2015). Scholars expose an uneven distribution of essential public services among regions, in which rural and old-industrial areas suffer the burden (Bock, 2016; Dax & Fischer, 2018; Humer, 2018; Lang, 2015). Many peripheral regions are afflicted by population decline, and the resulting retraction of available public transport, health facilities and educational services (Gieling et al., 2019; Kühn et al., 2017; Pociūtė-Sereikienė, 2019; Ubels et al., 2019b; Wirth et al., 2016). With the out-migration in rural areas there is population growth in urban areas. In addition, literature on digital connectivity exposes a broadband divide between rural and urban areas (Philip et al., 2017; Salemink et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2017). Digital
connectivity is seen as a key enabler of business innovation, such as automatic milking robots, remote patient monitoring in health care, and working/studying from home. A lack of return on investment for commercial internet providers in sparsely populated areas, leads to a ‘rural penalty’ (Malecki, 2003), and appeals community resilience in order to unroll fast broadband (Ashmore et al., 2017; Philip et al., 2017; Salemink, 2016). Moreover, marginalised rural areas are challenged to shake off the negative representations of themselves by outsiders, and change the downward-spiral effect and attract potential inhabitants, companies, and government investments (Dymitrow, 2017; Gkartzios & Scott, 2015; Meij et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2016; Willett, 2019). Territorial stigmatisation of places being ‘backwards’, ‘wasteland’, or ‘left behind’ has a reinforcing effect (Willett & Lang, 2018). Building upon these findings, this paper’s spatial interpretation of civic deprivation refers to regions that cope with lower material standards of living due to population decline and inaccessibility of public services.

Method

Measuring long-term regional development

In line with the conceptualisation discussed in the theory section, we use two concepts that correspond with two different forms of distributive injustices: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. To examine economic marginalisation we composed the following indicators: productivity, income, wealth, and jobs. These give an indication of the disadvantages in economic/material wellbeing and poor access to labour market opportunities. Second, civic deprivation consists of the indicators population change, access to public services, and access to fast broadband internet, which give an impression of material wellbeing. Table 1 provides an overview with the details of all the indicators used in the analysis of long-term regional development, including the units of measurement, the exact periods, and the data sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Long-term regional development</th>
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<tr>
<td>indicators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic marginalisation</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Civic deprivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
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In order to make the indicators compatible, the outcomes have been normalised to scores between -1 and 1. We chose not to use z-scores here, because indicators then would have different ranges making them incompatible. The normalised outcomes have been corrected so that negative numbers represent a negative regional development, and *vice versa* positive numbers reflect positive regional developments. For instance, if a region had an increase in the distance to public services and a decrease of wealth, both corrected outcomes show a negative number.

**Examining regional discontent**

In addition, we conduct a multiple regression analysis to see how uneven regional development affects feelings of regional discontent. To capture regional discontent we
selected three indicators on NUTS-level 3 that go beyond the correlation between place and votes: perception of unfair redistribution, appreciation of living environment, and institutional trust. We checked the robustness of the results by looking at inversed correlation between the independent variables, also known as multicollinearity. In order to lower the VIF-values to < 2.5, we dropped the Employment variable in the multiple linear regression analysis.

Table 2: Regional discontent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Unit of measurement</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Source</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of unfair redistribution</td>
<td>Likert scale ranging from 0 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree): “The government has done too little to improve the economic situation in my region”</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>SCoRE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of living environment</td>
<td>The percentage of households that are very satisfied or satisfied with the current living environment.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>CBS Statline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional trust</td>
<td>The percentage of households that trust the House of Representatives, the police, and judges</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>CBS Statline</td>
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</table>

Data

The data used in this study consists mainly of CBS Statline, a large dataset of Statistics Netherlands, which is a Dutch governmental institution that gathers statistical information about the Netherlands. In addition, we have obtained data regarding the geography of fast broadband internet in the Netherlands provided by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate, and survey data about perceptions of unfair redistribution from the SCoRE project, an international collaboration of universities that studies sub-national context and radical right support in Western Europe. All data has been either obtained at or adjusted to NUTS 3 regions, a classification made in the early 70s that divides the Netherlands into 40 small economic territories with each their own (city-)core. Whenever possible, the data measures the regional development from 1995 till 2019. Yet, much of the desired data was not available over the full period, therefore we took the longest period possible within that timeframe.
Findings

Uneven regional development in the Netherlands

In the first part of our findings we lay out the long-term regional development in the Netherlands, based on the two indicators of distributive injustices: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. We have taken the average of the normalised scores per indicator and plotted them for all the 40 NUTS-level 3 regions into a radar chart, see figure 1. A low score stands for a lower development, a high score for a higher development. On basis of the total average of both indicators, the radar chart shows a clockwise ranking of all regions, from very low developed to very high developed. The gridlines led us to identify four distinguished groups, or regional categories, clustered together: very low developed [-0.10; 0.10], low developed [0.10; 0.20], medium-high developed [0.20; 0.40], and very high developed regions [0.40; 0.60].

Figure 1

Radar chart of longterm regional development in NL
Total average of normalised scores per region
Subsequently, we plotted the same normalised scores into a scatterplot, see figure 2. The y-axes shows the regional scores on economic marginalisation, and the x-axes represents the regional scores on civic deprivation. Considering the ranking of regions, portrayed clockwise in figure 1, visualising the results in a scatterplot demonstrates the range between the average scores of economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. We encircled the four distinguished groups of regions in the scatterplot.

**Figure 2**

![Scatterplot of longterm regional development in NL](scatterplot.png)

**Very low developed**

The very low developed regions signify socio-economic sidelined regions. As displayed in figure 3, these regions are characterised by a large decline in access to public services, decline in wealth (with the exception of Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen), stagnation of employment and population, high unemployment rates, small growth of income, small growth of already small proportion of productivity. The very low developed consist of five old-industrial and rural regions: Delfzijl en omgeving, Oost-Groningen, Zuidoost-Drenthe, Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen, and Noord Friesland. These areas have a low population density, and are located in the geographical periphery of the Netherlands. The outlier within the very low developed regions in the scatterplot is Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen, which can be explained by the region’s increase in wealth.
**Low developed**

The group of low developed regions score a little higher than the underdeveloped region. These areas also show a decline in access to public services, decline in wealth, small increase in population size, stagnation in employment, low degree of internet coverage, and a small growth of a small share of the country’s economic productivity. Five regions are flagged as low developed: Overig Groningen, Achterhoek, Zuidwest-Drenthe, Zuidoost-Friesland, and Zuidwest-Gelderland. The latter three are rural areas, while in the city-region of Overig Groningen the university city of Groningen is settled. The low developed regions are located in the periphery of the Netherlands.

**Medium-high developed**

A substantial part of the Dutch regions show a stable, medium-high long-term increase in terms of economic and civic development. In 26 regions we observe an overall steady growth in productivity, income, employment, population change, and internet coverage. Overall the distance to public services, as well as the wealth, show a very small increase in the moderate developed regions.

**Very high developed**

The very high developed regions in the Netherlands consist of four rapid growing regions: Groot-Amsterdam, Utrecht, Agglomeratie Haarlem, and Flevoland. Their position at the top of the ranking is due to a large increase in wealth, population and employment, in comparison to other parts of the country. In the very high developed areas we also see the highest internet coverage rate, and in contrast to the other regional categories see an improvement in the accessibility to public services. In addition, the very high developed regions have the highest scores in productivity and income growth. The very high developed exist for a large share of urban and suburban areas, with a high population density. Regions are located in the geographical west and centre of the Netherlands, which for most part consists of the urban conurbation Randstad.
Figure 3

Stacked bar chart of longterm regional development in NL
Average normalised scores per regional development category

-4,00 -3,00 -2,00 -1,00 0,00 1,00 2,00 3,00 4,00

Productivity
Income
Wealth
Employment
Unemployment
Population
Public services
Digital connectivity

Very low developed
Low developed
Medium-high developed
Very high developed

Figure 4

Percentage of urban areas within region
Share of private households in urban areas in 2020 per regional development category

Very high developed
Medium-high developed
Low developed
Very low developed

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

33%
22%
11%
5%
A geography of Dutch discontent

Perceptions of unfair redistribution

Our findings on the perceptions of unfair regional redistribution show that people living in relatively low developed regions feel more dissatisfied with the central government’s investments in their region than those in higher developed areas, see figure 5. Yet the variance between the regional categories is not very large with averages between 5,1 and 5,9 on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). So even inhabitants of very high developed regions on average agree, albeit to a lesser extent, that the government did too little to improve the economic situation in their region.

A first observation of the multiple regression analysis of all 40 regions, in Table 1, is that the indicators wealth and population change show a significant correlation with the perception of unfair redistribution (p<0,05). This means that, in terms of prediction, the wealth and population change give an indication to what extent inhabitants feel that the government did not invest enough in their regional economy. Especially population change, which has a higher significance as well as a larger coefficient. These results reveal that in regions with a decrease in median wealth and population change people are more likely to be dissatisfied with regional redistribution by the government, and hence more likely to feel that they deserve more in terms of investments in their regional economy.

Appreciation of living environment

Compared to other regions, inhabitants of very high developed regions are less satisfied with their living environment, see figure 6. Even though the differences between the four regional categories are small, the average scores are between 83,9 and 86,2 on a scale that ranges from 0 to 100, it is an interesting result. The fact that people in low developed regions are more likely to be appreciative of their living environment could be explained by a broader definition of wellbeing that examines...
regional performance by including different themes ranging from subjective wellbeing to environmental issues, see for instance the Regional Monitor for Broad Wellbeing in the Netherlands (Horlings & Smits, 2019), or the Social Progress Index of the EU (Annoni & Bolsi, 2020). The fact that some relatively low developed regions are less likely to be satisfied with their living environment compared to very high developed regions could come from the disadvantages of urban overdevelopment, such as a lack of affordable housing, higher levels of criminal offenses, higher levels of feeling unsafe, less green spaces, and higher levels of air pollution (CBS, 2020). This resonates with many other EU member states in which the subjective wellbeing is relatively higher in rural areas than it is in urban areas (de Dominicis et al., 2020).

The results in Table 1 demonstrate that two indicators of economic marginalisation are significant in relation to the appreciation of living environment. These are income and wealth. Income then has a positive coefficient estimate, while the wealth has a small negative coefficient estimate, which tells us that the effect of income is larger than wealth. Regions with a long-term growth in the average disposable income of private households, are likely to have a larger share of inhabitants that is appreciative of their living environment. In contrast, people living in a region where wealth increased are less likely to appreciate their living environment, yet the coefficient here is rather small.

**Institutional trust**

Looking at institutional trust, the findings in figure 7 present that people living in very low developed regions have less institutional trust than in other regions. The multiple regression analysis, in Table 1, shows there is a significance with the growth in income per region. Regions with a long-term growth in the average disposable income of private households, are likely to have a larger share of the inhabitants that trust government institutions.
Table 1: multiple linear regression analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Perceptions of unfair redistribution</th>
<th>Appreciation of living environment</th>
<th>Institutional trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Productivity</strong> (GDP per capita × € 1000,-)</td>
<td>-0,005 (-0,820)</td>
<td>-0,085 (-1,190)</td>
<td>0,043 (0,530)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income</strong> (average disposable income private households excl. students × € 1000,-)</td>
<td>-0,0361 (-0,517)</td>
<td>1,789* (2,343)</td>
<td>1,743* (2,037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wealth</strong> (median wealth private households excl. students × € 1000,-)</td>
<td>-0,010* (-2,122)</td>
<td>-0,151** (-2,800)</td>
<td>0,048 (0,435)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unemployment</strong> (average yearly unemployment rate ÷ 100)</td>
<td>0,065 (1,468)</td>
<td>-0,405 (-0,840)</td>
<td>-0,893 (-1,653)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population change</strong> (the sum of population change × 10 000)</td>
<td>-0,020** (-2,774)</td>
<td>-0,008 (-0,986)</td>
<td>-0,009 (-0,104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessibility public services</strong> (distance to facilities in km)</td>
<td>-0,010 (-0,319)</td>
<td>-0,062 (-0,187)</td>
<td>-0,140 (-0,378)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Digital connectivity</strong> (coverage rate of 12.5+ mbps broadband internet ÷ 100)</td>
<td>0,009 (0,700)</td>
<td>-0,093 (-0,700)</td>
<td>-0,220 (-1,469)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0,481</td>
<td>0,216</td>
<td>0,340</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: N=40 regions. The t-values are reported in parentheses (based on robust standard errors). ***p <0.001; **p <0.01; *p <0.05. By reason of multicollinearity we left out Employment in the analysis.*

Discussion and conclusion

Central to this paper are two forms of distributive injustice we reinterpreted from a spatial point of view: economic marginalisation and civic deprivation. The former capturing traditional economic decline, which ties to academic debates on uneven regional development geography (Blažek et al., 2019; Butkus et al., 2018; Iammarino et al., 2018; Moretti, 2012; Odendahl et al., 2019). The latter grasping issues of shrinkage in regions, which engages with peripheralisation literature (e.g., Bock, 2016; Dax & Fischer, 2018; Humer, 2018; Lang, 2015; Raugze & van Herwijnen, 2018). This study shows that about one fourth of the regions in the Netherlands have developed relatively less over the long term according to the principles of
economic marginalisation and civic deprivation, and to a small extent it is likely provoke regional discontent. Our statistical analysis of uneven regional distribution in the Netherlands, enabled us to distinguish four types of regions: very low developed, low developed, medium-high developed, and very high developed. In light of relative material deprivation within the national context, 10 out of 40 regions are less developed, or ‘left behind’ (cf. Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018; McCann, 2020), of which 5 are dwindling at the Dutch fringes.

Considering the geography of discontent, our multiple regression analysis reveals that the divides in uneven regional development can give an indication of levels of regional discontent in the Netherlands. Our findings support existing electoral evidence showing the international rise of the geography of discontent is prompted by long-term economic decline, as presented by Rodríguez-Pose (2020) for instance. Inhabitants of regions that have seen a decrease in median wealth and population change are more likely to be dissatisfied with regional redistribution by the government, and hence are more likely to feel that they deserve more in terms of investments in their regional economy. Also, regions with a smaller growth in disposable income than others, are likely to have a larger share of the inhabitants that lack trust in government institutions. In contrast to several electoral studies of discontent and regional development (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Gordon, 2018), our findings present no significant correlation with GDP.

Moreover, very low and low developed regions show higher levels of appreciation of their living environment, which corresponds to patterns of subjective wellbeing between rural and urban areas in EU member states in Western Europe (de Dominicis et al., 2020). It adds to the list of reasons for rural stayers (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018), which at the same time could provoke hostility towards ‘outsiders’ who allegedly threaten their community such as refugees (Huijsmans et al., 2021), or urban dwellers. The difference in appreciation might come from the disadvantages of urban overdevelopment to the quality of life (CBS, 2020), which in a way is balancing regional discontent between rural and urban areas. Our analysis shows that civic deprivation, as flagged in peripheralisation literature (Dax & Fischer, 2018; Humer, 2018; Kühn, 2015; Lang, 2015), is likely to bolster inhabitants’ perception that their region receives insufficient support in the redistribution of government investments. Many rural areas are pressured into social innovation in order to maintain public services or ways of living (e.g. Bock, 2016; Ubels et al., 2019), for instance through initiating a cooperative that gives the local supermarket a new lease life or to settle fast broadband internet (Salemink, 2016). As a result of such local resilience the regional disparities of civic deprivation might be reduced, yet at the same time such a ‘rural penalty’ might provoke feelings of being ignored
by decision makers that fail to give communities their fair share (Malecki, 2003), which is important part of a ‘rural consciousness’ (Cramer, 2016). Community resilience makes it possible that our indicators such as accessibility to public services and digital connectivity are perhaps less valid. Therefore, we argue that population change serves as a rigorous indicator for regional discontent in the Netherlands, which opposes the findings on discontent of Van Leeuwen & Vega (2020), who demonstrate that ‘the populist voting mark-up’ cannot be explained by prognoses of population decline.

The findings in this study demonstrate that relative material deprivation within a national context can indeed provoke feelings of distributive injustice along regional lines. Yet, considering the regional patterns in longterm development in the Netherlands, can we speak of unjust distribution? We can only touch upon this political-philosophical discussion of spatial justice briefly here. In doing so, we highlight both a liberal and an egalitarian take on spatial justice as introduced in the theory section. According to Rawls’ difference principle (2009) that is grounded in liberalism, an unequal distribution of economic resources is only permitted if it is also to the advantage of the least well-off. One can argue over whether the inhabitants of relatively less developed regions in the Netherlands are benefitting from the transformative innovation and drivers of progress of new regionalism. In an absolute sense, their productivity, income, digital connectivity increased, yet wealth and accessibility to public services decreased. Thus, with a spatial reinterpretation of Rawls, the banishing of the least well-off from economic city-cores (Guilluy, 2019), and issues of shrinkage in the periphery here (Wirth et al., 2016), could urge for more just redistributive policies on these matters.

In comparison, egalitarianism has a more strict view on equal distribution. Nancy Fraser’s egalitarian philosophy is grounded on the principle of participatory parity, which argues that arrangements and institutions should be designed so that people can participate on a par with others in social life. With that, a structural lack of job opportunities, a deficit of digital connectivity, and decrease in access to public services in someone’s living environment could be viewed as unjust. Particularly, given the aforementioned rural penalty that makes it challenging for these areas to settle new services for innovation and maintain basic services, and hence attract companies and residents. If interpreting participatory parity from a spatial viewpoint, redistribution should be safeguarding minimum living standards and economic resources in less developed regions, rebalancing regional development rather than (re)investing in the national champions (Crouch & Le Galès, 2012).
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