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# Building back better in urban contexts through a dual ethics of justice and care

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has had sharp effects in urban settings, both in terms of exposing existing inequalities but also in presenting possibilities for reconfiguring the social and spatial organisation of urban life around new ethical foundations. This has led to political exhortations to ‘Build Back Better’ (BBB) as a way of avoiding a return to the old ‘normal’ of deep and enduring structural inequalities. However, scepticism remains about the transformational potential of existing visions of BBB as an urban policy response (Rickett, 2020). It is a notion often riddled with ambiguity that has led to partial, ameliorative responses inadequate to the scale and nature of a pandemic best understood as a totalising crisis that has affected work, family life, production and reproduction (Tooze, 2021). Our provocation is to contend that combining the ethics of justice and care could provide a potentially powerful and far-reaching framework to address the weaknesses of BBB strategies to date.

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has had sharp effects in urban settings, both in terms of exposing existing inequalities but also in presenting possibilities for reconfiguring the social and spatial organization of urban life around new ethical foundations. This has led to political exhortations to “Build Back Better” (BBB) as a way of avoiding a return to the old “normal” of deep and enduring structural inequalities. However, scepticism remains about the transformational potential of existing visions of BBB as an urban policy response (Rickett, 2020), not least in the wake of the stalled Build Back Better Act in the United States (Shephard, 2022). It is a notion often riddled with ambiguity that has led to partial, ameliorative responses inadequate to the scale and nature of a pandemic best understood as a totalizing crisis that “*through our bodies ... affected us comprehensively, entangling the worlds of work and family life, production and reproduction*” (Tooze, 2021, p. 98). Our provocation is to contend that combining the ethics of justice and care could provide a potentially powerful and far-reaching approach to address the weaknesses of BBB strategies to date.

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The central contribution of this paper, therefore, is to propose a novel conceptual dialogue between notions of (in)justice and care to develop new forms of BBB that are realizable as radical, democratic and pluralistic responses to the crisis and its aftermath at the urban scale. We advocate that a more enduring foundation for BBB can be achieved by combining Fainstein's (2010) notion of the "Just City" with its focus on institutional responses to urban inequalities with a micro-level concept of an "ethics of care" derived from the work of Tronto (1993, 2013).

The proposed synthesis of Fainstein and Tronto offers a way of complementing the broad principles of "democracy", "diversity" and "equity" (DDE) foundational to the Just City with a more grounded understanding of the social interdependencies and relationships of care which, as the pandemic made apparent, sustain human flourishing (Morrow & Parker, 2020; Odendaal, 2021). This addresses Williams' (2017, 826) call to "value both [care and justice] ethics equally" in ways that respond to the failure of urban theory to "recognise care as a transformative ethic that can guide our thinking on what constitutes the just city" (Williams, 2017, 821). However, in the spirit of a conceptual dialogue, we also counterpose Barnett's (2016) notion of *injustice* to emphasize the need to identify harms and oppressions in the quotidian practices of urban life (a lens the "Just City" does not directly cover). Such an approach demands a reflexive, grounded and dialogical approach to urban geographical research if it is to be capable of identifying injustices that can inform BBB approaches.

### ***A new approach to building back better in urban contexts***

The COVID-19 crisis had highly uneven economic and social consequences within and across nations despite unprecedented government intervention and quicker than expected economic recovery. The pandemic saw inequalities widen between higher-income and lower-income countries (Narayan et al., 2021), while in high-income countries the risk of dying from the virus or of negative impacts on jobs or incomes was greater among more vulnerable groups including women, low-paid workers, households in poverty, migrants, ethnic minority populations, and young people (Cribb et al., 2021; OECD, 2021; ONS, 2021; Tomlinson, 2021). It also compounded pre-existing inequalities due to, for example, differential capacities to reduce risk through living in uncrowded dwellings or working from home, as well as through unequal burdens of care by gender that saw women more likely to shoulder extra responsibilities (Cooper & Szreter, 2021; Marmot et al., 2021; Tooze, 2021).

At the same time, the pandemic saw profound social, economic and political changes that surfaced and challenged longstanding assumptions about the social and spatial organisation of urban life. Among other things, the crisis highlighted our dependance on often low-paid and undervalued key workers in sectors such as food, transportation, distribution and utilities; the interconnectedness of social life in terms of our exposure to, and protection, from the virus; the intricate and essential but often invisible or undervalued networks of informal and formal care that sustain economic life; how spatial routines and practices have been shaped by a separation of work and home life that, for some, collapsed through the shift to home working; and the potential for rapid and transformative change in transport use and impacts through a rise in active travel and a temporary reduction in air pollution (Jon, 2020; Kabeer, 2021; Norman, 2020; Tooze, 2021).

The ruptures engendered by the pandemic in terms of both deepening pre-existing inequalities and reconfiguring the organisation of urban life prompted a range of policy-makers and commentators to argue the need to reimagine the ethical principles that should underpin visions of a good society to enable human flourishing (Jon, 2021; Norman, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Jon (2021, p. 136) suggested such collective reflexivity can take a specifically urban dimension in that the crisis provided a “critical momentary juncture” for cities around the world to pause and re-evaluate core values while “changing public sentiments around what truly matters”.

This call for moral or ethical revaluation has, to some extent, found expression in political exhortations to “Build Back Better” or, in some formulations, “Build Back Fairer” (Marmot et al., 2020). The term has been widely used, with varying levels of detail and lexical affiliation, in national and urban settings; for example by the UK government (HM Treasury, 2021), the President of the United States (The White House, n.d.), the New Zealand Government in terms of investments in Auckland (New Zealand Government, 2021), the City of Seattle (2020), and by think tanks concerned with urban policy more broadly (Ross et al., 2021 [for Brookings]; Enenkel & Sells, 2021 [for Centre for Cities]).

Across the world, and despite often being constrained in the autonomies they have, city leaders used the pandemic as an opportunity to pursue goals around equity, sustainability and democracy (Pipa et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2020). Examples in the UK include recovery plans produced by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCR CA, 2020), the enterprise body in Greater Manchester (GM LEP, 2020), and the Bristol City Office (Bristol One City, 2020). A desire for transformational change and new ethical foundations are often central to these plans. The LCR strategy (2020, p. 1) expresses a vision where the LCR economy becomes “the most progressive, values and ethics led economy in Europe” while the Bristol One City plan asserts the need to be “values driven” (Bristol One City: 1). This is underpinned, to varying degrees, by a commitment to tackle economic and social inequalities, engage residents and community organizations in decision-making processes, and promote environmental sustainability. However, strategies are also often partial, contradictory, prone to rhetoric and weighed down by the baggage of past policy orthodoxies around economic development.

### ***Pairing the just city with an ethics of care as a foundation for building back better***

Urban geography and related disciplines including urban studies and planning have long debated mechanisms for remedying injustice in cities (Soja, 2010) and here we draw on Fainstein’s notion of the Just City as a useful framework. Her conception of the Just City is an avowedly normative attempt to define a set of “broadly applicable norms” (2010, p. 36) – democracy, diversity and equity (DDE) – which can be applied to embed justice in the process and outcomes of urban policymaking. They are presented as “evaluative standards” (ibid.) to assess urban policy and through which to express goals of social movements. Capturing each pillar in turn: democracy encompasses a concern to ensure deliberative processes and participation are core features of decision-making processes with representation for groups unable to take part; diversity equates to a concern for “others” and a recognition of urban differentiation whether expressed through race,

ethnicity, gender or culture; equity relates to the need to ensure that the distribution of material and non-material benefits derived from public policy supports “relatively disadvantaged social groups” (Fainstein, 2014, pp. 7–12). For Fainstein, equity takes primacy with a Just City one in “which public investment and regulation would produce equitable outcomes rather than support those already well off” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 3).

We argue that DDE provides a set of guiding concerns and principles that could inform a broader and enduring conceptualization of the potential role of urban development in the recovery. For example, the pandemic has clearly highlighted a lack of equity in terms of differential access to appropriate space within dwellings for those who choose or are required to work from home (Tooze, 2021). Issues of diversity are raised by the uneven exposure to, and inadequate compensation for, risk among workers in “essential” roles, with ethnic minority employees disproportionately concentrated in jobs that could be not carried out from home (House of Commons, 2020). Democracy engenders questions as to the extent to which employees have control and “voice” in determining working and care arrangements.

However, it is not always clear that DDE’s focus on meso-level institutional and political possibilities for change through the way urban spaces are governed and regulated can elucidate and bolster some of the values, relationships and practices that this unique crisis has shown to be essential. This marks it harder to articulate how these elements could be configured within recovery plans and strategies. For example, the pandemic rendered visible the intricate webs of formal and informal care that enable the market economy to function and the disruptive effects when schools, nurseries, care homes or daycentres suddenly close or restrict access, or when friends or family are no longer available to look after children or sick and disabled household members. Yet the framework of DDE does not readily address the profound questions this raises of who cares for whom and which circumstances, relationships, networks and institutions make these arrangements of care possible. Micro-level and relational understandings of the interconnectedness of human life remain undeveloped in the concept of the Just City beyond a fleeting reference to the need for “nurturance” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 45) rather than freedom to serve as a governing standard of human relations. Instead, DDE is given expression largely through a series of meso-level policies concerning housing, transport and economic development (Fainstein, 2010, pp. 172–175).

Taking inspiration from Fainstein’s own invocation to excavate some of the hidden or neglected normative dimensions of urban policy, we suggest the ambivalence of DDE in a COVID-19 world can be addressed through explicit reference to a theory of an ethics of care and related concepts such as “geographies of care” and “care ethics” (Lawson, 2007; also Brown, 2003; Tronto, 1993). As a leading proponent Tronto (1993, p. 113) has conceptualized an ethic of care (citing her work with Fisher) as a “species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web”. Ontologically, it is rooted in a view of human life as relational where “all humans are interdependent, relying upon the care of others in differing degrees throughout the course of their lives” (Tronto, 2013, p. 26).

Tronto invokes a broad definition of care, drawing on Duffy’s (2011) distinction between “nurturant care”, which directly supports the wellbeing of another person,

and “nurturant” care, which supports the “physical world, which is a prerequisite for nurturant caring” (Tronto, 2013, pp. 20–21). The latter includes, for example, cleaning and laundry staff at hospitals. Tronto argues that while relationships of care have often moved well beyond households, they remain sidelined because of a political focus on economic life as the cornerstone of democracy and the enduring dismissal, however inaccurate, of care as a private matter.

Tronto argues from a feminist democratic standpoint for the need, instead, to explicitly recognise, value and support care and to expose the unequal burdens of care under current social and political arrangements that systematically devalue caring. In a key departure from the ontological focus of DDE with its meso-level policy orientation, therefore, Tronto advocates a grounded, situated, relational understanding of micro-level practices of care as the basis for identifying the moral concerns and practices which need to be nurtured by “capital-P Politics” (2015, p. 4). Without denying meso – and macro-structural influences on care, her aim is to “carry the brief for changing the subject of political life from an abstract set of concerns about “the economy” to a way of coping with real people’s lives that is much closer to the way that people actually live” (Tronto, 2013, xiii). For Tronto, the task becomes one of starting in the “middle of things” (2015, p. 4) so that political solutions can be developed from thinking about how “a single care problem necessarily ripples outward” (2015, p. 10).

We contend that Fainstein and Tronto provide complementary perspectives that can be brought together in a novel and explicitly normative framework to shed new light on how the concept of BBB can be conceived and operationalized in urban settings. Fainstein’s DDE approach sets out an ethical framework for urban policy that can support a meso-level approach to enable policymakers and social movements to articulate and pursue visions of the “Just City”. However, as a more abstract, philosophically-derived set of concepts, DDE benefits from engagement with theories of care to re-evaluate the way we could or should organize our lives socially and spatially in light of *situated* and *relational* experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tronto’s work grounds some of the more abstract principles of DDE by encouraging us to continually move from micro – to meso-level practices to develop policies that are mindful of context. For example, and highly pertinently to the BBB agenda, Tronto (2013, p. 167) challenges the primacy of work in notions of work/life balance, asking instead: “how do we fit our work around our life? Balancing these two ethics, of work and care, enables us to think about how we organise time and our environment – *our space* – differently [our emphasis]”.

### **Checking for injustice**

Combining Tronto and Fainstein has value in establishing new forms of enquiry to understand the hidden practices and social interdependencies highlighted and challenged by the pandemic and how they might inform the BBB agenda. However, there remains a central tension in trying to synthesize the two approaches in terms of the uneasy compatibility of Fainstein’s abstract and idealized notions of justice with invocations to adopt a more situated approach to understanding questions of urban justice. In particular, the DDE framework recognizes the importance of democracy, yet says little about how that might be developed through a more grounded, relational perspective.

We contend that Barnett's (2016, 2018) call for wider and more pluralist forms of democratic dialogue as part of his "Geography of Injustice" – which "involves thinking about how social relations, institutional arrangements, and norms systematically disadvantage some persons as participants in shared practices of public life" (2016, p. 323) – can help to highlight and address missing concerns from justice frameworks. The upshot of this conceptual move is to position Barnett as a conceptual foil for Fainstein, but as a complementary lens to Tronto. He argues the need to prioritize injustice in order to "dethrone an impartial model of universal rationality by according a central value to the public sharing and evaluation of narratives of felt senses of injustice" (2016, p. 114). For Barnett, therefore, grounded experiences of injustice, often identified through the negative affective emotions it generates (e.g. anger), should be the "starting point" of a concept of justice rather than universally established ideals:

The meaning of the concept of justice is best approached as an emergent response to an expression of harm, injury or wrong. The strong implication of this simple sounding proposition is that justice is something developed not to satisfy an ideal model, but in relation to situated expressions of injustice. (Barnett, 2016, p. 116)

His advocacy of a theory that is "*thoroughly relational*" and rooted in "*situated expressions of injustice*" (2016, p. 116) aligns with Tronto's call to understand care practices from "*the middle of things*".

Barnett's (2018, p. 324) call for injustice to be identified through "*intersubjectively mediated, shared inquiry*" has two important implications for resolving the tensions with Fainstein's work, and for urban geographical research more generally. First, it demands reflexivity on the part of academics in order to critically reflect on our capacities to identify sources of injustice and to obviate the risk of monological "expert" pronouncements on policy problems and solutions. Second, it requires us to develop those new mechanisms of "shared inquiry" where understandings of harm and exploitation are arrived at dialogically through engagement with those on the sharp end of injustice in ways which avoids tokenism or co-option. Barnett is less clear on the form these mechanisms might take, but urban geographers perhaps need to be alive to a range of immersive approaches that move beyond monological means of data elicitation such as arts-based methods and participatory approaches.

In short Barnett's (2016, 2018) work demands an understanding of the Just City as "*thoroughly relational*" and constructed around "*situated expressions of injustice*" (2016, p. 116). His (2016) spatialized account also reinforces the importance of everyday spaces as key sites of inquiry with its emphasis on understanding the stretched and distributed socio-spatial relations of injustice. Combined with the notion of care, this suggests multiple contexts and public and private sites where injustices might be explored that relate to the experiences of the pandemic and the need to respond to these in any BBB strategies. This includes the inequitable distribution of care responsibilities across household members; the lack of (affordable) formal or informal care to enable economic participation; the inadequacy of homes in terms of space, technologies and facilities for fulfilling dual roles as carers and employees; and the difficulties in securing or negotiating paid work with appropriate flexibilities around hours and location to accommodate care-giving roles.

## Charting next steps

The pandemic has exposed elements – and injustices – of quotidian urban life that have been widely overlooked. This new awareness demands that the daily practices of urban life need to be foregrounded and re-centred in any BBB approaches developed to manage and negotiate urban change. It also lays down a challenge for urban geographers to reappraise the conceptual framings and methodological approaches that they deploy. In this provocation, we contend that a novel conceptual dialogue between Fainstein, Tronto and Barnett has the potential to inform stronger and more enduring formulations of BBB that orient urban policy around configurations of social and spatial life shown to be essential to human flourishing during the pandemic. We highlight the need for dialectical engagement between relational concepts of care and the notion of the Just City, so that the DDE framework does not become ossified as an ideal model of justice but is, instead, sufficiently fluid and responsive to accommodate emergent claims of injustice. Inspired by Barnett, we also call for a focus on how we might democratize and decenter “expertise” and foreground experiences of injustice beyond the policy, practice and academic communities. In doing so, we sketch out the foundations for an urban geographical research project that is better positioned to understand and respond to the challenges presented by the social and spatial dimensions of urban life as we emerge from the pandemic.

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