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What can legal geography do for the study of regions?

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Legal geography as a subdiscipline of human geography has been progressively gaining momentum across geographic and legal fora. Legal geography examines the co-constitutivity of law, power, and place, and has been employed to explore issues of spatial justice across contexts and scales, from the international, where national borders, armed conflict, human rights, and climate change, and cultural heritage are discussed, to the national, regional, and, then the micro level, where geography is used as a way of appreciating the spatial dimensions of formal and informal justice (e.g., courtroom geographies and geographies of home). However, it has yet to gain full scale recognition in a regional studies context, even though it has an important role to play, when it comes to appreciating the gap between laws and policies on the one hand and the law's place-felt impact on the other.

Beyond human geography per se, as a sum of two parts *legal + geography* can serve a dual purpose in our understanding of regions and places, both methodologically and epistemologically:

- a. Doctrinal legal analysis can help us “translate” the nexus of formal laws, policies, and softer approaches that govern, regulate and produce legal results in the context of place and;
- b. Socio-legal methodologies can ensure that the laws and policies that make place remain rooted in the promotion of diversity, inclusivity, and spatial justice.

To illustrate, in the context of regional studies, having a sound understanding of the different constitutional frameworks that govern public administration across

jurisdictions, helps explain different policy outcomes, such as uneven development or delays in policy implementation. For some countries (e.g., in continental Europe) public administration is a matter of public administrative and constitutional law, whereas some common law jurisdictions such as the UK, follow softer policy and management approaches. This offers a wide jurisdictional and geographic spectrum of rigidity that impacts the way policies and initiatives are felt on the ground, resulting in varying perceptions of justice and in varying developmental outcomes.

Legal geography however, is further associated with the examination of spatial power, investigating issues of representation, democratisation, and access to decision-making structures. This takes place through various tools and concepts that legal geography scholars have employed to foreground the presence of the law in a spatial context, such as the “splice” (Blomley 1994, 2003), the “bracket” (Blomley, 2014) or the “nomosphere” (Delaney, 2004). These concepts introduce framing mechanisms through which space and law can be examined at the same time in a place-specific context, taking geographic particularities into account. In so doing, legal geography opens the road for bottom-up, participatory, and feminist approaches, by examining how relevant legal contexts manifest in a given place: human rights, property rights, and heritage could be all equal in a place-specific context.

A prominent example of this would be the study of islands/ islandness, whereby a particular geography has triggered an array of legislative responses globally, with priorities ranging from safeguarding and supporting the local population and its cultural heritage (Islands (Scotland) Act (2018) (the Act) to promoting and prioritising tourism economies by law, as in the context of Greece (e.g., Greek Law 4832/2021). In this case, adopting a legal geographic perspective can help us investigate and research the differences between several island regions, should attention be paid to the kind of policies that have been legally mandated due to the islands’ geographic characteristics. It can further help us explore whether these policy mandates are truly representative of the needs of the population, by taking a closer look at formal and informal decision-making mechanisms, consultation processes, and feedback, but also by focusing on how everyday life in these regions is shaped and impacted by the law in return, e.g., tourism and precarious employment.

In its simplest form, legal geography asks the question: “does the law take into account the geography of a particular place”, appreciating geography in its natural, human, political, and economic dimensions. And as with the breadth and depth of approaches encountered within geography itself, equally, legal geography brings with it an ever-expanding nexus of connections and sub-fields of inquiry, ranging from the formal (state laws) to the informal (enforceable social conventions), from the centralised (constitutional) to the dispersed (legal pluralism), constantly reconfiguring itself beyond human geography alone.

In the study of regions and their development, legal geography can offer a valuable, positivist benchmark that geographers need to take into account in their study of places, and a way of highlighting that the experiences of those impacted by law and policy are and should be as important at the same time. A regional legal geography should do exactly that.

Relevant publication: Kanellopoulou, E(J)., Panayiotopoulos, A., & Pavlidis, S. A. (2024). Cultural heritage beyond juridification: towards a place-first research agenda. *Journal of Place Management and Development*. (17)2: 220-236.

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Photos by the author: the touristic high street in the UNESCO listed Medieval Town of Rhodes, Greece versus the lived reality of the Medieval Town (living among the ruins)



