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**Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice***  
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Reflecting on the classical anarchist movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, George Woodcock, late, great historian and political biographer of anarchist ideas, wrote that the “seeds of great movements often lie in what seem at the time mediocre lives or small and insignificant encounters” (1977: 35). The lives and encounters Woodcock had in mind when sketching this passage could be found in the cafés and miserable hotels of Paris” *Quartier Latin*, where (then) unknown revolutionaries such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx convened around the same wooden table deep into the evenings of the early 1840s to plot the lineaments of the future, just society. From such modest, back-corner Parisian café tables would spring the conceptual oaks supporting the most assertive and combative of political movements, Anarchism and Marxism, whose long shadows and quarrels continue to inform our lived present.

As UCLA Urban Planning graduate students in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we, too, were only dimly aware of the “great movements” brewing in the corridors of Perloff Hall. Our mediocre lives as Phd students were filled with the insignificant encounters contained in keeping our heads financially above water in order to make it to the next semester; serving as research assistants for faculty; remaining ever on the prowl for research grants to fund that next bit of fieldwork; keeping up with our own course work readings; and (if we were lucky) grading a never-ending flow of masters-level student exams and papers. Seated at our brightly lit metallic tables at the Luvalle Commons campus coffee shop, we were physically much too close to the revolution that would in hindsight come to be known as the “spatial turn” to feel what the stakes

and outcome of that “turn” would be, either for the wider academic landscape nor for our own personal trajectories as thinking-sentient beings caught up within that whirlwind landscape. But perhaps this is the very nature of revolutions, particularly for those working at the leading edges of their white-hot center. That next committee meeting needs attending; those damned exams need *grading*.

With Ed Soja’s *Seeking spatial justice*, we now have a clearer promontory from which to survey what all the revolutionary sound and fury of the 1990s and early 2000s “spatial turn” was about, and what it might still mean for us today. At the center of Soja’s narrative is a landmark 1996 ruling, the result of a successful class action lawsuit brought against the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) by a coalition of grassroots organizations dedicated to the public transit needs of LA’s population of working poor.<sup>1</sup> Arguing that the investment bias in fixed-rail by the Los Angeles county bureaucracy systematically denied the needs of LA’s bus dependent population, progressive community advocacy groups such as the LA Bus Riders Union (BRU) proposed a different way of seeing the spatiality of the greater Los Angeles urban region, one not linked to notions of territorial or administrative equity so much as one recognizing socio-spatial *difference*. For BRU advocates, this difference would be highly inflected by class, ethnicity, race and gender, as the overwhelming majority of LA’s bus transit dependent population are comprised of people of color, especially women and children. In winning their case, BRU was able to convincingly demonstrate that the actions of the

<sup>1</sup> Labor/Community Strategy Center *et al.*, v. Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority.

MTA (as with every planning agency in the country) inherently privileged affluent automobile drivers, and in so doing actively discriminated against those residents who had no choice but to use public transit for journeys to and from work, school and basic social services.

The *LCSC v. LACMTA* case and its aftermath, Soja argues, offers a clear view of how justice, and consequent struggles over justice, produce “consequential geographies” in the urban realm (2010: 1). Space, in this view, is an integral moment in the condition of emergence of justice itself, a vital element in how justice and injustice are produced and develop over time. Soja’s assertion of justice’s inherent spatiality of course draws on his now decades-long project to infuse an assertively spatial perspective into the social sciences (1989). Such a perspective, rooted in an ontological understanding of space, time and social being as trialectically related, was intended to re-balance an entrenched and long-standing 20<sup>th</sup> century social scientific bias towards the social and temporal aspects of human life (Soja, 1996). In this light, Soja’s earlier conceptualization of the “socio-spatial dialectic” (1980) was not meant to suggest that space now is the determining element shaping patterns of inequality and injustice and progressive responses to them (as those suspicious of creeping geographical determinism would have it), but should rather be seen as fully mutually constitutive in their relations and effects.

The added “explanatory power of spatial thinking” advocated by Soja also serves to foreground a parallel concern of the book, which is to train attention on the centrality of urbanization and the “urban condition” as a key site for the contemporary production of inequality and injustice in the world today (Soja, 2010: 4). For the LA-based geographer, this suggests cities are key crucibles not

only for the working out of neoliberal injustice, but also the properly vanguard locations for the elaboration of strategies leading to “development with justice”. As described in detail, such an urban-based, assertively justice-orientated development agenda is exemplified by struggles surrounding the *Right to the City*, a loosely orchestrated “movement of movements” originating in the United States, but now operating increasingly worldwide. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s initial formulations (1968), *RTC* demands greater control over how the spaces of social life are spatially produced, becoming “virtually synonymous with seeking spatial justice” (Soja, 2010: 7). In this respect, via *RTC* the search for spatial justice dovetails with the struggle for democratic rights to urbanized space all over the world.

In setting the stage for what he aptly labels “the globalization of injustice”, Soja (2010: 9) frames three overlapping levels of spatial (in)justice. The first results from the external creation of unjust geographies through various forms of “bordering” as well as the political organization of space. Relevant instances extend from South African apartheid and parallel attempts at the colonial regulation of space to more elusive acts of spatial segregation instantiated in electoral district gerrymandering and the privileging of private property rights. At a more local level, unjust geographies are described as arising from the discriminatory decision-making arising from various forms of exclusionary zoning, the siting of toxic facilities and restrictive forms of racial segregation. A third level of analysis trains attention on meso-level geographies of injustice, as expressed in geographically uneven development at the regional scale, between the urban and the global, while drawing attention to a range of actors attempting to harness a more encompassing regional spatial scale in the service of more assertive forms of regional democracy and

community-based regionalisms. With regard to the latter form of organizing in particular, attention is trained on Los Angeles-based labor/community coalition-building initiatives, as exemplified in the work of diverse community development corporations, vigorous rent control movements and cross-racial environmental justice mobilizations, as well as the *Justice for Janitors* coalition. Two organizations in particular, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and Strategic Action for a Just Economy (SAJE) are targeted as the result of novel “spatial justice-oriented labor-community-university coalitions”, in which the students and faculty of the Urban Planning program at the University of California, Los Angeles, have played a central, catalyzing role.

Such a powerful and heady mix of LA-based labor/community activism would appear to confirm, as Soja argued years ago, that Los Angeles is still today where “it all comes together” (1989) in terms of spearheading a national, if not global movement for greater spatial justice in the face of globalization’s unjust deprivations. But whereas in his younger days Soja’s Los Angeles was amenable to being compared to Jorge Luis Borges’ *Aleph*, a sparkling spheroid of incandescent intensity capable of uniting all the world, literally, within its compact form (1989), in his older, perhaps more wizened, age, Soja seems intent on throwing some disenchanting caveats into his analysis. This is nowhere more evident than in his discussion of the struggles of the LA-based environmental justice movement (EJM), an outgrowth in turn of the broader, national civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In this context, *EJM* began by confronting the myriad forms of environmental racism disproportionately affecting predominantly African-American and Latino populations of Los Angeles. In struggling against the siting of toxic waste facilities

or combatting air and/or water pollution in their communities, Soja concedes that *EJM* helped raise consciousness regarding the spatiality of injustice. Nevertheless, he also cites “confusion and divergent” interests between the more “romantic environmentalism” underpinning the strategies of *EJM* and the critical spatial perspective driving the *Right to the City* movement(s). This, Soja attributes to the “militant localism” of *EJM* (citing Harvey, 1996), as well as, implicitly, its racially-orientated identitarian bias, leading to its “narrow focus” and its “fragmenting effect on larger class and labor struggles.” (2010: 53). “Environmental and spatial justice ... should not be too easily conflated”, Soja concludes. “Environmental justice may be best considered and conceptualized as a subfield of spatial justice...” (ibid.).

Implicitly, then, Soja attributes *EJM*’s failures to not having sufficiently “placed space first” in its strategic thinking. In this context, however, one may productively question what political value is obtained by subordinating the racial, ethnic or gender specificities of any movement to an overarching spatial concept, as it appears Soja is now inviting us to do. Surely, if the notion of “spatial justice” is meant to do the Archimedean work of forging a “movement of movements”, it must in turn do conceptual justice to the messy entanglement of “space” with the myriad particulars —ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, age— which constitute the passionate lifeblood of any social movement. Readers of *Espacialidades*, caught up in the recent and unsuccessful campaign to prevent the return of PRI rule, would also arguably have an equally difficult time hierarchizing issues of race, class and space so as to account for the outcome of Mexico’s frighteningly uneven electoral geographies. Yet, like a barrel-chested Diogenes, Soja persists in roaming the landscape of LA’s labor/community mobiliza-

tions, and time and again, while citing the potential for an assertive “spatial justice” lens, is disappointed at the lack of an explicit “spatial justice”-oriented *intentionality*. If only Soja’s actants would say those two words! How different the world would be! Kropotkin’s apocryphal dictum comes to mind:

One party may have developed more clearly the theories which it defines and the program which it desires to realize; it may have made propaganda actively, by speech and in print. But it may not have sufficiently expressed its aspirations in the open, on the street, by actions which *embody the thought it represents*; it has done little, or it has done nothing against those who are its principal enemies; it has not attacked the institutions which it wants to demolish; its strength has been in theory, not in action [...] (Kropotkin, cited in Capouya and Tompkins, 1975: 8).

But Prince Pyotr Alexeyevich doth protest too much. What revolution has ever fully embodied “the thought it represents”? And would not such a 1-to-1 correspondence between thought and action sow its own kind of “terror”? Certainly the revolution that was the spatial turn has, in a very real sense, “been won” (Dear, 2008) to the degree that it no longer belongs to anyone, being creatively re-appropriated and reinvented in a bewildering diversity of locales all over the world, many of which are located nowhere near the anchor points of urbanity dreamt of by its progenitors. Despite its strong urban-centric bias, SSJ does open a vital space for others to take its insights, literally, elsewhere, and we can all be thankful for that.

A final, brief note on style. Soja is known to write books that are both deadly serious in content while joyfully playful in form (this is also what makes them incredibly good reads). Such was certainly the case in all of his work extending across the giddy arc of the 1990s, ranging from *Postmod-*

*ern geographies* through *Thirdspace* (1996, for which this reviewer acted as research assistant) and on into *Postmetropolis* (2000). Soja received much unwarranted criticism from colleagues for this “looser”, less conventional form of academic writing. But, seen in hindsight, the form was the message; Soja’s texts enacted the kind of radically open-ended space he was striving to create and reflect in the world around him. *Seeking Spatial Justice*, in this respect, is a departure in form from Soja’s previous *oeuvre*. It has a more lapidary tone, as if the times now called for “*Schluss mit lustig*,”<sup>2</sup> a final buckling down to set the record straight. Here, the wild playfulness of *Postmodern geographies* and *Thirdspace* is sacrificed in favor of an approach that hunkers down to basics, wishing to establish sediment for the long haul. Night is approaching, we sense, and the Owl of Minerva needs to designate heirs-apparent (poor heirs-apparent!). Perhaps the *Raumgeist* calls for this new, sober tone. Too much has gone awry over the past decade for most thinking folk. Too many bodies have passed on into the other world. It is time to take stock, while thinking big again. Despite it all, through it all, Soja’s “strategic optimism” (2010: 7) remains a beacon for our generation, as well as the next. We are in desperate need of it.

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<sup>2</sup> Approximate English translation from the German: “Enough with being funny”, typically said by a person in a position of authority in situations which require utmost seriousness and concentration.

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