

## **Spatial Justice and the Right to the City: an Interview with Edward Soja**

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## Spatial Justice and the Right to the City: an Interview with Edward SOJA

by **Frédéric Dufaux** | **Philippe Gervais-Lambony** | **Chloé Buire** | **Henri Desbois**,

Image: **Chloé Buire**

Sound: **Henri Desbois**

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*(The transcript of this interview has been edited and completed by Edward Soja)*

**Paris, 30 September 2010**

### Part 1

JSSJ: Edward Soja, thank you very much for accepting this interview with *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*. Your work is very inspiring for us.

You are a distinguished Professor of Urban Planning at UCLA, and a critical Geographer too.

Your most recent book, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, comes after other important contributions to spatial Theory, among which *Thirdspace and Postmetropolis*.

In this new book, you insist on the particular meaning and qualities of an explicitly spatialized concept of Justice.

Why is it so important in your view to add spatial to justice?

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ES: Well, let me first say how happy I am to be here!

You are, as much as any other group or place in the world today, using the concept of spatial justice explicitly and creatively. And so in many ways, this is a very vital place for me to be visiting.

The question about why I insist on the spatial has many answers. The broadest answer reflects a remarkable if not widely recognized event that began in Paris after 1968: the first stirrings, mainly in the work of Lefebvre and Foucault, of what would eventually—after more than 20 years of neglect-- become called the Spatial Turn. A resurgence of interest in space and spatial thinking has been occurring over the last several decades, spreading a spatial concept and awareness to every discipline. Today, more than in any other time in at least the last two hundred years, spatial thinking has become transdisciplinary, adopted in various ways in almost every subject area. For many disciplines -outside geography, architecture, urbanism- spatial thinking is very new. And so what we are seeing today is a kind of initial exploration about how spatial thinking, in a wide variety of subject areas, from religion to archeology to anthropology and accounting, can open up new possibilities, new insights.

As someone who has been promoting this spatial turn for many decades, I now want to push it still further, by assertively adding a significant spatial dimension to other kinds of broad debates that have not received a rigorous spatial analysis in the past. This led to my interest in spatializing the inter-related concepts of justice, democracy, citizenship, community struggles and so on, to explore how the spatial perspective might open up new possibilities, new ways of thinking about these traditionally important concepts and ideas. This is one way to explain why I insist on using spatial to describe justice.

Another more specific reason for emphasizing spatial justice came from the writing of *Postmetropolis* and partly explains why it took me ten years to write *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

When I was completing *Postmetropolis*, which emphasizes what has been happening to cities over the last 30 or 40 years, I realized that the picture I was painting of the contemporary urban condition seemed very depressing and dark. Urban restructuring had produced so many negative outcomes that one ended up with almost no hope for any possibility for a better future. And so at the very end of *Postmetropolis*, I started speaking about spatial justice and the possibilities of using explicitly spatial strategies to address in new ways the enormous inequalities and injustices that had been generated by nearly four decades of economic restructuring and neoliberal globalization. Seeking spatial justice became for me a source of hope for the future, a new direction for urban social movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Still another answer to your question about attaching spatial to justice takes me back to, for me, the always inspiring ideas and thoughts of Henri Lefebvre. As the Spatial Justice concept was developing, I was looking back to Lefebvre's writings in the late 1960's and early 70's, especially those relating to *Le Droit à la ville, The Right to the City*. But there was much more in Lefebvre's writings after 1968 that encouraged an assertive spatial perspective, my key starting point in *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Being assertively spatial, seeing justice as essentially spatial in all its aspects, is what distinguishes what I have written from the closely related writings on the Just City, for example. I'm exploring very specifically how a spatial perspective can add new insights at a political-theoretical level to efforts to understand and to struggle against social injustice of every kind. But even more concretely, I look at how a critical spatial consciousness can stimulate new strategies for political organizations and activists to work towards greater social justice, greater equality, and to fight against the most oppressive forces that are operating in the world today. There would be nothing left, in my view, if the vital and assertive spatial emphasis were eliminated from an understanding of justice in general or the search for a Just City in particular.

The justice part of spatial justice is also very significant. The term justice and the concept of justice have also obtained a larger meaning conceptually, politically, and strategically, in recent years. There has been a focusing on Justice as a powerful mobilizing metaphor. More so than struggling for equality, freedom, or universal human rights, struggling for greater justice appears to be more politically practical and inclusive, a basis for creating new and more cohesive coalitions among highly diverse groups and social movements, a common ground for activists involved in struggles over the workplace and labor issues, over gender issues, over sexual preference, over racial issues, the environment, the peace and anti-war movement. Struggling for greater (spatial) justice opens up a wider net to encompass many different forms of activism, encouraging them to come together in larger and more diverse kinds of coalitions. So the joining together of spatial + justice is a kind of extraordinary moment of conjunction, with both terms growing in their power and influence in the contemporary world.

## Part 2

JSSJ: Let's come back to Henri Lefebvre. How do you articulate Spatial Justice to the Right to the City, elaborated by Henri Lefebvre? Why is the Right to the City so central to theorize Spatial Justice? Can you tell us?

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ES: There are many terms that have emerged over the years to describe some aspects of the spatial dimensions of Justice and politics and so on. In *Social Justice and the City* (1973), for example, David Harvey used the term "Territorial Justice". The concept never really developed much further and even Marxist geographers rarely used it again. An implicit concept of Spatial

Justice was around for a long time but didn't get much explicit academic or political attention. Until the year 2000, only two or three academic publications appeared in English using the specific term Spatial Justice. Until very recently, the concept of Spatial Justice also made little sense to labor unions and the labor movement, or to feminists or most other activist organizations. The concept of Spatial Justice in some form was kept alive politically mainly through the environmental justice movement.

The environmental justice movement, although it did not see itself in this way, was essentially a movement around Spatial Justice with regard to environmental issues. Environmental racism not spatial justice, however, was the dominant focus for the movement, even though the racism was expressed in largely spatial terms, involving locational discrimination and distributional inequalities. As the spatial turn expanded in its impact, it was accompanied by not just a wider use of the term Spatial Justice but by a resurgent rediscovery of Henri Lefebvre as a leading spatial theorist, first in the Anglophonic world and much more recently in France. Suddenly, in a few places such as Los Angeles and New York, the Right to the City idea began to percolate from pure abstract theoretical debates into actual political practice.

The Right to the City seemed a more practical and attainable political objective, especially in comparison with achieving universal human rights or Revolution now. It also seemed more concrete and easier to understand and organize for than Spatial Justice. The impact of the Right to the City idea was magnified further by the UN announcement that, for the first time, the majority of the world's population lived in cities and that the future is going to see even more of the world's population living in cities. Soon there was an explosion of interest in the Right to the City, from various UNESCO conferences in Paris and elsewhere in Europe and a series of World Social Forums in Latin America, leading to the proclamation of a World Charter on the Right to the City.

Another place where everything was coming together was Los Angeles. Notions of social and spatial justice were almost in the air, the atmosphere of Los Angeles, especially after the so-called Justice Riots of 1992. Several of my colleagues in the Urban Planning Department at UCLA (without my direct help, I might add) began plans to organize a Right to the City Alliance to build upon an established base of strong and successful labor-community coalitions, such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE). The first meeting of the RTTC Alliance was held in Los Angeles in January 2007, and Lefebvre's presence was felt. There was a discussion of Lefebvre's ideas about the right to the city and the participants were urged to read some of his work. There was some emphasis on spatial thinking but the term Spatial Justice was never used explicitly,

Over the past several years there has been a kind of strategic convergence around the right to the city idea, linking what I have been calling Spatial Justice to environmental justice, territorial justice, the geography of social justice, and the search for the Just City. All these ideas are coming together, with Lefebvre's concepts at the center of it all. While some of the hard radical core of Lefebvre's arguments have become softened in these larger developments, there is much that remains. What is especially attractive to me in Lefebvre's concept is that it's rooted in taking control over the social production of social space, in a kind of consciousness and awareness of how space can be used to oppress and exploit and dominate, to create forms of social control and discipline. This means that struggles over unregulated gentrification, or gated communities, or inequalities at the workplace, or in the distribution of income, all kinds of injustices need to be seen, partially at least, as causally related to the unjust geographies that have been socially created and in which we all live. No one, none of the writers in Marxist geography or sociology, or anywhere in the both Anglophonic and Francophonic worlds, has been more explicit than Lefebvre in grounding what he was talking about in the social production of unjust geographies, in recognizing how space can be both oppressive and

liberating. And no one makes it more clear that there is the need to intervene in this spatial process to transform it, to redirect it, to make it more just.

And so there is a necessity almost to go back to Lefebvre, and to this remarkable period that I think, looking back, will be recognized as one of the most important moments in the development of western thought in the twentieth century. I refer to the period from 1968 to 1974, when at least two people based mainly in Paris, Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, developed remarkably similar ideas about how to think spatially, how to think in new and innovative ways about space and its causal power, and how to make a critical spatial perspective as powerful as a critical historical perspective. How did this convergence of thinking occur? Were Lefebvre and Foucault in close communication? Did one borrow ideas from the other? There is virtually no literature on this truly remarkable moment in the development of Western social and political thought. It remains a major challenge for future researchers to unravel and elaborate on the Lefebvre-Foucault connection (or lack thereof).

The emergence of a new critical spatial perspective gives added significance to what happened in Paris in 1968. While these new developments in spatial thinking were blurred and buried for most of the next 25 years, we are beginning to appreciate that for the first time in the preceding century there was an effort, led by French scholars, to break down the hegemonic social historicism that had formed with the development of Marxism (historical materialism) and the history-driven social sciences in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The implicit aim of both Foucault and Lefebvre, I have argued, was to rebalance the significance of space and time, to break down the tradition of privileging time and history as dynamic and developmental, while space and the making of human geographies were seen as mere physical background, container or stage for the human social drama. And they were both saying something very simple: old ways of thinking about space as either material form or mental representation were not going to do it! If you continue to think about space in the ways that you did traditionally, you would never get spatial perspectives as powerful as historical perspectives. And so what we need is to find another, alternative way to make this spatial perspective broader and more comprehensive, more focused, more insightful, more useful and critically sharp than it had been before. Foucault called this new perspective heterotopology; for Lefebvre it revolved around what he called lived space or the composite space of representations.

The intellectual world, Anglophonic and it would appear Francophonic as well, were not prepared to accept such a radical re-thinking of the social significance of space, and these innovative ideas would remain dormant for more than twenty years, at least until the growing spatial turn gave enormous new significance to the (Parisian?) writings of Lefebvre and Foucault. Going back to what I said at the very beginning, it's a great pleasure to be talking about this in Paris, where at least the initial stages of the critical spatial turn took place!

### Part 3

JSSJ: The pleasure is shared!

To come back to this very central idea of coalition building... In the fifth chapter of *Seeking Spatial Justice*, you describe quite an unusual reality in the US Universities: strong and active links between university scholar-activists in urban planning in UCLA, and local, labor and community organizations.

According to you, those links "played an important role in the resurgence of new and innovative coalitions, as well as in more academic contributions to spatial theory and urban studies"<sup>1</sup>.

Can you tell us more on this translation of theory into practice?

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<sup>1</sup> *Seeking Spatial Justice*, p. 158.

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ES: Yes, also, a little more background. This was not taking place in very many cities in the United States, not even in the Bay Area or New York or Chicago. In that chapter, I was making an argument that Los Angeles was exceptional in that it was a place where innovative ideas about both spatial theory and spatial practice developed together. I always have to be careful, because particularly the British don't like me talking about Los Angeles being so special, so I often try to avoid it when looking at more theoretical debates. But when speaking about spatial politics and social movements, Los Angeles was indeed quite special. It was the place where new coalitions emerged linking community based organizations with labor unions as well as religious and ethnic organizations, the environmental and peace movements, and in some cases certain groups of scholar-activists at local universities. Not all these coalitions were explicitly spatial, but several such as LAANE, the Bus Riders Union, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, and the Right to the City Alliance played key roles in bringing spatial theories developed in the universities into active political practice.

Going back to your first question about the significance of the spatial, one might ask where did this innovative spatial emphasis come from? One of the arguments I make is that it had to do in part with the fact that there was a cluster of scholars, largely at UCLA, but in other universities as well, mainly in urban planning and geography but also in other disciplines, who were actively exploring spatial theory--urban and regional spatial theory in particular--and developing new concepts relating to regional urbanization processes, urban change and restructuring, and urban spatial causality, how urbanization generates economic development, technological innovation, and cultural creativity. In what some called a Los Angeles School of Urban and Regional Studies, new ideas began to emerge about spatial development, regional democracy, creative cities, the stimulus of urban agglomeration, even some early notions of spatial capital, to match the already well established concept of social capital.

There were several other factors in the UCLA Urban Planning Department that encouraged the translation of spatial theory into practice. I was very hesitant and uncomfortable about devoting an entire chapter in the book to the department where I had been teaching for more than 35 years, for fear of being biased. But in some ways, I have been receiving more positive reactions to this chapter than some of the others. As I note, the department was organized from the beginning with a primary objective of training activists. When we compared ourselves to the University of Southern California at that time (early 1970s, after its establishment in 1968-69) we said that in urban planning at USC they trained students specifically for jobs as urban planners, whereas we trained our students to be change agents, no matter what that took. And so this made the UCLA connection to local community organizations, the labor movement, and other activist organizations something that has been there from the beginning.

In some cases, such as the successful trial led by the Bus Riders Union that recognized many decades of unjust practices in the provisioning of public transit and resulted in the shift of billions of dollars from building a fixed rail system primarily favoring the suburban wealthy to improvements in the bus network serving the more urgent needs of the transit dependent poor, there was relatively little input from university scholar activists. The case was fought most vigorously by a remarkable and fiercely independent organization called the Labor/Community Strategy Center. The Strategy Center's leaders developed their own spatial strategies, drawing on existing struggles over environmental and transit justice. I devoted the first chapter of *Seeking Spatial Justice* to the successful BRU lawsuit against the Metropolitan Transit Authority for it provides a particularly clear example of a struggle over spatial injustice. In other key organizations, especially the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), the university

connections were much more intense. Over the past ten or so years, for example, LAANE has hired more than thirty graduate students from UCLA Urban Planning, providing a continuous two way flow between the university and the wider community. As far as I can tell, there has been nothing quite like this happening in other large cities across the country.

The resurgence of labor-community coalition building in Los Angeles may have occurred without these university connections and the translation of spatial theory into practice that these connections encouraged. But there is little doubt that an unusually fruitful relationship developed between activist labor and community groups and the faculty and students in UCLA urban planning and that over time this relationship fostered a practical and strategic spatial consciousness that contributed significantly to making Los Angeles an innovative center of the American labor and community development movements.

*Seeking Spatial Justice* was published at a time when I was very optimistic about developments in Los Angeles. The Right to the City Alliance was flourishing and spreading across the county, LAANE was pioneering the use of Community Benefit Agreements whereby developers provided local benefits in return for public support for their investments, and in 2010 the Urban planning department was celebrating the appointment of an alumna, Cecilia Estolano, as the executive director of the Community Redevelopment Agency in Los Angeles, one of the largest planning agencies in the US. As a radical feminist lawyer and latina, Estolano had the potential to really expand some of the new things that were happening, especially the innovative Community Benefits Agreements. Unfortunately, however, soon after the book was published, she was dismissed by our supposedly liberal, labor leaning Mayor for very personal and nasty reasons<sup>2</sup>. With the economic meltdown of 2008 and other national events, including the deep recession in California, added to these local disappointments, my strategic optimism about the development of labor-community coalitions in Los Angeles is being severely tested.

JSSJ: Are there glimmers of hope, as you put it.

ES: Yes, there are some, but I'm not sure I can find very many glimmers of hope right now...

#### Part 4

JSSJ: Getting out of the United States, from our perspective of francophone researchers, what we try to do in Spatial Justice Journal is establish more communication between Anglophone and Francophone research communities, and also some of us are working in Africa. My question is connected to these two issues. From the Francophone, we often get the response or the reaction, when we promote the Spatial Justice concept: "you are bringing an anglo-saxon concept". How do you adapt, how do you reinterpret this, in consideration of the French urban planning tradition? That's one question. And it's kind of the same question, for those of us working in African countries -I know that you have been working in Africa- with completely non-democratic political situations, extreme poverty, extreme deprivation... We often get the response: "But is Spatial Justice the more urgent? Why would we want to work on that? And why would you, from the countries of the North, come and tell us what is just, spatially just?"

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ES: They are very similar questions in one way, but require very different answers. On the first question, spatial justice appears to be an Anglo concept in large part, I think, because of how Henri Lefebvre was treated in France after the events of 1968. There was a particularly intense dismissal of Lefebvre and his ideas across the political spectrum. His innovative ideas about

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.laweekly.com/2010-01-07/news/city-hall-8217-s-revenge-on-cecilia-estolano/1/>

spatial thinking and urban spatial causality became outdated and buried in the French intellectual tradition. So too were his assertion of the right to the city and its connections to related notions of Spatial Justice. Lefebvre, until very recently, was virtually forgotten in France. With the growing Spatial Turn, however, affecting all the social science and humanities disciplines—and not just in the Anglophonic world—there was an extraordinary revival of interest in Lefebvre, particularly after the long-delayed English translation of *La Production de l'espace* that appeared in 1991, seventeen years after its publication in French. So, when Spatial Justice and its relation to the right to the city idea appear in France, they seem, rather simplistically I might add, to be imports from the Anglo tradition. I can think of other ways to defend against claims that Spatial Justice is an invasive Anglo import, but I'll toss the question back to you, for I am sure you can find better ways than I to explain how well these ideas fit into the French urban and geographical discourse.

The global emergence of Spatial Justice and related concepts as well as the revival of interest in the works of Lefebvre, Foucault, the Situationists, and others are being carried forward by the Spatial Turn, by the transdisciplinary and transnational spread of spatial thinking. The Spatial Turn is not a purely Anglophonic phenomenon. Its deeper meaning takes us back to Western Europe in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Marxism and the liberal social sciences took shape through a pronounced Historical Turn, an ontological privileging of time and temporal processes that would eventually be enshrined in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, *Being and Time*. I view the Spatial Turn as a sea change in all Western thought, a move away from the dominance of social historicism to what Lefebvre called a triple dialectic, in this case connecting the historical, the social, and the spatial on equal terms, no one privileged over the others.

This now brings me to your second question, about the relevance of Spatial Justice struggles given the extreme poverty and deprivation found in many developing countries. Given the history of Western imperialism and orientalism, there is every reason to be suspicious of such new terms as Spatial Justice being imported and imposed on the non-western world. But it must be remembered that seeking Spatial Justice and the right to the city are not alternatives to the struggle for social justice or human rights, but rather they are concretizing examples and strategic enhancements of these broader projects. It is important to see the search for Spatial Justice as potentially generating new and more effective ways of achieving major human goals such as reducing poverty and disease, fighting racism and other forms of discrimination, and working against environmental degradation and political tyranny.

To paraphrase the leading postcolonial critic and scholar Edward Said, none of us is completely free from struggles over the unjust geographies that we have created and in which we live. Perhaps the most blatant form of "injustice through geography" was South African apartheid and it is no surprise to find that the current political discourse in South Africa talks more of Spatial Justice than most other countries. Although it may not be widely respected internally, the South African constitution explicitly prohibits residential displacement, a spatial injustice that was widely practiced under apartheid. This anti-gentrification law closely reflects the right to the city idea. In South Africa and elsewhere in the developing world, Spatial Justice is not a choice to be taken in competition with other choices. It is a new kind of tool that can be used to advance many different causes and projects.

## Part 5

JSSJ: Thank you. Maybe that will be the last question. To come back to *Postmetropolis*, there was a lot on urban imaginaries, representations of space, discourses on space... There is less of that in *Seeking Spatial Justice*. How would you connect these two fields?



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ES: I will be very brief. *Seeking Spatial Justice*, unlike my preceding books, was aimed at a non-academic audience and more specifically at activists and progressive planning practitioners as a way of encouraging the further translation of spatial theory into strategic political practice. I could not talk about Spatial Justice, however, with discussing spatial theory and such "heavy" topics as the socio-spatial dialectic and ontological debates, topics that trade publishers told me were unacceptable in broad-based popular books. The effort to achieve a kind of compromise between an academic and trade book led me in very diverse directions, all in all very different in scope and content from my earlier work. What unites everything I have ever written, however, is a passionate promotion of a spatial perspective. This is why I begin *Seeking Spatial Justice* by saying that foregrounding a critical spatial perspective and seeing the search for social justice as a struggle over geography can open up new ways of thinking about the subject as well as enriching existing ideas and practices.

JSSJ: Thank you very much!

## Further reading

### Books by Edward Soja referred to in the interview

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### A paper by Edward Soja in *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*

- **SOJA, Edward**, 2009, "[The City and Spatial Justice](#)", *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, n° 1 September 2009.

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