BOOK REVIEW

S. Fainstein: The just city

Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2010, p. 212, ISBN: 0801446554

Justus Uitermark

Thanks to Fainstein's concerted efforts over the last two decades, which have culminated in this seminal book, justice is now once again squarely on the agenda. What, then, is Fainstein's just city? The just city, according to Fainstein, has three components. First, it is democratic in the sense that people have control over their living environments. Fainstein values democracy but immediately qualifies her support as she argues that local democracy can easily result in negative global outcomes (for instance, when an affluent community democratically decides to close itself off from its surroundings). Second, the just city, according to Fainstein, allows diversity of various kinds. However, like democracy, ambitions to create diversity often result in nominally unjust outcomes, as when poor residents are forced to relocate to remote and more expensive estates as part of efforts for social mixing. Third, the just city, according to Fainstein, features equity. Fainstein identifies a number of tensions between these different criteria. For instance, urban renewal policies that force poor minority households to relocate from neighborhoods where they are concentrated may increase diversity at the cost of equity and democracy (Fainstein 2010, p. 73). In case of a tension or trade-off between different criteria, according to Fainstein, equity should prevail; equity is much more central and fundamental to her conception of the just city than democracy and diversity.

Though Fainstein occasionally appears to accept as a matter of course that planners can and should pursue equity, she philosophically grounds her understanding of the just city on John Rawls' concept of the 'veil of ignorance'. The concept is based on the following principle: imagine that societal roles were completely re-fashioned and redistributed and you did not know what role you will be reassigned—what sort of society would you then create? If you are a slave owner, you may reason that, in the reshuffled society, one should be allowed to have slaves. But the principle of the veil of ignorance dictates that you do not know if you will come back as a slave owner in the reincarnated reality—in fact, chances are you won't. For this reason, it is to be expected that slave owners would imagine a world where slavery no longer exists.

J. Uitermark (✉)
Department of Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: uitermark@fsw.eurnl

The argument that planners can and should serve justice brings Fainstein into discussion with two other literatures. The first is Marxism. The book can be read as an extended discussion with David Harvey and others who emphasize the inherently unjust nature of capitalism as a global system. Fainstein argues that planners have a degree of discretion and should use it to serve justice. The second is deliberative planning. In an important critical dialogue with this literature, Fainstein argues that communication and communicative rationality are not enough to ensure a democratic city. To truly serve justice, she suggests, we need to think in terms of outcomes, not only processes.

While Fainstein adopts Rawls' principled and potentially radical argument, at other points she is pragmatic rather than principled (Uitermark 2011). For instance, she prefers the concept of 'equity' to 'equality' for largely pragmatic reasons. Equality, for Fainstein (2010, p. 36), "acts like a magnet for all the objections based on rewards to the most deserving, on questions of the obliteration of incentives, on the trade-off between growth and equality, and on the unfairness of penalizing everyone above the median in the name of the greater good". She therefore prefers the term "equity" which is commonly used in policy analysis and implies 'fairness', which is a "more broadly accepted value than equality. It has the power to gain wider political support than terms that explicitly target the better-off" (Ibid 2010, p. 36). Equity, then, refers not to equal treatment of every individual but to treatment that is "appropriate" or to "public policy that does not favor those who are already better off at the beginning" (Ibid, Fainstein 2010, p. 36). Fainstein thus strives for justice, though not with a capital 'j'. Her goal is not to rethink the foundations of society but to push planners and other decision makers to reconsider what they can do locally.

To illustrate that different outcomes can be achieved within the same global framework, the book compares cases from New York, London and Amsterdam. While Fainstein compares mega-projects in the three cities (see Fainstein 2008), the book's empirical chapters discuss rather different examples, which sometimes makes it difficult to ascertain if the cases reflect broader differences. For instance, Fainstein discusses the development of a sports stadium in New York but not in Amsterdam. Similarly, she looks at the urban renewal of Amsterdam South East but doesn't compare the process to similar urban renewal operations in New York or London systematically. The comparison therefore doesn't tell us in systematic detail how injustices are produced in the various contexts. But it does allow her to argue that national frameworks and local policy decisions produce substantially different planning processes and outcomes.

Scholars who stick to their topic have an edge over those who don't. Fainstein has been thinking and working on justice, planning and cities for decades. This book represents the culmination of her work and an invitation to Marxists, theorists of communicative planning and other scholars to deliberate the possibilities of planning to create a more just world. The book also reflects her position as a planning professor close to practitioners. While many scholars have recently discovered or rediscovered (social) justice or the 'right to the city' as conceptual and political antidotes to the neoliberal and revanchist city, Fainstein's book speaks to (not against) politicians, policy makers and professionals as she provides a set of guidelines that planners might follow to achieve (somewhat) more just cities. I can only hope that the latter accept the invitation to reflect on their work through the prism Fainstein has developed in the *The Just City*.

References

Fainstein, S. (2008). Mega-projects in New York, London and Amsterdam. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 32*(4), 768–785.

Uitermark, J. (2011). An actually existing just city? The fight for the right to the city in Amsterdam. In N. Brenner, M. Mayer, & P. Marcuse (Eds.), *Cities for people, not for profit* (pp. 197–214). Blackwell: Oxford.