
Review

Seeking spatial justice

Edward W. Soja

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2010, xviii + 256pp.,
£18.50/\$24.95, ISBN: 978-0816666683

Contemporary Political Theory (2013) **12**, e16–e18. doi:10.1057/cpt.2011.40

Over the past half century, struggles for justice have become ever more diverse in their focus, with emphases on social, environmental and racial justice efforts overlapping and reinforcing one another. In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Edward W. Soja makes an extended case for including *spatial* justice as a broad-ranging alternative to conceptualizing justice, recounting the theoretical and practical origins of his development of a concept of justice as seen from a ‘critical spatial perspective’ (p. 2). Using struggles in and around Los Angeles to demonstrate practices of spatial justice, Soja weaves together accounts of coalition-building politics and university-community engagement to draw attention to the development of theoretical knowledge about space through practical engagement in justice struggles.

Soja documents and endorses a ‘spatial turn’ toward thinking about the significance of space in shaping and conditioning human life. This turn, evident to Soja in geography but also in sociology, political science and anthropology over the last 30 years, marks the inclusion of space alongside history and society as lenses through which to interpret and engage contemporary politics. Not wanting to dismiss social and historical perspectives entirely, Soja attempts to walk a fine line amidst society, history and space, describing them as a ‘triple dialectic’ of ‘fundamental or ontological qualities of human existence, from which all knowledge follows’ (p. 70). *Seeking Spatial Justice* represents an attempt to encourage readers to adopt this spatial perspective as a corrective against the dominant social-historical approach in the social sciences.

In particular, through his focus on the reintroduction of space into social and political thought, Soja aims to establish a concept of spatial justice by applying ‘a critical spatial perspective to what is more familiarly known as social justice’, and interprets numerous accounts of coalition-led actions in the Los Angeles region as examples of struggles for spatial justice (p. 6). According to this account, spatial justice describes justice struggles that attend to concerns

over how space is used and how decisions about the use and design of particular spaces are determined.

Soja understands spatial justice to be at play in many of the recent organized struggles in the Los Angeles region. Through a retelling of the history of social activism and urban development in the region, Soja argues that over the past two decades Los Angeles became uniquely situated for justice movements to flourish, largely in response to how neoliberal globalization had transformed the local labor market and the broader economy. He opens the book recounting the Bus Riders Union legal decision, which obligated the regional transportation authority to reorient bus-based transit around transit-dependent communities, instead of investing in high-profile rail projects that served wealthier commuters. Soja also discusses community-university organization against a planned Wal-Mart in Inglewood and the efforts to retain a community garden in South Central Los Angeles. And although 'there was no overt mention of spatial or territorial justice, nor were there any explicit claims about the right to the city' in these actions, Soja sees a desire for spatial justice present in them, and, consequently, evidence of a changed perspective on social justice that includes space as a key issue (p. 186).

Through numerous examples based in Los Angeles, Soja seeks, and finds, spatial justice in social justice actions even as he acknowledges that participants do not mobilize the language or concepts of spatial justice. While he claims that 'interpreting what happened through a critical spatial perspective and its wide-ranging geographical imagination adds significant insight and understanding to conventional commentaries', Soja does not demonstrate effectively what precisely is added (p. 35). In many ways, his descriptions of these events parallel conventional accounts of coalition-building politics in social justice struggles. In one way or another, all social justice struggles can be interpreted to have a spatial aspect, as Soja admits (p. 207); it is unclear, however, what was notably spatial about these particular instances of popular action in contrast to other forms of political action.

Seeking Spatial Justice also claims that the theoretical accounts of spatiality and urban living that emerged out of UCLA's Urban Planning Program, where Soja has been a professor since 1972, influenced how the various justice movements in Los Angeles developed and strategized. Soja makes a compelling case for the unique contributions in spatial theory that came from current and former faculty and students in the program, based on their community engagement in coalition building and justice struggles. However, the connection between the theoretical-conceptual insights and the practical-political work is weakly demonstrated; it remains unclear how, exactly, the theoretical developments informed or shaped the political struggles. Soja has great enthusiasm for a 'critical theoretical' approach to the relationship between theory and practice (p. 69), and repeatedly praises 'the two-way flow

of ideas' between UCLA's Urban Planning program and regional justice struggles (p. 145), but the impact of theory on political practice is not made evident in his account of university-community engagement in Los Angeles. Soja finds spatial justice at work in analyses of these movements, but it is not sufficiently clear how, or if, a critical spatial perspective influenced them.

In contrast to the movements he analyzes, Soja does not find spatial justice in academic accounts of justice movements before the late twentieth century. Throughout the book, Soja criticizes academics for not using the term spatial justice, suggesting an antipathy on their part toward an overly deterministic notion of space prevalent in mid-nineteenth century geography. He repeatedly reminds readers that the term spatial justice has rarely been used, even as other geographers, notably David Harvey, used parallel concepts such as territorial justice and geographies of injustice. But Soja is insistent, for reasons he does not fully explain, that spatial justice is a conceptual improvement over these other terms, chiefly because the other concepts 'deflect the search for a deeper understanding of the consequential spatiality of justice' (p. 225). A more rigorous defense of the language of spatial justice would illuminate why spatial justice is conceptually superior to territorial justice or geographies of injustice.

Perhaps the most limiting aspect of Soja's book from a political theory perspective is his use of the concept of justice. Like 'spatial', the concept of justice is underdeveloped. Soja briefly discusses John Rawls' work as an example of a universalizing and despatializing notion of justice, while stating that Iris Young's writings represent a corrective that includes 'respecting difference and pluralistic solidarity' (pp. 76–79). Soja traces the emergence of the concept of spatial justice in the writings of David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre, highlighting how they provided the initial tools to conceptualize spatial justice. Justice carries a vague sense of fairness for Soja, yet it is not clear what a just society or decision entails. Instead, Soja uses justice as a catch-all term to describe a condition that progressive politics aims for.

Overall, *Seeking Spatial Justice* offers a novel interpretation of justice struggles as struggles over how space is organized. Soja provides a reflective and optimistic account of the connections between theoretical and practical work and how they can be mutually constructive. Although the links between these are not fully illustrated, and its central concepts remain underdeveloped, the book presents a broad overview of developments in geography around debates over space, and makes an impassioned case for thinking about space as a site for political contestation.

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