



**Partecipazione e Conflitto**  
\* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*  
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>  
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)  
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)  
**PACO, Issue 7(3) 2014: 682-685**  
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v7i3p682

Published in November 15, 2014

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

**Edward W. Soja (2010), *Seeking spatial justice*, Minneapolis ; London : University of Minnesota press, series: *Globalization and Community*, ISBN: 978-0-8166-6668-3, p. 256.**

Soja has written a book with a strong commitment to increase the awareness of groups and social movements about spatial justice. The key idea developed throughout this volume on the production of unjust geography, is what the UCLA geographer describes as the successful experience of collaboration between academia and the social movements of the city of Los Angeles in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The main objective is to show that the production of space is driven by different forces: in agreement with the analysis of David Harvey, he claims one driving force to be the political and economic power of the exploitative effect of capitalistic accumulation. However, multiple other forces contribute to shaping geography, such as racism, religious fundamentalism, gender discrimination plus other that are not necessarily designed to reinforce class differences like the drawing of electoral district, the localization of schools or hospitals, the location of toxic facilities and so on.

Soja's analysis is mainly focused on the city and its social movements, but the peculiarity is that it is also a (self)analysis of how academia needs to interact with these movements in order to raise their awareness as well as providing an alternative form of education which is more committed to translating urban planning theory into practice.

The book is organized into six chapters. It starts with a first descriptive part, where Soja broadly illustrates the concept of justice and its interconnections with the concept of space. The first chapter, in particular, presents a textual analysis of the literature, seeking the term "spatial justice" and its use, and how it has only become a topic of discussion over the past ten years (with the new century). As the production of space is socially driven and social relationships are often unjust, the same is true for spatial relationship at different geographic scales, as the au-

thor reminds us in its second chapter, where he reviews many forms of unjust geographies at a global, local and regional scale. Soja analyzes the production of unjust geography as caused both by exogenous and endogenous geographies of spatial discrimination: the former is driven by “imposition of political power, cultural domination and social control over individuals and groups” (p. 32) at every scale, from the global division of power that divided the world in First, Second and Third to the administrative drawing of boundaries that created unjust geographies like the banlieues of Paris, the apartheid, Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the gerrymandering. The latter is generated by “endogenous process of locational decision making and the aggregate distributional effects that arise from them” (p. 47), like distributional inequality issue generating struggles over race and environment.

The professor of Urban Planning intends to build a spatial theory of justice by taking into account insights and early ideas expressed by Foucault. In the third chapter he states that there is a need for an ontological restructuring of thought on human existence: most of the social theory has been based on social and historical aspects over spatiality. This has generated what Soja calls an ontological distortion where human life has been limited to two qualities from which all forms of knowledge has followed for over a century. The spatial quality is the third, forgotten, quality of human being. This quality goes beyond the social and temporal ones and it has had a great importance since the end of the last century, as an unprecedented diffusion of critical spatial thinking, called “spatial turn”, has driven many recent forms of engagement, such as the environmental justice movement, in Los Angeles as well as in other cities.

Starting from these assertions, Soja describes how the space concept was integrated with the justice discourse, using a broad literature review. After an overview of the work of many scholars and an almost obsessive search for the term “spatial justice” into the literature, he focuses his attention on two influential scholars, namely Henry Lefebvre and David Harvey. The works of the French philosopher and the Marxist geographer are two important benchmarks for the author, who in the following pages proceeds to pursue a meeting point between their similar, however different visions. Lefebvre’s concept of the *droit à la ville*, or the right to the city and Harvey’s emphasis on the capitalistic process creating social and spatial injustice are two milestones for *Seeking spatial justice*.

Throughout this volume, Soja pursues some points of contact between Harvey and Lefebvre: he gently criticizes Harvey for his marxist vision, that assumes distributive justice as a bourgeois issue – for Marxists the focus point remains the transformation of the social relation of production. Soja seems very satisfied that Harvey, in his recent books and interventions, reached a point of compromise, with Lefebvre’s right to the city, that is to deal with the importance of space and of the city, especially after the crisis of the 2008. Eventually, Harvey reconsiders Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city” and extends it to a broader set of rights, but with attention not to do it in a ‘bourgeois’ way.

The most interesting part of the book starts from the fourth chapter, where Soja describes the history of the different forms of social activism in Los Angeles starting from the 1960s and connecting economy restructuring to the changes in the city geography and the emerging of social struggles, thus identifying the implicit or explicit struggles over geography that these move-

ments represented. Here is the main message of the work, i.e., that the collaboration between academic research and social movement could promote awareness of the importance of space and its unjust production, and ultimately fostering a collaborative strive towards spatial justice.

Soja shows the example of Los Angeles as a model of how scholars can collaborate with social movements to increase space awareness. This example is proposed as the best way to adopt activities (protests and struggle but also researches and politic counter-proposal) against unjust policies.

In this section we find an interesting history of the Los Angeles movements since the 1960s, and their collaboration with academic researchers and young students of UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) that were interested in space-related issues, such as urban planning, geography and architecture. Social movements were part of the case studies including the restructuring of economy into the city and its consequent production of (unjust) spaces.

Movements and academy managed to collaborate against this kind of politics. The movements were around issues like wage, housing, public transportation, labor condition and immigrant condition, and opposing the investment that the local government was ready to make in favor of affluent neighborhoods. This is offered as an interesting piece of evidence of how several movements were able to create different forms of alliance, not only urban but also regional, in the struggle for just politics at different scales. Finally, the last chapter contains some final considerations about the new “spatial fix” after the emerging New Economy, based on its more flexible organization and its growing sectors like finance and real estate, and the 2008’s crisis: urban agglomeration and “city regions” became more important as state sovereignty changed, while there is today a growing awareness about injustice and inequality embedded in this recent shape of neoliberal economy.

Soja concludes by referring back to David Harvey, who in 2009 identified the ongoing financial crisis as a crisis of urbanization due to the capitalistic process related to space – here Harvey develops his earlier argument about accumulation by dispossession – and turns to the need for a renewed struggle over the right to the city. Soja agrees with Harvey when he affirms that crisis is fundamentally urban-generated and the response must be fundamentally urban based, but he also adds other explanations like the previously mentioned multiple forces shaping unjust geography.

According to Soja, in order to recognize all these forces and to contrast them, there is a need to build large coalitions (involving also movements like the environmental justice movement and other movements related to globalization, neoliberalism, global warming etc.). These large coalitions need to organize themselves across geographical scales and to use the critical spatial perspective to resist both unjust geography and capital accumulation.

Soja presents his work as a way of challenging geographers, urban planners and other scholars that deal with space. Taking the example of Los Angeles, he aims to provide them with the tools to show the inequities and to view the problem from the perspective of the poor and the disadvantaged residing in the most deprived areas of the city.

The books provides many interesting insights, the most interesting of which being the presentation of a concrete successful experience, where young scholars from the Urban Plan-

ning Department and the Labor Center at UCLA managed to create a positive collaboration around the issue of space and to develop an effective university-community partnership that reached many effective results.

Despite presenting an interesting review of literature about how spatial and justice theories were combined by scholars, the first section, appears to be somewhat weaker in its methodology and theorizing. There is also a useful reference section at the end of the volume that provides further explanations about the debated topics and the related authors. The second, more practical section is very interesting, although it is not entirely clear how spatial justice can be obtained, how this process can be built, and, ultimately, how the Los Angeles model can be exported into other contexts. Except for the interesting part dedicated to the restructuring of economy and the city, there is a lack of data or charts that could strengthen the author's argument. In any case the work remains a very interesting call and a spur for scholars to work with active societies on the territory with both social and academic objectives through the use of action-research.

(Simon Maurano, University of Bergamo)