

## Seeking Spatial Justice – Edward Soja

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### Critical review

In the beginning of his academic career Edward Soja (1940-2015), an American geographer, focused on African Studies, though he had already been a critic of urban and regional planning, in particular that of the city of Los Angeles. Having paid special attention to the need to provide Geography with new concepts and visions that included perspectives from other fields, Soja aimed to understand reality from a point of view that encompassed each space's sociological and historical context. At theoretical level, he was highly influenced by reference French authors, such as Foucault and Lefebvre, whose concepts he applies to space and to contemporary challenges while never losing sight of the geographical and territorial perspective.

In 2010, after having published several texts on this matter, Soja publishes *Seeking Spatial Justice*. In this book, he aims to further the theory on the relation between space, society and exclusion, which had already been discussed by classic authors such as David Harvey, Henry Lefebvre and Michel Foucault. He also draws on the opinions of more recent authors, such as Don Mitchell and Mustafa Dikeç, among others. Soja assumed that most theoretical urban analysis favours history or sociology-based approaches, which leads to studies focused on time rather than on space. According to him, and as Lefebvre advocated, space is a social product, with social and cultural texture and a crucial element to understand spatial phenomena. He thus advocates what he call spatial turn - a shift that allows for social-spatial dialectics able to consider that human activity is as understandable in time and its social interaction, such as in space. This

does not imply rejecting or neglecting diachronic or social approaches to territory but rather the thought may be developed towards a new space awareness, able to discover different perspectives, produce new theories and handle courses of action based on premises different from those favoured by planning in the last four decades.

Soja declares that “my objective is clear: to stimulate new ways of thinking about and acting to change the unjust geographies in which we live” (p. 5). Therefore, in *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Soja advocates the need to develop the concept of spatial justice - not as an alternative but as a complement to the concepts of environmental justice and social justice - rather absent in literature prior to the 21st century. He bases his analysis on specific instances of territorial claim (as is the case in Los Angeles or the outskirts of Paris). According to him, “that the spatiality of (in)justice (combining justice and injustice in one word) affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography on (in)justice.” (p.5) Soja’s starting point is that human activity in the territory at any historical moment and social context necessarily leads to situations of social injustice, geographies of exclusion (deriving from the hierarchy of places and their central position, their easy or difficult access, public investment or divestment in their quality, etc.). This realization, together with the failure of the principles of urban planning in the second half of the 20thc, which aimed to provide equal access to basic needs in housing, education and employment - makes the term space justice not only a mere theoretical concept for territory analysis, but also a political and strategic objective as it aims to correct territorial injustice. In this context, Soja considers the role of civic organizations that claim fairer territories - and have increasing ability to form associations and partnerships that go beyond their local borders and issues - an item that requires further studies for clearer definition.

The book starts with a theoretical approach, reviewing the literature on space justice so as to contribute to the building of a theoretical framework on this matter. Soja then focuses on the specific case of Los Angeles and discusses the relation

between teaching and practice of urban planning. He concludes with a series of considerations on the pursuit of space justice after September 11 and the 2008 economic crisis.

Criticism to this work has been written by authors such as Paul Chatterton, Kurt Iveson and Kate Derickson, who point out the fact that Soja emphasizes the case of Los Angeles and favours an academic activist perspective while not providing it with the tools that allow the concept to be applied in other contexts. Moreover, they indicate that creating a new concept of space justice may not bring any advantages to the already established concept of social justice. Soja responds saying that the political aspect of the concept makes it more an objective than a tool and, thus, with more accurate indicators. He states that “However one sees the relation between spatial and social justice, seeking specifically spatial justice can add new and interesting strengths and strategies to justice struggles of all kinds, and especially to the building of cohesive, lasting and innovative coalitions across divisive lines of class, race and gender.” (Soja, 2011, p. 262).

Despite the criticism, Soja’s work has had significant impact, and the concept of space justice has been studied, either from a more theoretical or from a more practical perspective in several academic fields. In the 21st century, at a time when globalization is increasing important in terms of territory and leading to space injustice, local approaches are also growing that aim to fight exclusion - both local and global - by resorting to local and global tools, alliances and references. In this framework, the relation between space and justice, though still lacking in study and analysis, is more and more pervasive and Soja’s legacy one to take into consideration in the next few years.

Edward W. Soja (2011): Response to Kurt Iveson: ‘Social or Spatial Justice? Marcuse and Soja on the Right to the City’. In *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*. 15:2, 2011, p. 260-262.

Edward Soja – Seeking Spatial Justice. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.