

**Excerpts from “The city and spatial justice”**

Edward Soja, Paper prepared for presentation at the conference *Spatial Justice*, Nanterre, Paris, March 12-14, 2008.

The specific term “spatial justice” has not been commonly used until very recently, and even today there are tendencies among geographers and planners to avoid the explicit use of the adjective “spatial” in describing the search for justice and democracy in contemporary societies. Either the spatiality of justice is ignored or it is absorbed (and often drained of its specificity) into such related concepts as territorial justice, environmental justice, the urbanization of injustice, the reduction of regional inequalities, or even more broadly in the generic search for a just city and a just society.

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**Why spatial ? Why now ?**

1. Whatever your interests may be, they can be significantly advanced by adopting a critical spatial perspective. This is the premise that lies behind practically everything I have written over the past forty years and is the first sentence in *Seeking Spatial Justice*, the title of a book I am currently writing.

2. Thinking spatially about justice not only enriches our theoretical understanding, it can uncover significant new insights that extend our practical knowledge into more effective actions to achieve greater justice and democracy. Obversely, by not making the spatial explicit and assertive, these opportunities will not be so evident.

3. After a century and a half of being subsumed under a prevailing social historicism, thinking spatially has in the past decade been experiencing an extraordinary diffusion across nearly all disciplines. Never before has a critical spatial perspective been so widespread in its recognition and application—from archeology and poetry to religious studies, literary criticism, legal studies, and accounting.

4. This so-called spatial turn is the primary reason for the attention that is now being given to the concept of spatial justice and to the broader spatialization of our basic ideas of democracy and human rights, as in the revival of Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city, of particular relevance here in Nanterre. Whereas the concept would not have been easily comprehensible even five years ago, today it draws attention from a much broader audience than the traditionally spatial disciplines of geography, architecture, and urban and regional planning.

5. Thinking about space has changed significantly in recent years, from emphasizing flat cartographic notions of space as container or stage of human activity or merely the physical dimensions of fixed form, to an active force shaping human life. A new emphasis on specifically urban spatial causality has emerged to explore the generative effects of urban agglomerations not just on everyday behavior but on such processes as technological innovation, artistic creativity, economic development, social change as well as environmental degradation, social polarization, widening income gaps, international politics, and, more specifically, the production of justice and injustice.

6. Critical spatial thinking today hinges around three principles:

- a) The ontological spatiality of being (we are all spatial as well as social and temporal beings).
- b) The social production of spatiality (space is socially produced and can therefore be socially changed).

c) The socio-spatial dialectic (the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial).

7. Taking the socio-spatial dialectic seriously means that we recognize that the geographies in which we live can have negative as well as positive consequences on practically everything we do. Foucault captured this by showing how the intersection of space, knowledge, and power can be both oppressive and enabling. Building on Foucault, Edward Said states the following: “Just as none of us are beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”

8. These ideas expose the spatial causality of justice and injustice as well as the justice and injustice that are embedded in spatiality, in the multi-scalar geographies in which we live, from the space of the body and the household, through cities and regions and nation-states, to the global scale.

9. Until these ideas are widely understood and accepted, it is essential to make the spatiality of justice as explicit and actively causal as possible. To redefine it as something else is to miss the point and the new opportunities it opens up.

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Los Angeles has been a primary center not just in the theorization of spatial justice but more significantly in the movement of the concept from largely academic debate into the world of politics and practice. I believe it can be claimed, although it is almost impossible to prove conclusively, that a critical spatial perspective and an understanding of the production of unjust geographies and spatial structures of privilege have entered more successfully into the strategies and activism of labor and community groups in LA than in any other US metropolitan region. Spatial strategies have played a key role in making Los Angeles the leading edge of the American labor movement and one of the most vibrant centers for innovative community based organizations....

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the impact of specifically spatial approaches in the search for justice is the Bus Riders Union, an organization of the transit-dependent immigrant working poor that successfully challenged the locational biases of the Metropolitan Transit Authority and their plans for creating a multi-billion dollar fixed rail system that would primarily serve relatively wealthy suburban population at the expense of the more urgent needs of the inner city working poor, who depend on a more flexible bus network given their multiple and multi-locational job households. A court order was issued in 1996 that demanded that the MTA give first budget priority to the purchase of new buses, reduction of bus stop crime, and improvements in bus routing and waiting times. ... In LA, the notion of spatial and locational discrimination, the creation of unjust geographies of mass transit, was added to the racial discrimination arguments and helped to win the case. There are many complications to the story, but the end result was a shift of billions of dollars of public investment from a rail plan that would benefit the rich more than the poor, as is usually the case in the capitalist city, to an almost unprecedented plan that would benefit the poor more than the rich.