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Spatializing the urban, Part I

Edward Soja

My comments here are instigated in part by the response I received last year from my presumptuous search engine after entering 'spatial justice'. Do you mean social justice?' I was asked. No, I wanted to scream back, but I knew no one would be listening. While keeping to the spirit established in this journal of stimulating continuing debate on 'urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action', I will begin by explaining why I am so insistent on the specific term spatial justice. Framing my response to the eight excellent commentaries on *Seeking Spatial Justice* contained in this issue is the assertion and assumption that *putting 'spatial' first, before justice as well as many other terms and concepts, is not only useful and revealing but will increasingly shape critical debates on both urban theory and urban politics and practice.*

I begin with a reference to what the critical realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar once called 'ontological struggle'. Reconstructing an appropriate ontology for urban studies is a necessary step toward better urban theory, empirical analysis, policy making and political practice. More specifically, this ontological restructuring primarily involves achieving a new balance between historical, spatial and social perspectives after a century and a half of hegemonic social historicism, during which the historical development of sociality, of individual biography and collective social life, took priority and epistemological privilege over the spatiality of life. Restoring the balance of the ontological triad or trialectic, as I once called it, wherein our social existence is seen as simultaneously spatial and temporal, geographical and historical, without either being intrinsically privileged over the other, is fundamental to building

more effective critical (urban) theory and practice.

To achieve this rebalanced ontology will require a period in which, almost as a form of affirmative action, the spatial will be strategically and assertively foregrounded, put first to make up for its marginalization as mere background container or stage under the impress of a hegemonic social historicism. This will mean going beyond the timid lament that space matters to recognize more cogently the far-reaching causal and explanatory power of the human geographies we produce and within which we live. Caution is necessary in promoting this assertive critical spatial perspective to avoid simply replacing social and historical determinisms with purely spatial ones. Such caution, however, should not prevent a determined and trans-disciplinary effort to reconstitute a three-sided rather than binary ontology of being, moving beyond Heidegger's *Zeit und Sein* to include a resounding *Raum* as well.

In many ways, thinking about the social world needs to become more like what thinking about the physical or natural world has always been: rooted in a three-sided ontology in which the material world (matter, energy) is seen as inherently spatial and temporal. Privileging time over space (or the reverse) becomes patently absurd. These ontological remarks underpin my insistence on maintaining if not asserting the importance of the spatial in understanding justice and many other fundamental social and historical concepts and developments. *Seeking Spatial Justice* is not just a descriptive exploration of the geography of social justice but a much more comprehensive attempt to spatialize the concept at all levels of knowledge formation: from ontology to

epistemology, theory-building, empirical study and social praxis. My discussion of the commentaries contained in this issue of *City* reflects the idea that just being spatial, using spatial metaphors and terminology, is not enough. Spatializing social justice requires an interpretive commitment to what might be called the precession of the spatial in theory and practice.

Putting space first ... and demanding more

Seeking Spatial Justice, as nearly all commentators notice, is driven by a determined advocacy of a critical spatial perspective, something I have been doing in all my academic writings. What is different about *SSJ* is its more specific concern for how a critical spatial perspective has begun to spread beyond the academic realm and into social and political practice, significantly influencing the mobilization, identity, cohesion and strategic actions of urban social movements. For some very special reasons that are discussed in detail in *SSJ*, this process started most successfully in Los Angeles but has been emerging in new and interesting ways in other major urban regions and activist organizations.

The expanded practical and political role of spatial theory has made me more confident than ever before of the inherent power of spatial thinking and the attendant practical and theoretical payoffs that come from putting space as an interpretive perspective first rather than subordinating it to more social and historical modes of analysis. This has reinforced my insistence on interpreting justice as specifically and inherently spatial rather than seeing it as merely the geographical dimension of social justice, or attaching to justice such other labels as environmental or territorial. Spatial justice, in my view, should not be reduced to just another variant of social justice or one of many attributes and aspects that can be ranked and compared on some scale of inherent importance. My intent in *SSJ* is not to compete with these alternative terms but to supplement their usefulness

through a *critical spatialization* of justice as a concept, a rethinking in which the spatiality of justice is not only a descriptive material dimension but also a generative, explanatory, and causal force in and of itself.

The only exception to my insistence on the specific term spatial justice is the synonymous use of Henri Lefebvre's (1968) original and assertively spatial concept of right to the city (RTTC). So convergent are the two concepts, that I considered changing the title to reflect the virtual equivalence of seeking spatial justice and struggling over the right to the city. As several commentators note and I agree, activists are likely to find RTTC more tangible and familiar a mobilizing metaphor than *SSJ*, just as a few decades ago more politically appealing notions of environmental justice attracted activist geographers and other spatial thinkers. What I do not find acceptable, however, is an occlusive substitution in which the assertive spatiality and attention to urban spatial causality that is inherent in Lefebvre's conceptualization is lost or blocked from view, as I think has been occurring in recent discussions of the RTTC that reductively refocus the debate around, for example, the search for a just city or worse, bland (neo)liberal calls for egalitarian democracy and/or universal human rights.

Continuing to be inspired by the unfettered spatial insights of Henri Lefebvre (1996), I build into nearly every chapter of *SSJ* a vigorous argument that not only does space matter, but that a critical spatial perspective has the power to advance our knowledge in new and innovative ways whatever subject one chooses to explore. Putting space first as an explanatory perspective and/or political strategy, I argue from the start, has the potential to open up enriching and often unexpected possibilities for both theoretical and practical political innovation. These payoffs arising from foregrounding a critical spatial perspective are illustrated more vividly by what may eventually be considered one of the most important geographical discoveries of the past century: that specifically urban spatial causality or what I called synekism, the stimulus of

urban agglomeration, may be the *primary* cause of economic growth, technological innovation and cultural creativity. Urbanization (delivered and lived of course by human agency) is not the only cause of societal development and change, but it is being posited today—most often I might add by non-geographers—as *the most important* generative force.

Urban spatial causality and the generative effects of cities have recently entered economics textbooks as Jane Jacobs externalities, honoring the author of *The Economy of Cities* (1969), where the idea was first systematically approached. Jacobs would also argue that urbanization has been the primary driving force behind all forms of societal development over the past 12,000 years, starting with the urban generation of the agricultural revolution, standing on its head the long accepted canons asserting agriculture as the necessary predecessor to urban development. While the wider implications of these discoveries are yet to be felt and the barriers to acceptance remain formidable, I can think of no stronger assertion of the significant societal effects of the making of human geographies or what Lefebvre called the (social) production of (social) space.

Putting space first has been sustained and stimulated further through the impact of what has been called the spatial turn. More than ever before, an awareness of at least the potential importance of a critical spatial perspective has spread throughout the humanities and social sciences as well as into such professional fields as Law and Theology. What was almost incomprehensible twenty years ago—and this includes the spatial writings of Lefebvre, Foucault and Jacobs—has now become not only more familiar but, in many cases, superficially fashionable, little more than using spatial metaphors such as mapping, landscape, topography or that. However one views this spatial turn, it has expanded in unprecedented ways the academic and popular audience for discussions about the significance of the spatiality of social life. This reinforces the

idea that *recognition and further exploration of urban spatial causality, the enormous generative and explanatory power of the way we organize urban geographies, will significantly shape the development of urban studies in the 21st century.*

For this to happen, however, the generative force of cities (and perhaps also the form and focus of debates that occur in *City*) must be cogently aware of the socio-spatial dialectic and wrapped in a balanced understanding of geography and history (geohistory), and not descend into simplistic spatial determinisms. Keeping in critical balance the ontological sociality, historicity and spatiality of life is necessary to achieve such immediate goals in urban studies as fostering the combinatoric synergies of urban cultural studies and urban geopolitical economy, advancing and connecting the political agendas of many different ‘socio-spatial’ movements (as they need to be called today), and more generally creating innovative ways of transforming theory into practice, knowledge into action.

Varying resistances: cautious but supportive nods from practitioners and activists

At least from the eight commentaries on *SSJ* contained in this issue, there is a great deal of variation in how far my arguments about the ontological, theoretical and practical significance of putting space first are accepted. Given the preamble, my first overall response is to urge everyone, no matter how strong their spatial perspective may be, to expand the scope of their geographical imaginations. Whether engaged in critical theorizing or active practice, thinking spatially about justice and participatory democracy can have significant payoffs.

Although there are exceptions, I think there is a broad patterning of responses, with those more involved in practice and action more willing to accept a strong spatial perspective while more academic commentators, especially geographers, feel more

comfortable with a traditional ‘flat’ spatial perspective, in which space is seen in just its materialized form as mappable background environment, important to be sure but with little explanatory, generative or causal power.

Martin Woessner, currently involved in the Center for Worker Education at CUNY, is about as creatively and insightfully understanding of my assertive spatial perspective as I can possibly ask for and I am very grateful to him for establishing such a clear and positive comparative marker. He is also the only commentator to recognize the critical importance of ontological rethinking and its role in freeing the assertive power of a critical spatial perspective from the smothering effects of persistent social historicism, rekindling my hope that these ontological issues will continue to play a role in the debates contained in and sparked by this journal.

Reverend Andrew Davey, one of the leading progressive political activists in the UK, also strikes similarly supportive chords about the importance of a critical spatial theory of justice while understandably raising the important observation that spatial strategies are not the monopoly of progressive forces. European fascist and far-right parties (just as I might add the most powerful global corporations) use spatial strategies in remarkably sophisticated ways to reinforce spatial structures of social control, cultural and racial oppression, and political economic advantage. Davey hopefully points to such organizations as Unite Against Fascism and Hope not Hate as well as variations on the struggle over the right to the city as a means of reorganizing to change the unjust geographies encouraged and sustained by such groups as the British National Party and English Defence League.

My spatial assertiveness is accepted more cautiously by such activist commentators as Andrea Gibbons and Jon Liss, but I greatly appreciate their somewhat skeptical support and especially their very cogent insights into the contrasting spatial imaginations of activists and theoreticians. Gibbons in ‘Bridging theory and practice’ wonders whether theorizing spatial justice helps very much in

‘actually imagining change’ and convincingly argues that practitioners do far better at this imagining than theoreticians. She does not doubt, however, that her activist experience in Los Angeles revolved around struggles for spatial justice, although they were never labeled as such. She goes on to raise vital questions about how to build a radical and effective praxis and ends with a gentle demand that theorizing spatial justice needs to provide more inspiration for such building and growing. *This represents a challenge to all critical theorists, spatially informed or not, to appreciate the difficulty and complexity of the translation of theory into practice, what is often described as praxis.*

The activist Jon Liss, co-founder of the Right to the City Alliance along with Gilda Haas (former executive director of SAJE, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy in Los Angeles, where Andrea Gibbons worked), is also Executive Director of Tenants and Workers United in Alexandria, Virginia. Liss makes a brilliantly detailed argument about how spatial analysis and a vivid spatial consciousness are at the core of ‘all of the most advanced organizing work’. But he also notes that no one uses the explicit term ‘spatial justice’. As with many of the commentators, there is a political and theoretical preference for the right to the city idea rather than the more abstract sounding and still not widely understandable term spatial justice. *Especially with regard to the continuing transformation of spatial theory into spatial practice, there must be continuing debate on the strategic significance of mobilizing political metaphors and complementary alternatives to spatial justice such as the right to the city, environmental justice, territorial justice and the just city.*

Liss applauds the work of the UCLA Urban Planning department but insightfully challenges me to critically evaluate the major labor community coalitions I discuss, including the Bus Riders Union, LAANE, and the RTTC Alliance. Jane Wills, as a leading academic activist in contemporary urban struggles in the UK, addresses similar issues

in her essay on 'Academic agents for change'. The achievements of the Urban Planning department at UCLA are recognized, appreciated and linked to ambitious developments in the Department of Geography at Queen Mary—University of London. Wills also, like Liss, turns the critique around to focus on the new labor–community organizations themselves, both in Los Angeles (unconvinced by arguments that seeking spatial justice was vital to coalition building) and in London, where she describes the growth of the London Citizens organization as a much more traditional community-based social movement (with little or no attention given to space or spatial justice thinking).

While applauding my passionate spatial advocacy, Wills politely suggests that my attachment to spatial justice may have 'clouded' my analysis of the role played 'by political resources, relationship-building and pragmatism in pursuing coalition politics'. Reacting to this reasonable critique, I want to make it clear that my attachment to spatial justice (and to putting space first) is not meant to preclude the importance of other factors affecting the growth of new coalitions, but rather to suggest that all these other influences and contingencies need to be seen as spatial too. That I do not do enough of this kind of analysis and organizational critique in *SSJ* is a perfectly valid point, one that relates to Liss's request for deeper analysis of all the new coalitions. My concern is only that coalition-building in all its aspects continues to be seen as inherently spatial or spatio-temporal and not as some abstract social or organizational process.

Wills, a geographer, displays a weaker version of what is often the reaction of geographers to assertively putting space first—that is, a hesitance if not actual resistance to promoting too great an emphasis on spatial or geographical causality. She speaks of the 'stubborn cartography of injustice' in London, for example, rather than the more pointed spatiality or geography of injustice. Spatiality may sound too abstract, but surely calling it an unjust geog-

raphy or a stubborn geography of injustice would be easily understood. In her reaction to over-spatializing, Wills for me provides a transition from the commentaries of the activists to the more academic and theoretical interventions.

Academic reactions: moving beyond the spatial debates?

The comments of Iveson, Chatterton and Cunningham sidestep some of the more assertive statements about the precession of the spatial to present three very different and informative reinterpretations of *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Kurt Iveson in his reflections from Sydney uses *SSJ* as a springboard for a fascinating exploration of the struggles of the Battlers of Kelly's Bush in Sydney, and comparisons of *SSJ* with the book *Power in Coalition*, written by Amanda Tattersall (2010), director of the newly formed Sydney Alliance, Australia's version of the London Citizens organization and the labor–community coalitions of Los Angeles.

The story of the Battlers, the related Green Ban movement, and the new Sydney Alliance are refreshingly examined as explicitly spatial in their mobilization, objectives and strategies. Particularly interesting was the important entry of the labor movement into what were essentially local community struggles, a key feature of the Los Angeles coalitions discussed in *SSJ* but very different from London Citizens, where union locals and labor–community ties are buried under overly centralized national politics. I was left wanting to know more about the Australian case, for example, whether there are any examples of what in Los Angeles has been called community-based regionalism. Iveson's essay effectively reinforces the comments of several others about *the need to engage in rigorous comparative studies of contemporary coalition building and urban-based socio-spatial movements, especially those inspired by the struggle over spatial justice and/or the right to the city.*

Paul Chatterton's commentary, 'Seeking the urban common', revolves around a stimulating and challenging exploration of the synergies between *SSJ* and Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth*. Chatterton, like the others, is supportive and enthusiastic about *SSJ* and uses the term space a lot, but I could not help feeling that too little attention was being given to urban spatial causality and the implications of the socio-spatial dialectic in his reading of *Commonwealth*. Do Hardt and Negri, for example, recognize that the commons is fundamentally spatial (not just urban) in its causes and consequences, that it is assertively spatial and not just a social and historical phenomenon? Do they address the expansion of the commons concept to the national and global scale or the degree to which legal obsession with private property rights needs to be directly challenged in the reformation of the commons, as I discuss in *SSJ*? Shouldn't a geographer notice the need for Hardt and Negri's discourse, here and in their other works, to be more explicitly and assertively spatialized?

These are merely some chiding asides, for I learned a great deal from Chatterton's stimulating essay. It was additionally reassuring to see someone so closely associated with the journal *Antipode* feel so comfortable actually using the term spatial justice so many times. I mention this given the strong tendency for radical geographers, especially those most influenced by David Harvey, to be suspicious of anyone emphasizing either of the terms spatial and justice, both of which Marxists often associate with bourgeois or diversionary tendencies. Along these lines, however, I wonder if Chatterton has ever considered changing the name of the new research group he helped to create at Leeds from 'Cities and Social Justice' to 'Cities and Spatial Justice' or perhaps even Socio-spatial Justice?

David Cunningham's essay on 'Rights, politics and strategy' goes right to the heart of my arguments in *SSJ* about strategic optimism, the necessity for coalition building, and my claim that a shared spatial

consciousness of oppression can act as a new kind of connective tissue to bring together diverse social movements in large multivalent alliances and associations. For Cunningham, however, such eclectic coalition building may be a step too far, blunting the more radical edges of the right to the city idea and more aggressive struggles for spatial justice. These comments connect well with several other commentaries noting the need to critically analyze even the most successful examples of coalition building.

Cunningham goes on, however, to identify with David Harvey's alleged position that in the end the issue is capitalism, full stop. Through this positioning, a certain antagonism against spatial thinking enters the debate and the language changes to suggest the lingering effects of social historicism, with mention of the privileging of 'social forces' in 'social reality' and what seemed to me the somewhat contradictory advocacy for the use of justice and universal human rights (*sans* their fundamental spatiality) as powerful political rallying cries. The forceful spatiality of capitalism almost disappears in the midst of a relentless fear of radical ideas being reduced to mere reformism.

These Marxian orthodoxies lead Cunningham to attack me for spanning too much of the political spectrum and for 'dubious political judgments', claiming that I do not blame the IMF and World Bank enough for leading the world into poverty (rather than merely following the logic of capital). In response, I want not only to say that I would never dismiss the immediate responsibility of the IMF and so many other global organizations and institutions for the 'horrible immiseration' of the developing world, but at the same time I remain uncomfortable with the tightly closed doors of capitalist reductionism. *Capitalism is not the only issue, nor should we reduce the causes of all injustices purely to the demands of capitalist accumulation.*

I make this argument, here and in *SSJ*, not as an apologist for capitalism or the IMF nor as a deluded political actor who has spread

his inclusiveness too widely, but as a geographer-planner committed to finding some room between reformism and revolution for radical spatial praxis, as a teacher of committed activists who see the need to go beyond reducing everything to capitalism's perpetual imprint, as a strategically optimistic urban analyst who sees the urgent need for building flexible and cross-cutting coalitions even when they stretch beyond conventional class or race or gender boundaries, and finally as a scholar-activist who believes that Marxism is not like pregnancy or death, demanding 100% allegiance. Pure capitalism or pure socialism are not and should not be the only choices, nor is it intolerable to be, say, 80% Marxist and committed not to socialist revolution now (or reflexive anti-Marxism) but to the cross-cutting goal of making capitalism as socialist as possible.

I am sure I will pick up this issue again in the next volume of *City* and in response to another set of commentaries on *SSJ*. For now, I want to thank Bob Catterall for organizing this extraordinary forum and all the commentators for their thoughtful and much appreciated contributions. I look forward to continuing the debates.

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