



Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory

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Building on the work of Foucault, Giddens, Jameson and Lefebvre, one of America's geographers argues for a rethinking of the dialectics of space, time and social being.

Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory Details

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From Reader Review Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory for online ebook

Peter says

Nice summations of various critical spatial perspectives.

Lauren says

This is definitely less accessible than some of Soja's other work, but it does provide a productive overview of some of Lefebvre. This is definitely a book about Marxist geography/theories of spatiality at its heart -- Soja is dealing with spatiality and class struggle, but he's also clarifying why spatiality has to be discussed contextually rather than solely through materiality.

"We make our own history and geography, but not just as we please; we do not make them under circumstances chosen by ourselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the historical geographies produced in the past" (p. 129). Space is a product of the social as well as the material and, in fact, the material is shaped by the social. Studying only the measurable appearances of space rather than the contextual, social spatiality of human life reduces space to just physical objects that exist without political process or human influence.

Perla Toro says

In this moment I am reading this book.

Iany Mcgrawn says

I loved
Was amazing, I really love it

Donald Whale says

Definitely a must read for geographers and students of social science, but I was surprised by how much Soja leaned on past literature

Michael Alarid says

Soja is the man.

Andrew says

Edward Soja is the absolute shit, but this is NOT a good starting point for his works. Postmetropolis is far more accessible. That said, this is really good. For us indignant folks with geospatial imaginations, this is an INTENSELY well-researched excursion into the exclusion of spatial analysis from the critical sphere. Probably not for the general reader, or even the general academic reader (at least in its entirety), though. It's quite dense, and heavily reliant on an at least passing familiarity with Harvey, Jameson, &c. However, I strongly recommend the chapter "Reassertions: Towards a Spatialized Ontology" for anyone interested in critical theory. It's in this chapter that Soja's spatial vision is most lucid, and it's damn interesting.

Kat says

I found this book fascinating although it should be noted my tolerance for academic Marxism is very high and I can't imagine someone getting much out of it unless they fit a very specific criteria! But from the perspective of a sociologist (with a philosophy background) lured into geography by the appeal of Henri Lefebvre this was the most excited I have been reading nonfiction in years.

Katrinka says

Excellent so far.

Steve says

Geesh. Don't read this.

Okay, that is harsh, but the book is basically a history of spatial theory with a heavy bent toward Marxist theorists. And lots of capitalism and economics going on. Just wasn't my cup of tea. Very academic, by the way. Very, very academic. This person said that, and that person said this.

The last two chapters looked hopeful: It All Comes Together in Los Angeles and Taking Los Angeles Apart: Towards a Postmodern Geography. But they weren't, really. Chapter eight went through economic numbers from 1890 to the present--circa 1989. Chapter nine tried then to give you a feel for the city, but I found Soja's analysis of Los Angeles lacking.

Mesut Bostanc? says

Verso books has made available one of Edward W. Soja's first published works as part of its radical thinkers series. Postmodern Geographies is an early meditation on the question of space in capitalism and geography in modern critical theory. One might wonder about the

relevancy of this to radical politics while wading through passages on spatialized ontology, but in fact the refocus on this work comes at a perfect time to help rethink political upheavals that have occurred in just the last few weeks.

In the recent uprising in Egypt which ousted the octagenarian thug Hosni Mubarak, Tahrir Square became the symbolic and literal center of the aspirations of a wide-range of Egyptians hoping to awake from the oppressive doldrums of 30 years of emergency laws and neo-liberal social decay. World-wide television viewers were treated to daily images of endless crowds of protestors, dramatic street battles, and eventually the jubilation that filled the square when Mubarak begrudgingly stepped down. Reporters were on hand to record the slogans, the acts of social solidarity, and the faces of Egyptians themselves; many of whom were experiencing the freedom to assemble freely for the first time in their lives.

For an uprising that is credited as having been originally started online using social media, it is remarkable to see how important a physical geographical place became in deciding the fate of the movement in Egypt. Despite any praise on the part of the media that served to fetishize technology and the role of these new online forms of communication in reshaping social movements, in the end it was people on the ground, occupying central squares and factories across Egypt, which brought about tangible change. Further revolts have brought to our attention similar locations in other World capitals. And in America, the capital building in Madison, Wisconsin has become a focal point by being occupied by public employer unions and supporters staging a protest against anti-labor legislation meekly disguised as budgetary policy measures. It seems as though taking control of public space in order to create a central point of resistance has done more in a few weeks in these situations than merely blogging and tweeting could have ever done.

There is something refreshingly old fashioned about seeing this kind of street politics reemerging. Of course we cannot be grateful for the outrageous injustices that have brought people out to the streets. But seeing the classic images of marching columns of protestors, barricades, and grassroots rallies is something never seen before by a young leftist raised almost entirely after the collapse of the USSR. There was an aspect of immediacy, something so human, about seeing people stare down the institutions of state oppression face to face. And in reading Soja's insights into the ways in which oppression is now veiled more by geography than history, we can begin to understand the novelty of seeing direct political confrontation in public space.

Postmodern Geographies is a collection of 9 essays which each deal with aspects of space in critical social theory. Starting with a history of the resistance to the conceptualization of space in critical theory, Soja explains how geography was often neglected for being considered to be stilted, empirical, and thoroughly undialectical as opposed to the preferred focus on time and history. He gives a thorough summary of why space has often been pushed to the side by the injunction to "always historicize". Showing the extent of this resistance, He is able to exhibit the originality of Henri Lefebvre's thought in approaching space as well as tracing the awakening of Michel Foucault to the usefulness that geography would have in his own investigation of social institutions. We are also shown how other big names in critical theory have incorporated spatiality into their works. In a motif that continues through the book, in this historical explanation we begin to see for ourselves how thinking about space offer new perspectives on understanding how the survival of capitalism depends on the creation of space. At this point it is at the micro-level of everyday life, what Lefebvre calls the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption". The essay offers a wealth of academic

sources for anyone interested in how an individual exists within a space constructed to induce consumption and quiescence. Anyone raised in the suburbs can find a fair deal that resonates

with this approach to thinking about space.

In following essays, Soja goes on to narrate the various debates that come with incorporating the concept of spatiality into critical theory. For instance, in the chapter on the “Socio-spatial Dialectic”, we see how difficult it is to conceptualize how exactly social relations of production produce space. Is the built environment a product of this process, or merely part of the “superstructure”? How do we understand a struggle over public space, or rent, using the Marxist form of analysis which is more immediately concerned with the struggle going on in the workplace? Soja provides some fascinating viewpoints and directs our attention towards an understanding of why controlling public space is still important in our contemporary age. Political power is not only interested in controlling what goes on at the point of production or in the realm of ideology, but indeed aims to create a built environment conducive to the survival of capitalism. Class struggle, therefore, must include a fight over the production of space and its “territorial structure of exploitation and domination”. By taking over public space, these recent uprisings in places like Wisconsin and Egypt have made a powerful assertion that a democratic and free sense of space is not one in which capitalism is able to roam “freely”, but instead one where democratic deliberation is present and central. Soja's strengths definitely lie in bringing together theories of space that have as their subject the urban environment. At other levels he doesn't seem as convincing. Although necessary to the stated goal of a comprehensive reassertion of space at all levels of critical theory, his passages on “spatialized ontology” and Anthony Giddens' concept of “structuration” seem particularly unhelpful. He also takes a step in the opposite direction by becoming less theoretical and applying his and other critical theorists' ideas on spatiality to a geographical portrait of Los Angeles. Soja offers some spectacular figures on the immense economic output of Los Angeles, and shows empirically just how fractured and unequal the built environment is. However, after such an excellent explanation of the dialectic of space in capitalism and a strong critique of the resistance to the role of space in critical theory, it seems ironic that his move to exhibiting the real-life example of the capital of postmodern geography seems much more like dry empiricism than dynamic analysis.

As political struggle goes forward, Edward Soja's book will be useful by giving us another approach to envisioning resistance to the logic of capitalism. Using his excellent examination of how capital produces and controls space, it is up to us to work out the implications. Especially given the preliminary and open-ended nature of Postmodern Geographies, the ways in which we can reassert space into our political strategies is ample. When thinking about a fight over use of a public square, or the fate of a marginalized urban group, foreign wars, or even our own individual place in everyday life, it will be fruitful to remember a new injunction: always territorialize!

Mara Eastern says

A demanding but helpful introduction into the past and present of urbanisation and more.

Mohammad Munib says

I picked this book with such promise. It barely made it through the preface.

The problem isn't so much with the content - it's useful as an index if you're interested in this particular area

of study - as it is with the fanboyish pretentiousness with which it is written. I couldn't believe this was a 'distinguished professor' speaking. The jargon just gets to his head. Any point worth making is endlessly regurgitated through awkward rephrasals; sprinkled as they are throughout the prose without any sequencing (as that would go against the ever-so-radical premise of the book). It's infuriating that so many reviews caution away readers from how 'dense' it is - the jargon isn't a cipher for some profound insights which lay beneath, it's just an excited reportage of how his discipline developed over time. The star it does get is for cheering on Lefebvre. *High-Five* - but your writing still sucks.

Malcolm says

As important and useful as this book as a powerful assertion of the need for a spatial awareness in social theory it is very much of its time (the late 1980s) although still worth visiting. Soja is thoroughly correct to note the absence and assert the importance of a spatial dimension to social theory that has for too long privileged the temporal (I say that as a historian). Chapters 3 & 5 remain important and useful (some of the other chapters have not stood the test of time (I write this 20 years after the book came out, although I appreciate his denunciations of Giddens!). Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* is I think more useful although both are hard to grapple with, and it was not available in English when this book came out so for many of us it was our first introduction to Lefebvre.
