

---

## An interview with Susan Fainstein

### Susan Fainstein

Harvard University

### Alex Schafran

University of Leeds

Susan Fainstein is a professor of urban planning in the graduate school of design at Harvard University. She is the author of numerous books, most recently *The Just City*, as well as many edited volumes, including issues ranging from urban tourism to gender and planning, planning theory, and urban theory. Just as importantly, she is one of the great teachers of urban planning, the mentor to many respected practitioners and scholars, having previously taught at Columbia and Rutgers and as a visitor at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Witwatersrand.

This interview was conducted in December 2011, and has been edited and condensed. The interview was conducted in collaboration with Polis Podcast on CoLab Radio ([colabradio.mit.edu/category/polis-podcast/](http://colabradio.mit.edu/category/polis-podcast/)), where the audio version of this interview is also available.

**Alex Schafran:** I want to start talking a little about the idea of the just city and the book in particular. This is a really interesting book, in that I haven't seen very many other academic texts where the production of the idea was almost a public event.

I was in New York in 2006, for the big party, where you delivered an early edition of the paper. I've read the book that Peter Marcuse, Johannes Novy, and Cuz Potter, and others edited, where a kind of newer rendition of the essay came out, and now you have the larger book itself. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how the idea came about and how you developed it over time.

**Susan Fainstein:** In a certain way, my entire career has been devoted to the question of how do we make more just cities, but my doctoral dissertation was about the movement for community control of schools. At that time, I think that I had greater faith that simply grassroots movements and popular participation would bring about wholesale transformation of urban life.

My degree was in political science, but my teaching career has entirely been within planning, where one has to in fact deal with the nitty-gritty of what really goes on in cities. I was always conscious of having to teach what would be useful to my students, who would actually be planners, not scholars.

This led me to do research for quite a while on urban redevelopment, and I published a coauthored book called "Restructuring the City," which looked at the history of urban redevelopment programs in five American cities. It was a book that was a comparison of different approaches to redevelopment, but entirely within the context of the United States.

I increasingly, however, looked to Europe for other models of redevelopment, within the context of a democratic, capitalist system, but where there was greater sensitivity to issues of equity than in the United States.

My research tended to proceed on one track, which was comparative urban research, looking at European and American cities. Then I wrote a book called *The City Builders*, looking at

---

London and New York, and then, another track, I did a lot of writing in planning theory, looking at the question of the relationship between planning and greater equality, the relationship between the planning process and planning outcome.

This final book was an attempt to bring together these two different strands of scholarship. On the one hand, theoretical issues of what do we mean by justice in the city, to what extent can we do anything at the scale of the city, as opposed to the state, the nation the globe. On the other hand, what have cities actually done? What can we glean from what they've done in terms of what could be done better?

**AS:** I'm interested in the European question. As you know, *Justice Spatiale* is a Europe-based journal and in some ways it has come together in a bilingual format partly to deal with some of the work that you do in the book, which is to try to bring the European and American question into a little bit more of a conversation.

In the book, you talk a lot about Amsterdam, and about London in particular, and not surprisingly, Amsterdam emerges at the top of the pile, but you seem to resist broader comparisons between the larger systems and how the idea of justice is thought about in the context of Northern European cities, or in English cities, or in American Cities.

You're well familiar with German scholars Margit Mayer and Johannes Novy's argument to resist idolizing in some of the European cities. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about how you see some of the similarities and differences, just in terms of how justice or the idea of a just city is conceived on both sides of the Atlantic.

**SF:** One of the reasons I don't deal with it in the book is because I am trying to say "Look, this is what we can do at the local level." To some extent, we have to accept the national and international context that we're in. There's a certain tendency, I think, among people on the left to say there's not anything you can do at the local level. Castells long ago said that the most you can have is an urban revolution, but that wouldn't be transformative. Until we have a national revolution, or David Harvey would say you need a global revolution, there's nothing you can do. I feel that's too disheartening. Remember, I've taught people who are urban planners, and I'm saying urban planning has done a lot of harm at the local level, but that it could do some good, or more good, so that's where my focus is. That doesn't mean that I don't think that other levels aren't of great importance and, in fact, I've written about them at other times.

One issue is what's sometimes called American exceptionalism - which these days in the United States has a positive spin on the right, but which in the scholarly literature has tended to have a negative spin and has been evidenced in the underdeveloped welfare state, which apparently on the right has been considered to be a positive attribute. Yet there are a number of reasons one can deduce for saying why there is no socialism in America and not even any social democracy.

First of all, and this goes back to Louis Hartz's argument about the liberal tradition in America, the United States was born with political democracy, which gave rise to a values system which greatly emphasized liberty, but at the expense of equity. Hartz attributes this partly to the lack of an aristocratic tradition which meant that the American bourgeoisie did not have to fight a class war against the aristocracy and his argument, which I am oversimplifying here, but the absence of the bourgeois revolution meant that there was also the absence of a socialist revolutionary impetus so that socialism as a theme never took root in America. Also, the kind of aristocratic paternalism that existed in Europe, the idea of a national state which has its responsibility of public welfare is also not part of the American tradition.

So, part of the difference has to do with the class structure of the United States, the stage at which political equality was won, and the absence of certain kinds of political values that exist in Europe. What this has manifested itself in is the absence of left parties in the United States so that Democratic Party, which is probably somewhere where Christian Democrats would be in Germany, is as far left as you get within mainstream politics. That means that there's not the same kind of pressures on government that exist in European countries to force welfare legislation of various kinds.

What this means in terms of cities is that all European countries transfer a great deal more of national wealth to their cities than is the case in the United States, where national support, federal support, for urban budgets is very low, there's constant threat of fiscal crisis. If cities themselves can't stimulate growth, then they've got nothing to distribute.

What you get then is this competitive race, which has in many instances turned into a race to the bottom. We have constant competition among American cities for tax rateables, for jobs, and the way they get them is by giving big subsidies to developers.

So one can certainly start at the top and look at the differences among nations to explain what's happening at the urban level, and I wouldn't deny that at all, it's just simply that that's not what my book was about. My book instead was saying, if we're going to establish criteria for more just cities, and the three criteria I established were equity, diversity and democracy, then what local policies which are within the capability of local government would make a difference in this respect?

**AS:** I always will remember vividly a comment you made at the RC21 conference<sup>1</sup> in Amsterdam [in 2011], about an interview you'd done with a Dutch planner where you were admiring their orientation towards justice, which you felt was exceptional. He remarked to you that "Why do we want to be different? Why should Amsterdam be any more just, or any more redistributive than any other city?"

**SF:** Actually, what he said to me, was, rather proudly, that as Amsterdam has now receded (but is still way ahead of American cities) and has moved away from its huge commitment to social housing, he said, "At last, we are a normal city."

**AS:** Ah, yes, "normal". This is a question that came up in the first Polis Podcast<sup>2</sup> with Jan Willem Duyvendak and Justus Uitermark, surrounding Justus' comment that maybe Amsterdam is now "just a nice city" as opposed to a just city.

In talking about Amsterdam and New York, two cities that you know and love very well, do you get a sense that there's a change in either city in terms of the degree to which one can put justice forward as a sort of primary operating principle, especially at the levels of higher power, at the levels of state, at the levels of corporate or real estate investment?

**SF:** Certainly, there's a retreat in Amsterdam in terms of urban development from the enormous commitment that existed to building the city for the benefit of the working class. In part, I suppose, because there's been a shrinkage of the working class itself, because there's a much larger group of middle and upper middle class people who'd like home ownership, so there isn't the widespread support.

Also, and this is key, has been the antagonism to immigrants. When I was talking about the reasons for American exceptionalism, one of the most significant reasons is the history of slavery and then the history of racism subsequent to the Civil War, which has tended to cause

---

<sup>1</sup> Research Committee 21 (RC21) on the Sociology of Urban and Regional Development of the International Sociological Association.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thepolisblog.org/2011/11/polis-podcast-beta-social-justice-and.html>

white Americans to see government benevolence as benefiting the black other. In Europe, you have right wing parties which don't campaign so much on how they're going to change economic programs to be more conservative but rather on the grounds that immigration has taken people's jobs away. So immigration is a very divisive issue, which then leads to the election of governments which are not only anti-immigrant, but which are anti-welfare status. Therefore, this antagonism to the other is very key in terms of driving the politics of it all.

**AS:** Do you see anything in terms of the reverse possible in the United States -- in the kind of post-Obama movement? You are starting to see more and more cross-racial coalitions in American cities, especially at the grassroots level, around all sorts of issues of justice. Do you think that our cities are moving into a new era where new coalitions are possible, to push us a little bit past that which is now a very old and very tired dynamic?

**SF:** Yeah, well, it's helpful. I think that young people in America are less racially prejudiced, just as they are much less prejudiced against gays. Enormous progress has been made in that respect in Europe, actually, as well as here.

There's a much higher rate now of interracial marriage than had been the case in the past. The United States population, which used to be so much black and white, is now so heterogeneous, especially in large cities, with every gradation in-between, of people who are of Hispanic background, whose skin color is a great range. The very successful (contemporary) integration of Asians into American society comes following the Chinese Exclusion Acts of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

So, there is, I think, much greater openness, and of course, the United States, despite the anti-immigration sentiment that's right now being played on by politicians, particularly in the South and in the West, the United States has a very long tradition of being accepting of immigrants and successfully assimilating immigrants into the country, which is reflected in representation at every political level.

**AS:** To shift track just a bit, many of your reviewers, your students and your critics focus on the deep political theory which is a big part of the book. I'm a fan of your use of Nancy Fraser's idea of non-reformist reforms, dealing with the age-old argument on the American Left about just how radical and revolutionary you need to be, how much of a system change is possible, about whether to take an incremental approach.

You also have a very clear engagement with the long history of political theory around justice. I think John Rawls must have had the best brand manager in the world, because now, for some reason, if you talk about justice, somehow, you have to talk about John Rawls even though we've been talking about justice long before John Rawls, and we'll be talking about it long after Rawls.

But what I've always liked about your work, in which to me seems to be a broader, and more critical call in the book is the attention that you've long paid to this divide between planning theory, which I would argue is more aligned with political theory, and urban theory and the actual urban.

It is something you wrote about in one of my favorite articles of yours in 2005 (Fainstein, 2005) and though the divide may be intellectually untenable, in the day to day goings about of planning departments, and academic planning departments in particular, there still remains some sort of divide. Can you talk a little bit more about the divide between the urban and the planning theory, how you see it changing, and how it made it into this book?

**SF:** To give a little credit to Robert Beauregard - I think that he wrote the first article that really focused on this divide. What you see especially after World War II was the

development of something called planning theory. Planning theory tended to be about how do we do planning. What is the process by which planning should occur? This particularly became formalized in the work of Andreas Faludi, and his reader on planning theory, which for many years was the work that was most used in courses (Faludi, 1973). It reflected the view that you could take the rational model, that has been generated, really, in economics, of benefit-cost analysis, and go through this process, and the process would produce the appropriate outcome.

Basically what you've got at that stage was the separation of the planning process from the content of planning. Then the revolt against urban renewal planning, in particular highway planning, said that well, the problem was that planners didn't involve people. They didn't have participants.

So the form of the planning process became introducing democracy, or deliberation, or collaboration, or communication into the planning process. But this still didn't say anything about the substance of planning it was simply assumed that if you have good processes, with the people affected involved, then you would have good outcomes.

This is, to me, still a separation between urban theory and the content of what it is we should want in cities, and the process. Moreover, it implied that the role of the planner should be simply that of a facilitator and mediator, rather than of anybody who pressed for particular kinds of outcomes. That's really giving up on the role of planners as reformers.

**AS:** What I'm curious about, especially in terms of this link between the urban and planning, or what some call the process/outcome debate, is that throughout the book, you discuss, I think fairly obliquely, the concept of who planners are and what planning is. At times, you're really clear that what you're talking primarily are the decisions of public agencies about fairly sizable projects - major redevelopment project, major housing projects, etc. But in terms of how you define who planners are, at times you talk about public servants in particular, as well as people looking for consulting firms, people working for not-for-profit agencies.

A lot of your past work has dealt very specifically with the role and the impact that private capital and private developers have on the production of space. So I'm curious as to how you define really what planning is - is planning just a public sector activity, or is planning the larger production, the intentional production, of space in the urban environment? Precisely who are the actors that we're talking about? To me, that's a critical thing to understand a little bit if we're trying to understand the production of justice.

**SF:** Yeah, you're right. Probably, I should have focused on that question more in the book. I would say that it is anybody who becomes involved in the production of space. My book, "The City Builders," was really much more about private developers than about public planners. It also was about people who work for non-profits at the community level.

I think that this is where participation does come in, where I do think it's crucially important. Without pressure from beneath, without public participation and demands being made, one is not going to see people in the public sector being awfully concerned about what happens to low income people.

So it's critically important to have grassroots pressure. What I don't think the grassroots provide are very imaginative, or creative set of demands most of the time. This does require people who are professionally trained, who think about it full-time, who have a commitment to values of equity and diversity. There's a much more significant role for such people to play than simply facilitating a process of public input.

**AS:** In terms of those people working full-time on these issues, there's more and more, especially in cities like New York, essentially a full time non-governmental, non-corporate

professional planning class, that is educated, that possesses the same level of expertise, but isn't necessarily either a public servant or working on behalf of for-profit entities. Is it critical to develop that group of people? In New York alone, I don't even know what the numbers would be, but it is a pretty significant population of folks. Is it enough?

**SF:** No, of course, it's not enough and, after all, for people to have this as their full time job have to get paid by someone. I've done a lot of work actually on who works for community development corporations and one of the issues that they always raise is that of cooptation, because the financing of community development corporations is either by private philanthropy or the government, and people are fearful of biting the hand that feeds them.

In times, and this was true in the 60s and 70s, when they are being backed by publics who are aroused, they can be much more effective because then the people who are in positions of power are cognizant that they have to make concessions in order to survive.

**AS:** The other question that really came to mind, in terms of the linkage between the urban and planning theory, in particular with this kind of search for the just city, is the question of scale.

Again, you touch on that slightly in the book, but not as much directly. You have a very brief section where you discuss the region in terms of regionalism, but for the most part you're focused on the scale of the project - really large projects, mega projects. You are very clear in how we should think about justice and how to evaluate large-scale projects in the center of urban environments.

My work is a lot about the foreclosure prices in the suburbs, about the deep suburbs, about the general restructuring in American city. More than half of poor people in America now live outside of center cities. In California, in particular, there has been major restructuring of racial geographies so that there are now about as many African Americans in Riverside and San Bernardino County as in the city of Los Angeles, the same with Southern Solano and Eastern Contra Costa Counties vis-a-vis Oakland.

How do you see your ideas about the just city, about questions of equity and diversity and democracy applying to planning either at larger scales, the metropolitan scale, or planning that deals with suburbs and smaller jurisdictions surrounding central cities?

**SF:** Well, one of the things that happened in the United States, I guess it was under the Reagan administration, was the end of all metropolitan planning bodies that were in any way subsidized or financed by the federal government, except for some transportation agencies. There is no structure in the US really, except for state governments, which does regional planning.

I did a piece which argued that state governments are the regional planning bodies in the United States, and we might as well give up on trying to get metropolitan governments and metropolitan planning. But, it is within the power of state governments to do substantial redistribution. Hawaii is, I think, the only state (or it used to be) that actually has statewide collection of property tax which it then distributes by formula throughout the state.

This is comparable, oddly, to the most egalitarian tax change in the United Kingdom, one that occurred under Margaret Thatcher, who took away the power from local government - because she didn't like a lot of the Labor dominated local government - and removed collection of what the British called "rates", i.e property taxes of corporations and business, to the national government, and created a new reformed national business tax.

Now, once you have the taxes that are collected from the big property tax payers, taken by the national government -- or by state governments in the United States -- you can then have them redistributed on a much more equitable basis.

So, the most important thing, really, that could be done in America in terms of regional equity is tax-base sharing. We have that, as I've said, in Hawaii, and then we have it in the Meadowlands in New Jersey, we have it in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota). But that's about it - some of the (consolidated) metropolitan areas, like Metro-Dade (Miami, Florida) have it to some degree.

Then at the state level also is the determination of who gets economic development funds that are distributed by the state. Most states do it on a completely indiscriminate basis. That is, they do not favor low-income areas, but simply anything that they can get to come to their state, they will.

States do have so-called "enterprise zones," and to that extent, they target areas which are especially needy. These tend to be old central cities. But, in fact, as we have the suburbanization of poverty, this has to be rethought, in terms of what should be target areas. But I guess I would say that, for the US, state governments are the best instruments we have around for the regional scale.

In terms of the national government, we would have much better, or more just cities, or more just metropolitan areas, if we had much more pass-through from the national government. What we've been seeing in the latest retrenchments is that, even as much federal funding had already been withdrawn, even more is (being cut), while in previous recessions, what you had was increased revenue sharing with states and localities.

**AS:** What about the question of within existing suburban jurisdictions? We have a tendency, I would argue, to conceive of cities as unique, individual places, and suburbs as this sort of undifferentiated mass, or places that we chop up into various typologies - the rich suburb, the poor, fading suburb, the declining suburb, the exurb - when many of these places have a deep history, they have an internal politics. It may not be as long of a history as cities, they may not be as advanced of politics, they may not be quite as complicated and quite as sizable as cities, but they are actual municipal entities and cities with their own histories.

Do you think that some of your ideas about justice are applicable as you push out into smaller areas or areas that don't have a history of talking about things in terms of justice, as many of the cities in the United States in which you've done work have?

**SF:** Yeah, sure. The biggest problem are in those cities which were built as essentially groups of homogenous subdivisions, or gated communities even more so, where each separate development tends to have its own internal facilities, and is exclusionary.

I'm uncertain how we really overcome this. The most segregated group in America, by far, are the rich, who live in very exclusive communities, and which are extremely hard to integrate. I think we're seeing more suburban integration in those kind of middling kinds of suburbs.

But it's very hard to undo history. So that the fact when FHA (Federal Housing Administration) forbade loans in areas that were racially integrated, and so many of the suburban subdivisions were built in that period, what you have is a history which is entrenched of suburban exclusion.

It's a different thing to say we're going to start a new development and have it integrated, from saying, we have these segregated environments, and we are going to force integration upon them. Now there are places which, because of the desires of the people there, have successfully become more diverse.

For example, Shaker Heights, Ohio, where I grew up. When I grew up, the only people of color in Shaker Heights were people who were live-in servants. My high school class had exactly one African American student in it. It was a wealthy suburb, although it varied,

---

because we lived in a two-family house, and people who lived in apartments and two-family houses were less well off than those people who lived in single-family houses.

But, at some point Shaker became integrated because it abutted the east side of Cleveland which was entirely Black, and people began to move over the boundary, so that that part of Shaker Heights began to become a ghetto. The response was to start an organization called The Shaker Communities, which deliberately steered people into different neighborhoods. So even though there's a gradient where the western part of the city is the most black, and the eastern part is the least, it is fairly integrated in the school system - which has always been exemplary, one of the best in the country- (and the system) has become highly integrated.

So it's possible to achieve racial diversity, and to a degree, class diversity. But, even then, I'd say one of the reasons for the success of Shaker Heights, or Montclair, New Jersey, or other various examples around the country of places which have been committed to racial diversity, is they don't have the very bottom, and that makes it easier.

The fact of suburban exclusion is one that's extremely hard to deal with at this point, and I think maybe, partly just awaits an aging of the American population where we have more, both -- if you want to call it "gentrification," -- integration of the central city, and integration of suburbs.

I think everywhere one is seeing is a consequence of changed demographics -- and when I say everywhere, I mean in the wealthy world - of much later child bearing, far fewer families with children at home, and the consequence of people who are either retired and childless, or young and childless, is a greater willingness to live in various kinds of places than was the case when we have the modal American family, of mom, dad, and the kids.

**AS:** I couldn't agree more. Especially in California, where we've long been at the vanguard of some of these demographic changes, many of the old ideas, not just about what to do (policy-wise) but the very terms describe the places that Americans live are very, very out of date, and I think it impedes in some ways our ability to push forward.

I'm curious about something you just mentioned, which is again another theme in the book, which is the issue of history. All of your work has been either historical or historically grounded, and one of the questions that has always bothered me about some of the communicative rationality work in planning theory, is that, while people criticize it for not dealing with power, to me the reason why it doesn't deal with power is because it doesn't deal with history. It sort of assumes that the situation in which you're going to be planning has never been planned before, and that the people have never experienced, with either private sector, or public sector intervention, and that they don't already have ideas about how this is going to turn out ahead of time.

How do you see the question of history in terms of questions of justice and the just city -- both in terms of whether we need to better acknowledge the history that has happened, or how do we move forward for history? For instance, you talk a lot about issues of planning and planning expertise - we're still talking about sins of modernist planning, even if we may be a generation or two away from having acted in that particular way.

**SF:** Well, the two terms that are most used are "path dependence" and "cumulative causation." Both of them say that we continue on the trajectories we're on, until something jolts that equilibrium. Or you can go to Stephen Jay Gould's "Punctuated Equilibrium Theory," and I think that that applies.

But what one sees if you look at the history of American urban policy and American urban development is that there were certain critical periods when the trajectory changed. One was, of course, the Great Depression. But let me go back a little further. Starting with World War I



was the stopping of large-scale immigration into the United States for quite a long period of time, along with the suppression of the German-speaking communities. While one could look upon this as an enormous interference with justice in one way, it also led to the almost complete integration of the former minority groups, which really were a lot more separatist than current mythology has it, into the idea of being an American.

This then allowed - except for black people, who were still "the other," but immigrants were no longer "the other," - this allowed in a way the development of the New Deal welfare state - the feeling that the Okies, for example, people, ethnic groups who lived in cities were all part of an American community which required help from the national government. That was when the national government entered into urban development on a large scale.

Now, those people who were, let's not even say on the left, but were liberals, thought that once this trajectory got hold, it would keep going. It would snowball. For quite a period after World War II, it did grow. At the national level, we had Senator Taft sponsoring the Housing Act of 1949. It was sort of accepted, even by people who were Republicans, that it was the role of the national government to provide assistance.

Then with the crisis of the 1960s that was a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement, urban mass movements in cities, urban social movements, that one had considerable amount of response from government at all levels. So we had "The War on Poverty," we had Model Cities. We had, in response to threat, the development of social programs and redevelopment programs which were aimed at helping people who were poor.

But then, the next thing that happened was the backlash against it. It was the backlash against what were seen as riots, of welfare queens, of people living off the public and the labeling of national redistributive programs as ones that took from those people who worked to those people who were shiftless. But what was also crucial in the mid-1970s was that the United States and every one of the western European countries suffered from the crisis of capitalism. Castells has a very good book, actually, which is one of the least mentioned of his work, on the crisis of the 70s, which argues that corporate capitalism had become much less profitable as the social wage had increased.

That was when we saw this enormous retrenchment which continues to today, a taking back, what Neil Smith likes to call "revanchism." But the globalized moves of capital to move production elsewhere, to substitute capital for labor, to break unions, to push down labor costs in every possible way -- this is the present historical context, and cities are in many ways are stuck with it. But even then, there is some flexibility.

There are differences among cities. These differences are partly as a consequence of differences among national governments. But they're also differences that arise from the differences in urban governance and the aims of those people in power at the city level.

**AS:** I'm curious as to whether you see the current moment as another one of those shifts. It was very popular in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession to start speaking in world historic terms. I'm wondering whether we are somewhere in the mid 70s now and we're going to get a significant shift. It seemed to fade a little bit as there was a return to business as usual, but with the Occupy Movement maybe, with the Spanish and the Arab spring, people are again talking about fundamental shifts.

**SF:** What the Occupy Movement has succeeded in doing, with their slogan of "We are the 99," is pointed out to people who just really didn't understand it - which academics have been aware of for some time - the enormous increase in income inequality. This inequality, by the way, varies substantially from country to country. France has had relatively little increase in income inequality, as compared to the UK or the US, for example. We've been

---

aware of it, but most people really didn't understand it. And partly, the extreme segregation of the rich protects them from people being so aware of how rich they are.

Of course, by saying "We are the 99," it's saying OK, you know, it's only those people in the top one percent, which is hardly anybody, rather than the people in the top 30 percent or the 40 percent who need to be taxed more.

So, I think we have seen a change in the discourse. Now, it's just impossible, while we're now in the midst of it to know whether this will be a lasting change, or whether it will become incorporated in political programs for re-distribution or not.

Many people criticize the Occupy Movement for not having specific demands. I'm not one of them because I don't think it's up to them to create specific demands. But it is up to politicians to grab onto their formulation, and to create specific demands.

If you look at many comparisons of Occupy with the Tea Party, people have said Tea Party did have specific demands, but I'm not sure that's so true. What you have are politicians who saw that as a constituency that they could make use of, and they're the ones who formulated the discourse, not the Tea Party grassroots people themselves, who were much more like the Occupy people. Critics, rather than proponents of specific policies.

**AS:** I would agree completely. I think it's a misreading of Tea Party history. In the beginning, it was a networked display of anger, made possible in some ways by the current communication technology, where somebody decides to protest in Des Moines, and somebody in Lancaster, California can quickly mimic that and things can spread in a way that they've never spread before. It took a while before the organized Right really got behind it, and then started bankrolling it and started formulating it into policy demands, and eventually elected a slate of Congressmen on it.

I think you're starting to see, to a certain extent, for instance, the "Occupy Our Homes" movement - which is, you know, fundamentally, a co-optation in my opinion, a good one, by people that I agree with, to channel some of the Occupy energy and anger into direct policy demands around foreclosure and the foreclosure crisis and federal housing policy. That's the way things are done these days, and I think it's important.

Speaking of the 99 percent, you touch on in various degrees in the book an issue I would sum up as the broader moral question. There's a very interesting part where you talk about how in the current version of New York City real estate, there were limited options for very, very large profits. What the development community tended to push for, then, were these handful of different types of development that would reap huge profits. It became standard. Whereas in the past, 10 percent, 12 percent return on investment was acceptable, now, especially with hedge funds in the game, you're looking at 20 percent, 25 percent, 30 percent ROI (return on investment) across the board. It was a ratcheting up of what was morally acceptable (to demand).

You quote Todd Swanstrom's great line about selfishness,<sup>3</sup> and I would argue that the question of selfishness is something that is not just an issue with large scale capital, but with all sorts of Nimbyism, of every different type, from left wing environmental-based nimbyism, to kind of right-wing revanchist, often suburban, racist Nimbyism.

I'm curious, as to how you sort of see this linkage between morality and questions of justice and the just city. This is something I would argue that the left has been a little bit hesitant to

---

<sup>3</sup> "The political analysis offered by urban populism was essentially a streetwise version of elite theory: a small closed elite, stemming from the upper economic class, uses its control over wealth to manipulate government for its own selfish purposes." (Swanstrom, 1985, p. 129)

take on - David Harvey in particular, at least his earlier work - really hesitant, this idea of justice as a moral question.

**SF:** Yeah, well if you are a real Marxist, and Harvey is and isn't, to tell you the truth, then you say "Well, history is on my side and I don't have to worry about an abstract formulation of justice," that what Marx essentially said was that all abstract formulations of justice, philosophy in that sense are meaningless because justice is not created by people thinking of what is just but rather about the rise of a class that carries with it a more just society.

Now Harvey - I'm trying to remember if he said it in the article in *Searching for the Just City* or whether he said it in some panel I was on with him - said basically that when he was writing *Social Justice and the City*, he looked around at all the different philosophers who had theories of justice and eventually he came to the realization that that wasn't going to get him anywhere. So he discarded the concept of moral philosophy and instead kind of buys into the Marxist historical inevitability argument, but he doesn't ever make that explicit, because I don't think he really believes that the pield of history will necessarily produce a proletarian revolution. It's pretty hard to believe that at this point in time. Nor does he deal with socialism as it really existed - was (20<sup>th</sup> century socialism) just an aberration, a corruption, or was it in certain ways necessarily a product of a system where you have the state dominating wholly the economy as well as the polity?

I tend to be skeptical of the possibility of free society if you have that (state domination). This means that we're going to have a separation, or ought to have a separation, between economy and polity. At the same time, I think there has to be a much larger public role within the economy than we see in the western capitalist countries.

I've been very fascinated by Singapore, where I taught last spring, because it is a benevolent despotism where the state does to a large extent control the economy, and it works pretty well. The Gini coefficient is high, that is there is substantial income inequality, there is exploitation of foreign workers, but I will say that on the whole, they have produced a pretty decent, highly urbanized society where everybody pretty much, 90 percent of the population, live in public housing. Everybody has the right to the city in the sense of access to facilities, but not in the sense of the other Lefebvrian sense of creating the city.

It represents a completely different counterexample from the Amsterdam one, and one that I can't really think could necessarily be generalized, but it's an interesting case in terms of the range of possibilities that do exist. It does have total public ownership of land, which is also the case in Amsterdam, in Stockholm, in China. Public ownership of land gives the possibility of what Henry George called for, the public capturing the unearned increment. So I think there are various combinations of capitalism and state ownership which are possible which could create the possibility of a more just city.

But to go back to your question from which I've digressed some, I think you have to make a moral argument, that if you don't say that people should do things because it's right, then you have no way to counter self-interest. You simply, and Harvey does say this specifically, that everybody's going to act in their class interest. Well, how do you know what your class interest actually is? There's sort of an assumption that well, your class interest if you're a businessman is to exploit as much as possible, and your class interest if you're a working person is to resist as much as possible, and we just know what it is. But in fact there's a big spectrum of what your interest is, and part of your interest is living in a decent society.

So, I think one has to make an argument of what constitutes a decent society and to look to moral philosophy. The problem with philosophy when it's purely abstract is that it says "OK, this is what is a desirable set of goals," but doesn't give you very much in the way of how do

---

you proceed? What are the policies? What are the aims of social movements? How do we proceed toward those goals?

That's really what I tried to do in the book, to say that democracy, diversity, and equity are the three principal components of a just city. I've been criticized by many people for not discussing sustainability. And I agree that sustainability needs to be discussed, but I think that somebody else besides me could do it.

But given those general aims, which you could derive from political philosophy, then, what are some more specific aims that could lead you towards realizing those goals? That's where I really stand on the question of morality and self-interest that people need to construe their self-interest in terms of having an interest in the social good, an interest in social justice.

The first step towards doing that is to change the discourse, to make people talk much more about justice. The other impetus for my book was that all people in city government ever talked about was competitiveness, and if that's your starting point, then you inevitably move into "What can we do to bribe business to get them to come to my city as opposed to some others?"

**AS:** It's ironic in some ways that a chunk of your New York story focuses on sports teams, because I think competitiveness is incredibly important and that's where the competition belongs.

**SF:** Right. [laughs]

**AS:** I love rooting for my city when it plays in other cities, but I wish it wasn't a fight over factories and economic production.

**SF:** There you go...

**AS:** And I appreciate that you actually saved me from having to ask a final question, which was the question about land, because I couldn't agree more that when you get down to it, I think one of the fundamental questions is the old Georgist question about the ownership of land and that unearned increment (George, 1886).

I would argue that it is a moral question when you take that unearned increment exclusively for yourself, that it is a key moral failing, and unfortunately it has become something relatively unquestioned - often in the name of competitiveness - to not only take bigger and bigger chunks of it, but for the public sphere to give away the unearned increment to the private sphere in the name of somehow winning the race for additional skyscrapers and additional tax revenue, revenue which is not making the grade - it is simply not paying for the subways and the sewers and the water and the education system and all the sort of social reproductive functions that are the heart of urban management.

**SF:** Well, to my great surprise last spring, I was asked to give a keynote address at the Lincoln Land Institute annual conference. Now, Lincoln Land is interesting because it was founded by an industrialist who was a follower of Henry George. He endowed this institute to explore Henry George's ideas and how they worked out. But, it eventually became taken over by very conventional economists who did all these various conventional - and often quite useful - analyses of the incidence of the property tax and so on and so forth. It became very mainstream and seemed to lose its Georgist commitment to redistribution altogether or to the public gaining proceeds from the investment in land.

So, as I said, I was quite surprised that they should ask me and I gave this lecture in which I did call for public ownership of land, used the Singapore example in fact to show how public ownership of land in Singapore was used as a method of capturing the unearned increment and how substantial amounts of it were being used to produce affordable housing. I also

argued that the idea that the cost-benefit analysis and using that as your basis for making public decisions simply build into it all kinds of assumptions in terms of who should bear the cost and who should get the benefits -or actually not caring very much about who bear the cost and who got the benefits, and that it had a very strong circularity to it, which is that somehow prices told you what was right rather than moral philosophy telling you what was right.

Well, an economist in the audience was apoplectic, he was so angry at me. He said, "You are simply ideological." He really viewed economics as non-ideological, that is the view that what we did as public policy should be determined by Pareto Optimality. Pareto Optimality, of course, it's completely blind to questions of distribution. But the utilitarian basis of modern economics is one that simply says that efficiency is the preeminent value, and efficiency becomes measured by prices, and price is supposed to reflect who has power in the market. It's seen as factual, objective and non-ideological. What I want to do is cut into that, to break that down, and make people see that it is ideological. The idea of competitiveness has built into it a very strong ideological basis.

To go back to history for a moment. I just read a book by Fairfield on the formation of American civic ideals, and what is upsetting is how it shows the way in which left ideas that were rather prevalent before World War I just simply got swept away during the war with the idea that we had to win the war, and that anybody who wasn't concerned wholeheartedly with winning the war should be exiled essentially -- or jailed. So, what we see is that people get swept up all too easily in arguments that are not moral arguments at all but are simply 'our side had better win' kinds of arguments, and it's hard to counter that.

**AS:** I couldn't agree more. I think one of the great tragedies for the American Left is the fact that the Marxists won over the Georgists. Marxism was a brilliant strategy for a real industrial society, but America, from the very beginning - and this is speaking very much as a Californian, where the entire state was a real estate project from the get go - Georgism was a left-oriented strategy that recognized the true urban nature of the US. I would argue that our economy has almost always been an urban economy, from the rise of Detroit and the production of the suburbs, back to early California agricultural experiments. We've always been about land - this is what the Singaporeans and Amsterdammers, I think, have understood, and this is what Lefebvre and the Urban Revolution got, and I wish people would read as much Urban Revolution as they would read The Right to the City or The Production of Space. Unfortunately, the Singaporeans need to read a little bit more Right to the City.

Well, thank you, SF. This has been a really wonderful talk, and any conversation about the city should probably always end with a conversation about land. I really appreciate you taking the time.

**SF:** Thank you for asking me. I think you can tell I enjoy talking about it immensely.

### To quote this paper:

**Susan Fainstein, Alex Schafran: "An interview with Susan Fainstein" (« Un entretien avec Susan Fainstein »**, translation : Muriel Froment-Meurice), **justice spatiale | spatial justice**, n° 5, déc. 2012-déc. 2013 | dec. 2012-dec. 2013, [www.jssj.org](http://www.jssj.org)

### References Cited:

- BEAUREGARD, Robert A.**, « Bringing the city back in », *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 56 n° 2, 1990, pp. 210-215
- FAINSTEIN, Susan S. et al.** *Restructuring the City: The Political Economy of Urban Redevelopment*, Longman Higher Education, 1987
- FAINSTEIN, Susan S.**, *The City Builders: Property Development in New York and London, 1980-2000*, University Press of Kansas, 2001
- FAINSTEIN, Susan S.**, « Planning Theory and the City », *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 25 n° 2, 2005, pp. 121-130
- FAINSTEIN, Susan S.**, *The Just City*, Cornell University Press, 2011
- FAINSTEIN, Norman, FAINSTEIN, Susan S.**, *Social Equity and the Challenge of Distressed Places*, pp. 191-218 in Catherine L. Ross (ed.). *Megaregions: Planning for Global Competitiveness*. Island Press, Washington, DC, 2009.
- FAIRFIELD, John**, *The Public And Its Possibilities: Triumphs And Tragedies In The American City*, Temple University Press, 2010
- FALUDI, Andreas**, *A Reader in Planning Theory*. Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1973
- GEORGE, Henry**, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth; the Remedy*. Minneapolis, MN: Appleton Press, 1886,
- MARCUSE Peter, CONNOLLY James, NOVY Johannes, OLIVO Ingrid, POTTER Cuz, STEIL Justin** (dir.) *Searching for the Just City : debates in urban theory and practice*, Routledge, 2011
- SWANSTROM, Todd**, *The Crisis of Growth Politics*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1985