The city and spatial justice

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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[1].

All of these variations on the central theme are important and relevant, but often tend to draw attention away from the specific qualities and meaning of an explicitly spatialized concept of justice and, more importantly, the many new opportunities it is providing not just for theory building and empirical analysis but for spatially informed social and political action.

My aim in this brief presentation is to explain why it is crucial in theory and in practice to emphasize explicitly the spatiality of justice and injustice, not just in the city but at all geographical scales, from the local to the global. I will state my case in a series of premises and propositions, starting with an explanation of why the specific term spatial justice has emerged from literally nowhere in just the past five years and why it is likely to continue to be the preferred term in the future.

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

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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.

On the concept of spatial justice/injustice

1. In the broadest sense, spatial (in)justice refers to an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice. As a starting point, this involves the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them.

2. Spatial justice as such is not a substitute or alternative to social, economic, or other forms of justice but rather a way of looking at justice from a critical spatial perspective. From this

viewpoint, there is always a relevant spatial dimension to justice while at the same time all geographies have expressions of justice and injustice built into them.

3. Spatial (in)justice can be seen as both outcome and process, as geographies or distributional patterns that are in themselves just/unjust and as the processes that produce these outcomes. It is relatively easy to discover examples of spatial injustice descriptively, but it is much more difficult to identify and understand the underlying processes producing unjust geographies.

4. Locational discrimination, created through the biases imposed on certain populations because of their geographical location, is fundamental in the production of spatial injustice and the creation of lasting spatial structures of privilege and advantage. The three most familiar forces shaping locational and spatial discrimination are class, race, and gender, but their effects should not be reduced only to segregation.

5. The political organization of space is a particularly powerful source of spatial injustice, with examples ranging from the gerrymandering of electoral districts, the redlining of urban investments, and the effects of exclusionary zoning to territorial apartheid, institutionalized residential segregation, the imprint of colonial and/or military geographies of social control, and the creation of other core-periphery spatial structures of privilege from the local to the global scales.

6. The normal workings of an urban system, the everyday activities of urban functioning, is a primary source of inequality and injustice in that the accumulation of locational decisions in a capitalist economy tends to lead to the redistribution of real income in favor of the rich over the poor. This redistributive injustice is aggravated further by racism, patriarchy, heterosexual bias, and many other forms of spatial and locational discrimination. Note again that these processes can operate without rigid forms of spatial segregation.

7. Geographically uneven development and underdevelopment provides another framework for interpreting the processes that produce injustices, but as with other processes, it is only when this unevenness rigidifies into more lasting structures of privilege and advantage that intervention becomes necessary.

8. Perfectly even development, complete socio-spatial equality, pure distributional justice, as well as universal human rights are never achievable. Every geography in which we live has some degree of injustice embedded in it, making the selection of sites of intervention a crucial decision.

Why justice ? Why now ?

1. Seeking to increase justice or to decrease injustice is a fundamental objective in all societies, a foundational principle for sustaining human dignity and fairness. The legal and philosophical debates that often revolve around Rawls' theory of justice are relevant here, but they say very little about the spatiality of justice and injustice.

2. The concept of justice and its relation to related notions of democracy, equality, citizenship, and civil rights has taken on new meaning in the contemporary context for many different reasons, including the intensification of economic inequalities and social polarization associated with neoliberal globalization and the new economy as well as the transdisciplinary diffusion of a critical spatial perspective.

3. The specific term "justice" has developed a particularly strong hold on the public and political imagination in comparison to such alternatives as "freedom," with its now strongly conservative overtones, "equality," given the impact of a more cultural politics of difference, and the search for universal human rights, detached from specific time and place.

4. Justice in the contemporary world tends to be seen as more concrete and grounded than its alternatives, more oriented to present day conditions, and imbued with a symbolic force that works effectively across cleavages of class, race, and gender to foster a collective political consciousness and a sense of solidarity based on widely shared experience.

5. The search for justice has become a powerful rallying cry and mobilizing force for new social movements and coalition-building spanning the political spectrum, extending the concept of justice beyond the social and the economic to new forms of struggle and activism. In addition to spatial justice, other modifiers include territorial, racial, environmental, worker, youth, global, local, community, peace, monetary, border, and corporeal.

6. Combining the terms spatial and justice opens up a range of new possibilities for social and political action, as well as for social theorization and empirical analysis, that would not be as clear if the two terms were not used together.

A geohistorical look at the concept of spatial justice would take up back to the Greek polis and the Aristotelian idea that being urban is the essence of being political; it would takes us through the rise of liberal democracy and the Age of Revolution, and eventually center attention on the urban crises of the 1960s, with its most symptomatic and symbolic moments taking place here in Nanterre. Paris in the 1960s and especially the still understudied co-presence of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, became the most generative site for the creation of a radically new conceptualization of space and spatiality, and for a specifically urban and spatial concept of justice, encapsuled most insightfully in Lefebvre's call for taking back control over the right to the city and the right to difference.

The trajectory of these developments of a critical spatial perspective was both extended and diverted by David Harvey's Social Justice and the City, published in 1973. Never once using the specific term spatial justice in this book as well as in everything else he has written since, Harvey chose to use the term territorial justice, borrowing from the Welsh planner Bleddyn Davies, to describe his version of the spatiality of justice. In his 'liberal formulations' Harvey advanced the spatial conceptualization of justice and his view would shape all Anglophonic debates on justice and democracy ever since. Despite his recognition of Lefebvre's contributions as a Marxist philosopher of space, Harvey's Marxism moved him away from spatial causality and from a focus on justice itself, and he would rarely mention the term territorial justice again, although the notion of the urbanization of injustice would be carried forward and Harvey, very recently, would write again on the right to the city.

The first use of the specific term 'spatial justice' that I can find is in the unpublished doctoral dissertation of the political geographer John O'Laughlin, entitled S*patial Justice and the Black American Voter: The Territorial Dimension of Urban Politics,* completed in 1973. The earliest published work I have found using the term in English is a short article by G.H. Pirie, "On Spatial Justice" in 1983, although almost there in 1981 was a book by the French geographer Alain Reynaud, *Société, espace et justice: inégalites régionales et justice socio-spatiale.* From the 1980s to the turn of the century, the use and development of the term spatial justice became almost exclusively associated with the work of geographers and planners in Los Angeles…and this takes me to my conclusions.

Conclusion

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. New ideas about community-based regionalism, locational discrimination, electoral redistricting, and environmental justice have propelled such organizations as SAJE (Strategic Action for a Just Economy), the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, Justice for Janitors, and the Labor/Community Strategy Center (one of the leading figures having written on Henri Lefebvre) into the forefront of contemporary struggles over spatial justice and the city.

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. Similar civil rights cases based on racial discrimination had been brought to court in other cities and failed. 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. The bus network today is among the best in the country and is being used as a model of efficiency in other cities.

More recently and of special relevance here, Los Angeles and in particular the Urban Planning Department at UCLA has become the site for the building of a national movement centered on the notion of the rights to the city. Informed by Lefebvre and others espousing a critical spatial perspective, the local movement has been joined at the global scale by the World Social Forum, which in 2005 presented a World Charter of the Rights to the City.

I hope I have been of some help in explaining why, after thirty or so years of relative neglect Lefebvre's passionate ideas about *le droit à la ville* have been so actively revived.

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