

The Unexplored Legacy of a Reminder

Edward Soja's Socio-Spatial Dialectic and the Simultaneous
Unfolding of Time, Space, and Being

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the still unexplored legacy of Edward Soja's theoretical concept of socio-spatial dialectics. We take into consideration the emphasis he gives to the relationship between dialectics and hermeneutics and the complex ways in which social consciousness develops under the postmodern condition. The main argument we propose is that Edward Soja represents a conjunctural scholar between the history-driven historical materialism of modernity and the hermeneutical complexity of postmodernity. In this sense, we look at Soja as a unique and original theorist, who was able to continue and expand on Henri Lefebvre's scholarship in ways that are still widely understudied. Soja's anti-Cartesian notion of space as a center of struggles defies theoretical categorizations. It continually oscillates between dialectics, or even trialectics, and a Nietzschean understanding of time, cyclical and tragic. This paper ultimately seeks to present and analyze such theoretical positions in order to rediscover the topicality of Soja's scholarship.

**Keywords: socio-spatial dialectic, postmodern geographies,
critical social theory, edward soja, urban theory**

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INTRODUCTION

Edward Soja's contribution expands well beyond the realm of geography and it has the potential to inspire new generations of scholars interested in critical social theory for many years to come. Throughout his work, Soja explored a wide variety of themes and concepts that unravelled over time from "Postmodern Geographies" (1989) to "Thirdspace" (1996), from "Postmetropolis" (2000) to "The City and Spatial Justice" (2009) and "My Los Angeles" (2014). Furthermore, his work has inspired a generation of scholars dedicated to the politics of space within all spheres of the social sciences. The work of scholars, such as Neil Brenner (2011), Mark Purcell (2008), Murray Low (2004), and Stuart Elden (2013), just to mention a few, is widely influenced by Soja's research. In this current work, we tried to present the originality of Soja's reminder to look at the dialectical and simultaneous dimensions of the reality in which we find ourselves projected into, being it either *espace perçu*, *espace conçu*, or *espace vécu*¹. We did this by exploring two pairs of apparently antithetical dimensions that are, at the same time, intertwined and in tension at the core of Soja's intellectual conceptualizations: 1) dialectic and hermeneutics; 2) social consciousness and postmodernity.

¹ See Lefebvre (1974) for a wider discussion of represented space, conceived space, and lived space.

A common feature - that the attentive reader would easily notice throughout Soja's opera omnia - is the purposeful process through which his voice is often hidden behind the arguments of his intellectual mentors, Henri Lefebvre in primis, but also Michel Foucault, Ernest Mandel, all the way to the less academic John Berger and Jorge Luis Borges. For this reason, we paid a particular attention while trying to disentangle what we believe are Soja's positions and stances, without, of course, losing contact with the various sources of knowledge and inspiration from which he drew upon.

Dialectic and Hermeneutics

The development of the idea of socio-spatial dialectic stems directly from the strong critique of what Soja interprets as the history centred Anglophone Marxist tradition² of critical social theory and from the conviction that he shared with Foucault that: "space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile [while] [t]ime, on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic"³. In particular, Soja's idea of spatializing critical thought is derived from the perception of historicism as "an overdeveloped historical contextualization of social life and social theory that actively submerges and peripheralizes

² See: Soja, 1989, p. 47.

³ Foucault, 1980, *Questions on Geography*, in C. Gordon, 1972 (1980 ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* by Michel Foucault, Pantheon Books, New York, p. 70.

the geographical or spatial imagination"⁴. For this reason, he proposed to assign to space a more prominent role within historical materialism.

As he says:

*"the insertion of space into historical materialism and into the wider frameworks of critical theory is not just a matter of simple incremental adaptation, the incorporation of still another new variable or model into the old and unquestioned master narratives. Critical theory and Western Marxism have been so muted with regard to spatiality for so long that the inclusion of a theoretically meaningful spatial dimension may not be possible without shattering many well-established interpretive assumptions and approaches, especially those associated with the deeply engrained primacy of historical versus geographical modes of explanation and critique"*⁵.

⁴ Soja, 1989, p. 15.

⁵ Soja, 1989, pp. 44-45.

The socio-spatial dialectic, as thought by Soja, presents space not as a mirror or pre-determined or automatic result of a mode of production - as Soja believes it is interpreted within the framework of historical materialism - rather as a place where simultaneous social and spatial factors meet and produce a space that results from a dialectical process, hence, leaving the doors open to always new possibilities for the emergence of novel socio-spatial formations. The result is left open to an unpredictable dialectical process of becoming that may result both in the creation of uneven geographic structures - as studied and presented by David Harvey (2005) and Manuel Castells (1979) - but also in counter-hegemonic spatial formations able to problematize the duality between core and periphery with what Immanuel Wallerstein identifies as semi-peripheries.

However, the unravelling of these new possibilities is imaginable, according to Soja, only thanks to a "simultaneously historical and geographical materialism; a triple dialectic of space, time, and social being; a transformative re-theorization of the relations between history, geography, and modernity"⁶ or, to say it in other terms, by looking at the "making of geography", rather than by focusing on the "making of history", in order to explain the world, which is what Soja presents as

⁶ Soja, 1989, p. 12.

the "promise of post-modern geographies"⁷.

In addition to this, we can say that Soja's originality lies in the ability to reconcile apparently conflicting positions. Indeed, while proposing to look at the making of geography to explain the world, Soja also poses the attention on thirdspace both as an analytical transposition of Borges' Aleph, or the "space where all places are"⁸, and as a construct characterized by an "all-inclusive simultaneity [that] opens up endless worlds to explore and, at the same time, daunting challenges [because] any attempt to capture this all-encompassing space in words and texts [...] invokes an immediate sense of impossibility, a despair that the sequentiality of language and writing [...] can never do more than scratch the surface of Thirdspace's extraordinary simultaneities"⁹. This way, the reader could possibly feel bamboozled by an apparently contradictory position: on one side, the proposition and promise that the analysis of the "making of geography" can explain the world; while, on the other, Soja's reminder of "the incapacity of language, texts, discourses, geographies and historiographies to capture fully the meanings of human spatiality"¹⁰. On one side, a promise of overcoming of an extant situation rooted into a dialectical way of thinking and, on

⁷ Soja, 1989, p. 1.

⁸ See Soja, 1996, p. 56.

⁹ Soja, 1996, p. 57.

¹⁰ Soja, 1996, p. 57.

the other, the proposal to develop "an interpretive human geography" or "a spatial hermeneutic"¹¹. The question that we raise here is this: how does Soja possibly project Fichte (1794) and Hegel (1807) with Gadamer (1975) and Vattimo (1985) on the same path of knowledge production; the meta-narrative of the phenomenology of Spirit and the progressive appearance of social consciousness with the disenchantment of the postmodern condition; Idealism with Nihilism?

Social Consciousness and Postmodernity

We believe that a possible explanation of this tension lies in the understanding of the passage from modernity to postmodernity. Modernity itself refers to a wide and complex set of principles and elements that may even seem contradictory to a certain degree and that make of the definition of modernity an arduous task to many. Harvey, for instance, tried to define modernity as a process that “not only entails a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions, but [that] is characterized by a never ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself”¹². It is, indeed, through this process that postmodernity emerged under the guise of one of the many internal ruptures of modernism. One reason for the emergence of these ruptures is also due to the radically ambitious and far-reaching extent of

¹¹ See Soja, 1989, pp. 1-2.

¹² Harvey, 1989, p. 12.

modernist goals that, according to Habermas, attempted: “to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic”¹³.

Soja enters this debate by providing a clear definition of the process of modernization that is complementary to Harvey’s definition. As he says that:

“modernization [...] is a continuous process of societal restructuring that is periodically accelerated to produce a significant recomposition of space-time-being in their concrete forms, a change in the nature and experience of modernity that arises primarily from the historical and geographical dynamics of modes of production”¹⁴.

Based on these considerations, we can interpret the historical shift in perspective within Western philosophical thought from modernism to postmodernism as a *conjuncture*: the unfolding of a *moyen-durée*, typical of economic and social time, as opposed to the *longue durée* of

¹³ Habermas, 1983, *Modernity: an incomplete project*, cit. in D. Harvey, 1989, p. 12.

¹⁴ Soja, 1989, p. 27.

the *structures* and the *courte-durée* of *les événements*¹⁵. This conjunctural time brings with it several processes of change in perspective. At the economic level, we see the beginning of the internationalization of the Neoliberal thought, passing through what Harvey defines as "the revolutionary turning-point in world's social and economic history"¹⁶ between 1978 and 1980. From an architectural perspective, this cultural change has been identified by the architect, Charles Jencks, with a specific date. Harvey says that: "with respect to architecture [...] Charles Jencks dates the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern at 3.32pm on 15 July 1973, when Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize winning version of Le Corbusier's 'machine for modern living') was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for low-income people it housed"¹⁷. From a philosophical perspective, instead, we see the publication in 1975 of Gadamer's "Truth and Method" and in 1979 the arrival of Lyotard's "The Postmodern Condition" and the time of disenchantment.

In this context, we can say that Edward Soja was an innovative product of his time. While looking with admiration to Lefebvre's work

¹⁵ For a wider discussion of *longue durée* [long duration], *moyen durée* [medium duration], and *courte durée* [short duration] of *les événements* [the events], see: F. Braudel, 1958, *Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée*, Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, No. 4, pp. 725-753.

¹⁶ Harvey, 2005, p. 1.

¹⁷ Harvey, 1989, p. 39.

and, more generally, to French Marxism as the only school of thought that "from the onset, was [...] inclined toward an explicit spatial perspective"¹⁸, in a context in which "social theorization [was] dominated by a narrowed and streamlined historical materialism"¹⁹, Soja is inspired and inspires also the forthcoming social time beyond the conjuncture. Soja's force is his ability to appreciate the dialectic of historical materialism while being able to criticize and outline its flaws and, at the same time, develop a research agenda that tries to "resume the dialectic on a different terrain"²⁰: the realm of space.

If we interpret his dialectical and hermeneutic position from this perspective, we can say that Soja is essential to accompany us through what Braudel calls the *tides* of the conjunctural time, he leads us towards the new postmodern moment while pointing at the fundamental dimension of the previous time that we cannot leave behind us: the socio-spatial dialectic and the simultaneous unfolding of time, space, and being. The unexplored legacy of this reminder shows us Soja as a conjunctural scholar between the history driven historical materialism of the modern and the hermeneutical complexity of postmodernity. Soja warns us about the incapacities of all our intellectual means to fully

¹⁸ Soja, 1989, p. 46.

¹⁹ Soja, 1989, p. 31.

²⁰ Soja, 1989, p. 44.

grasp the "meanings of human spatiality"²¹, but reminds us of the realm in which these simultaneities can be explored.

We can even push the discussion forward by comparing Max Weber's concept of "meaning of history" to Soja's approach towards "meaning of space". In particular, Weber reminds us that meaning can be of two kinds. As he says:

*"the term may refer first to the actual existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor, or to the average or approximate meaning attributable to a given plurality of actors; or secondly to the theoretically conceived pure type of subjective meaning attributed to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action"*²².

This way, Weber tried to suggest us that the true meaning of history cannot be grasped by any human tool and that the only possible activity of the scholar can be oriented towards an approximation. Soja, indeed, extended this form of awareness also to the analysis of the meanings of human spatiality throughout all of his works. In particular, in

²¹ Soja, 1996, p. 57.

²² Weber, 1919 (2004 ed.), p. 4.

"Postmetropolis", he argues that:

*"there is too much that lies beneath the surface, unknown and perhaps unknowable, for a complete story to be told. The best we can do is selectively explore, in the most insightful ways we can find, the infinite complexity of life through its intrinsic spatial, social, and historical dimensions, its interrelated spatiality, sociality, and historicity"*²³.

However, even if recognizing the limits of research on spatiality, Soja does not propose an interpretive geography or spatial hermeneutic, as he calls it, for the sake of interpretation. Soja is constantly oriented towards the improvement of the conditions of inequalities and towards the definition of spatial justice. It is for this reason that Soja, even if aware of the complexity of the challenge of spatiality, argues that by analyzing space, from the perspective of the socio-spatial dialectic, we can develop a "knowledge that we can use not just to understand the world but to change it for the better"²⁴.

While Hegel saw space as a product and residues of historical time

²³ Soja, 2000, p. 12.

²⁴ Soja, 2000, p. 12.

and Marx looked at social consciousness especially from the point of view of collectivity, Soja, together with Lefebvre, connects social consciousness to space, by granting a primary and active role to the city and its spatio-temporal component, crucial to the radical transformation of society. For a long time, the revolution had to be defined as a change in social consciousness where space was never included, as a political change in time through the social dynamics within the nation-state. Soja adds the variability of space in a non-Cartesian way, as a dialectical force which negates and transcends social constituencies.

The definition of spatial justice and the transformation of society develop through the social production of spatiality and the socio-spatial dialectic²⁵. For Soja *space* is itself a means of production and a means of control, in other terms, a means of power, because social space embodies social relationships while, at the same time, being distinguishable from the mental and physical space and there is a double illusion that masks the fact that social space is a social product, which is something due to the fetishism of the spoken word, reinforced by the fetishism and ideology of writing.

Ultimately, Soja not only proposes a form of postmodern geography in relation to the empirical fabric of space, but also a postmodern geography of critical social consciousness in which space

²⁵ Soja, 2009.

plays a central role²⁶ and, this way, Soja is still able today to take us to new and unexplored fields of multidisciplinary research.

Conclusions

This short essay aimed to point the attention of the readers and scholars on few particular aspects of Soja's legacy that we believe are still unexplored. From our perspective, it seems that, while continuing and expanding on Lefebvre's tradition and teachings, Soja delineates an important set of studies centered around a peculiar revolutionary spatiality. Space becomes means of power through which people can dialectically interact to bring about social change and spatial justice, and the socio-spatial dialectic becomes the necessary analytical method to unravel the processes that develop within what Lefebvre called the “blind field”²⁷. Space is not a fixed concept, à la Descartes, but becomes the center of the struggle, in its interrelations with time.

Thus, Soja's notion of postmodernity is constantly shifting between dialectics (even trialectics) and a more Nietzschean time, cyclical and tragic. In these tensions and apparent contradictions, we find the measurement of his originality. The task of future scholars working in his footsteps will be to find in space the key to navigate and solve these theoretical problems.

²⁶ See Soja, 1989, p. 12.

²⁷ See Lefebvre, 1970, pp. 23-44.

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