

Homage to Ed Soja

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I first met Ed in the fall of 1983. I came to UCLA to do my PhD with someone else, but was quickly fascinated with his approach, his breadth of intellect, and he took me on as a student. I had come from Geography at McGill at a time when a Marxist orthodoxy had begun to solidify as an important and powerful analytic in Geography. In Montreal we were reading Capital, Poulantzas, Althusser, Hindess and Hirst, Milton Santos, talking about fractions and factions of capital and the role of the state. It was also a time when a debate between the meta-narratives of gender, race and class—sometimes fractious, sometimes productive—was beginning to emerge.

At GSAUP, the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ed was a *tour de force*. We grad students would crowd into his classes. I don't remember any readings actually being assigned to these classes, and perhaps there weren't any! Ed would talk for one or two hours almost non-stop and then take questions. These lectures were the basis for his book *Postmodern Geographies*, which I still believe today (in terms of what it has done to and for the discipline of geography) is his finest contribution. It was exhilarating, and I remember several times as graduate students we would pile out of the class, our thoughts stretched like rubber bands, trying to keep hold of the concepts and their implications, the socio-spatial dialectic, the spatial turn, before familiar pathways of thought would snap back into place.

I remember coming to the AAG for his Author Meets Critics on *Postmodern Geographies* a few years later. It was a midsized room, and in not untypical fashion the AAG had seriously misjudged the interest the work would generate. The room was packed, standing room only, and the audience snaked down the hallway trying to catch snatches of the discussion in the room. That moment I think was a metaphor for Ed—his person and his work—always exceeding the space provided for it, pushing the boundaries of thought

of that time. The socio-spatial dialectic is now something of a commonplace in geography today, and many scholars have pushed in directions well beyond it.

But what was exciting to me at the time was the sheer breadth of the project. This was not the working out of a particular analytical framework (be it Marxism, Lefebvrianism, or something else) in relation to geography. It was nothing less than—as Ed put it—the tracing of “a reconfigurative path through the intellectual history of critical social theory from the last *fin de siècle* to the present.” A massive undertaking, which pulled from Terry Eagleton, Martin Jay, Michel Foucault, John Berger, Marshall Berman, Stephen Kern, Ernest Mandel. I could go on—but the point here is that Ed offered a different way to *do* geographic thought—a rereading, an oblique and capacious reading across the western canon that offered new ways of thinking. It is not for nothing then that this work inaugurated what we widely call the spatial turn, and it is not insignificant that geography has been leavened subsequently by a whole series of “turns”—the cultural turn, the post-colonial turn, the ontological turn, the affective turn, and most recently the call for a Southern Turn, which focused on the global south and with the southern U.S. South in the recognition of and engagement with a vibrant anti-racist scholarship.

What Ed gave us was not merely a concept, the socio-spatial dialectic—however that has intervened in and redirected geographic thought, whatever mutations have emerged from it—but the idea and the practice of a ‘turning,’ a different way of building geographic thought, a different way to approach the act of thinking itself.

It is this movement I think that has inspired me and continues to inspire me in my own turn to and through philosophy.

It is not surprising as well that Ed has attracted a wide range of heterodox thinkers, students who worked “within shouting distance of Marxism,” to borrow Stuart Hall’s felicitous phrase: Clyde Woods who wrote *Development Arrested*, students like myself working on youth, others on the constitution of feminist and queer geographies, and all manners of difference. Ed was not “hands on” as an advisor. He left you to your own devices much of the time. He was always available to talk should you need it, but he also gave you the freedom to chart your own course. At a time in the discipline when the doctoral dissertation still followed the orthodoxy of a kind of ersatz science: state your hypothesis, develop the literature review, provide your methodology,

and explain the case study. He told me: “write your project as a book.” It was immensely freeing.

There is much more I could say here. Ed was especially kind around kids. I remember bringing my son to a conference in Baltimore when he was just past 6 weeks old, a newborn, before the days of childcare at the AAG. I was standing next to Ed at the back of a large plenary session with baby in arms, and my son started to sigh at a particular flat point in the presentation. Ed turned to me and said: “My thoughts exactly.” I remember Ed reporting with a mixture of pride and bemusement the first day his own son Chris was attending undergraduate classes at UCLA: Chris had indeed turned up on campus but left almost immediately because he couldn’t find a parking spot! Ed, I think, saw it as much confirmation of his concept of the socio-spatial dialectic as the intransigent behavior of his offspring. Ed was also funny: he loved to sing, had a booming voice to match his stature, and sang regularly with a chorus, although he complained to me once with some exasperation that he had been asked to tone it down. His voice was drowning out the other singers.

I got the news about Ed’s death November 3, 2015. I had no premonition, no warning that he was ill, that this was coming. It is still hard for me to grasp that he is in fact gone, both because of the new trajectories of thought that he instigated in our discipline, and because he was such a lovely presence. Derek Gregory, in his lovely tribute, referred to Ed as “a gentle giant.”¹ He was in many ways a mountain of a man: calm, but not passive. A presence.

So rather than thinking of him as gone, I prefer to think of him in the way that John Berger describes a particular sense of the past in the mountains: Ed is past, but a past that is never behind us, will never be behind us, but always to one side. A fitting and lyrical description of the way Ed has and continues to engage a space-time. Someone who has given and continues to give so much of himself and his work to our discipline.

1. On Derek’s Blog, Geographical Imaginations: <https://geographicalimaginations.com/2015/11/04/a-gentle-giant/>