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Remembering Edward W. Soja and the Los Angeles School

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How will I remember Ed Soja? So many words and descriptions come to mind. A friendly bear of a man. Belligerent and bloody-minded. Garrulous and opinionated. Witty, funny, crotchety, critical. Driven by an itching curiosity and a towering intellect. A rascal. When I think of him, I usually return to those days when our paths intersected most intensely, in the 1980s and 1990s, during the fabled rise of the Los Angeles School.

I first met Ed in the late 1970s, when I sought him out during a short visit to LA. These were the days before he had published his famous ‘socio-spatial dialectic’ paper. As always, he was welcoming, generous with his time, and verbal. After I moved to LA in 1985, I met Ed’s wife Maureen for the first time when I joined the long stream of visitors which were a permanent feature of their Mar Vista home. Maureen was an amazing host with a vivid temperament of her own. Together, they could be an intimidating duo, like an irresistible tag-team in a wrestling bout. I can never think of Ed without Maureen wafting into view with a beverage in hand.

It was no time before I regarded Ed as a friend. He introduced me to many sides of LA, and did not let the fact that I was a faculty member at USC stand in the way of good conversation. He and Maureen were present at the festivities when Jennifer and I married in 1987.

My first real introduction to Ed the scholar occurred when, as editor, I was preparing a special issue of *Society and Space* dedicated entirely to Los Angeles. Ed had agreed to publish his soon-to-be famous article entitled ‘Taking Los Angeles Apart’ in that issue. The journal itself was little more than three years old at that time (1986), and the LA issue was my first

1. Remarks read at Edward W Soja tribute sessions at the 2016 American Association of Geographers Annual Conference.

self-conscious effort to build a research agenda through the journal. I took my editorial responsibilities seriously and offered Ed helpful comments on his article. Too soon, he returned the manuscript to me without a single word altered! Ed loved his prose, and I had learned that you messed with it at your peril.

The rise of the LA school was made possible by a series of authoritative case studies on the region by Ed and others during the early 1980s, mostly focused on contemporary urban economic restructuring as manifest in Los Angeles. This remarkable collection provided an enduring empirical foundation for all that was to come. As work on LA intensified and drew in more collaborators at home and abroad, its empirical base diversified to include aspects of demographic diversity, environment, homelessness, etc. We began taking the first fateful steps toward the conviction that what was happening in Los Angeles could also be observed in other cities of the United States and other parts of the world. If not an urban archetype, LA was at least a forerunner of the shape of things to come. One of the earliest comprehensive articulations of this emerging epistemological consciousness was Ed's 1989 book *Postmodern Geographies*. Around that time, the idea of a 'school' of urban studies based on Los Angeles slipped into our contentious conversations.

All who were present will recall, however imperfectly, a notorious retreat convened at Lake Arrowhead, high in the mountains east of LA. There was maybe a dozen, perhaps twenty people in attendance. The question was tabled: Is there a Los Angeles School of urban studies? Substantive disagreements—and there were many—were swept aside by the fanfare of egos around the table. There can never have been a scholarly debate that was so hilariously inconsequential. The un-meeting of minds was fondly memorialized by Mike Davis in his book, *City of Quartz*, where he concluded that the still-born 'Los Angeles School' was as splintered and amorphous as the city itself. But never forget that the city of Los Angeles works; and the LA School produced path-breaking scholarship.

The most effective codifications of the LA School ultimately occurred not through the personal contribution of individual members, but in three edited volumes. Fittingly, it seems that the transcendence of an edited collection was required to accommodate the diversity of opinions and topics. Soja was a key figure (with co-editor Allen Scott) in the first of these books, called *The City* (1996), where things began to come together. Ed's own contribution was a masterful synthesis of the historical periodization of LA's urban development. [In case you're wondering, I consider that the other two edited volumes that

synthesized the case for the LA School were: *From Chicago to LA* (Dear, 2002); and *Up Against the Sprawl* (Wolch, Pastor and Dreier, 2004).]

In retrospect, the rhetorical gesture toward a distinctive 'LA School' was a necessary first step in gaining attention and shaking loose the dead weight of previous generations. The LA School was never a unified school in the sense of representing a homogeneous perspective on the region. It was and remains more of a loose confederation, whose members shared common ground concerning a phenomenal urban object even as they protected their individual sovereignties.

It's been suggested that the LA School is now 'over,' but nothing could be further from the truth. The ideas and epistemological reorientations encompassed by the LA School have been so thoroughly absorbed into urban scholarship that it is no longer necessary to rehearse its precepts and assumptions. But this is not the same as forgetting or estrangement. The legacy of the LA School flowers in the comparative urbanism that is so characteristic of today's academy. There is an intense curiosity about forming analogous schools for other cities, modeled after the LA School, as a method and strategy of argumentation. And of course, there are the ongoing works of the LA School's original gangsters, including Soja's own *Thirdspace* (1996), *Postmetropolis* (2000), *Seeking Spatial Justice* (2010), and *My Los Angeles* (2014).

The history of the LA School will be written by others, but Soja's prominent place in that history is guaranteed. I just hope future scholars will recall how much fun we had during our investigations, discoveries, and disagreements. You could say that the LA School discovered a 'beach beneath the street,' to borrow a phrase from the Situationists. The times we spent in Ed and Maureen's home in Mar Vista, and others' homes in Topanga Canyon, Venice Beach, Santa Monica, and the Hollywood Hills are testimony to the enduring friendships and pleasures that bolstered the work.

My last meetings with Ed were relaxed, even though they occurred in a conference setting. We skipped some sessions. We were older and our differences mattered less, if at all. I was struck by how Ed had absolutely no concept of 'retirement,' of stepping away from his work. His first retirement party at UCLA had rapidly degenerated into a lugubrious, gin-sodden Bacchanal (I'm speaking solely for myself at this point). It was amusing and touching to see Ed confront the recollections and admiration of long-time friends and colleagues; he seemed somehow unsure of how to respond to such expressions of affection. In any event, Ed paused for fully thirty seconds before he un-retired

and returned to his life of reading, writing, advising, traveling, and generally being an iconoclast. He had failed spectacularly in the role of being a retired person, another achievement that invokes my admiration.

Much more remains to be said and written about Edward W. Soja. He will be remembered because he made Los Angeles unavoidable in urban studies, and for being the undefeated World Champion of Geography in social theory, urban planning and social justice. To say that we will miss Ed is a monstrous understatement.