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Peer reviewed

Ed Soja

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Ed would have really appreciated this gathering. He loved to be the center of attention.

Ed was in every sense larger than life. He had an imposing physical presence and an enormous personality. He was also gifted with an extraordinarily fertile mind that took him persistently to the intellectual frontiers of geography, planning theory, and social enquiry generally. His astonishing (one of Ed's favorite words) verbal capacities served him well not only in his written work, but also in his more direct interaction with others, from his inspired teaching to public debate. His way with words seemed to be virtually inexhaustible and sometimes, to be frank, a bit overpowering. I sometimes had the feeling after a conversation with Ed that I had lost.

I first met Ed briefly in the mid-1960s, but it was only when I came to UCLA in 1980 that we came to know each other well and to spend much time together. At that stage in our careers we were both intently focused on efforts to re-think spatial theory in terms of Marxian categories. Ed had just published "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," which marked a crucial turning point in his career and, after a rather dry spell in the 1970s, signaled the flood of publications that was to appear in the last two or three decades of his life. This also initiated his subsequent near-compulsive concern with what he called "socio-spatial dialectics," an idea that subsequently evolved into the notion of the "trialectical" relations between geographic space, human society, and ideology. He experimented creatively and playfully with various theoretical approaches to these issues, including, most importantly, Marxism and postmodernism, but always in a highly idiosyncratic and imaginative

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

way. Among the numerous original ideas that he teased out of these materials was the concept of “third space,” of which he was inordinately proud.

Many of you are familiar with Ed’s more recent work and writings, so I want to focus here on earlier and less well-known aspects of his career.

I remember one special day, shortly after I arrived at UCLA, when Ed and I took an exploratory trip around parts of eastern and southern Los Angeles and Orange County. We made a whole series of weird and wonderful encounters including the baroque Mission Inn in Riverside, the Richard Nixon Birthplace in Yorba Linda, the new residential development of Mission Viejo (with its flock of Olympic swimming champions – a fact that especially appealed to Ed’s finely-honed appreciation of the improbable), the John Wayne (!) Airport, and the surreal Noguchi Garden in Costa Mesa, to mention only some of the highlights. At the time it seemed to us to be completely bizarre, though in today’s post-fordist/postmodern times most observers would probably take it all in stride. Was it real or was it a simulacrum? Ed made much of this question in his later work.

I certainly was taken aback with much of what we encountered that day, and Ed too was quite amazed despite the fact that he had already lived in LA for several years. What we saw was an urban landscape completely different from anything that was described in the literature of urban geography and sociology. This was an extraordinary mosaic of mushrooming ethnic communities in the suburbs together with enormously wealthy residential subdivisions, interspersed with vast swaths of high-technology industry set in manicured landscapes, more like upscale financial agencies or day spas than anything resembling manufacturing plants. The whole was dramatically different from our usual points of urban reference such as Chicago and Detroit in the northeastern USA. As our day progressed our conversation became increasingly animated about how our theoretical ideas could accommodate this departure from “normal” blue-collar/white-collar and factory-based forms of urbanization. In his later work, Ed would return again and again to the peculiar sense of strangeness and hallucination evoked by this landscape, and of course to the idea of the simulacrum and the postmodern strangeness of Southern California.

I like to think that this trip represents the moment of genesis of what later came to be known as the LA School. At any rate, in the mid-1980s a small group of us at UCLA and USC including Ed, Mike Davis, Michael Dear, Jennifer Wolch, Michael Storper and myself came to share in this sense that

Southern California heralded something radically new in urban theory. Up to then, Chicago had provided the basic model of 20th century urban society, and Los Angeles was typically seen as being an eccentric special case whose essence could be summed up in terms of sun, sea, surf, and movie stars. Ed was especially forceful in leading this academic discovery of Los Angeles, and thus began an intense engagement with the city and the region that lasted for the rest of his life.

The UCLA/USC group was also deeply involved in the launch and promotion of a new academic journal called *Society and Space*, with Michael Dear as its founding editor. The very title of the journal was an echo of Ed's socio-spatial dialectics idea. One of the earliest numbers of the journal was devoted to Los Angeles with its lead article by Ed entitled "Taking Los Angeles Apart." Here, Ed picked up on the *Aleph*, characterized by Jorge Luis Borges as "the only place on earth where all places are." Ed went on to write that the *Aleph*/Los Angeles functioned as:

... a limitless space of simultaneity and contradiction, impossible to describe in ordinary language. Extraordinary language is accordingly experimented with in describing Los Angeles as a place where everything seems to come together in evocative fragments (1986, 255).

This statement heralds three of the basic elements of the emerging Soja brand: an emphatic interest in space as a domain of "simultaneity and contradiction," LA as a place where "*it all comes together*," and a focus on the use of "extraordinary language." This insistence on extraordinary language evolved steadily over the following years, and helped to project Ed into his later postmodern phase marked by an inimitable form of Soja-esque verbal exuberance. Ed frequently told me that I had a tin ear in regard to his principal intellectual sensibilities so if he happens to be up there looking down, he is probably already complaining that I got it wrong all over again. He once called my own prose "stiff."

In that same issue of *Society and Space*, Ed and I published an extended editorial with the ambitious title "Los Angeles: Capital of the Late 20th Century." Here we made the provocative case for considering Los Angeles as the "paradigmatic metropolis of the world" displacing Chicago as the paradigmatic model of capitalist urbanization.

These early publishing ventures laid some of the conceptual foundations of the "LA School of Urban Studies" in opposition to the old "Chicago School

of Urban Sociology.” Ed and I then tried to push things further forward by organizing a group of some twenty local scholars to write papers on diverse aspects of the economic development and social character of Los Angeles. These papers were eventually published in 1996 in a book mischievously titled “The City” with the subtitle: “Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century.” For a time, this and other work on Los Angeles helped to re-orient much of the prevailing debate in urban theory. Indeed, over the brief course of its active life the LA School generated considerable controversy in urban studies circles, until it was more or less stoned to death by an army of hostile critics.

As I have already indicated, Ed’s intellectual commitments continued to evolve after the 1980s in a number of different ways. However, his passionate interest in Los Angeles and its political-*cum*-planning problems remained prominently to the fore in all this work. He and I remained good friends over this later period, though the time of our more intense forms of collaboration were now behind us. Still, I like to believe that that special moment of flowering in the 1980s and early 1990s was one that will come to be seen as the defining moment of Ed’s career. It is certainly one that I personally will always treasure, and it is inflected deeply with the towering presence of Ed Soja.

References

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