BOOK REVIEW

Just City, Spatial Justice and the Right to the City: What Role for E-Planning?

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The Just City
Susan S. Fainstein
© 2010 by Cornell University Press
212 pp.
$37.15

Seeking Spatial Justice
Edward W. Soja
© 2010 by University of Minnesota Press
256 pp.
$24.95

These two books represent a milestone for the study of justice in Geography and Planning. Although based on different approaches and with different objectives, both provide innovative perspectives on the theory of (spatial) justice. While for Susan Fainstein the aim is to offer a theory of justice that can be used to assess and compare different (urban) policies and institutions, for Edward Soja the aim is to show how geography is an essential component of justice and to explain how geography affects justice, at different geographical scales. While Soja seems to be critical of the The Just City thesis, which in his opinion “draw attention away from the core arguments” (p. 30), and is clearly more favorable to Lefebvre discourse on the right to the city, I tend to see both perspectives and discourses on justice and geography as complementary. And if it is certain that none of these books deal explicitly with e-planning, it is also sure that urban planning and urban policies, broadly defined, are present in both books, and, for that reason, the values, arguments and experiences examined and discussed will be of interest for all those working in the field of urban e-planning.

In The Just City, Susan S. Fainstein discusses how to achieve justice in the urban context, from a perspective that sees justice as the normative principle of urban policy, based on the rejection of the neo-liberal ideology that has framed urban policies in most cities around the world in the last decades. The goal is to offer “an urban theory of justice and to use it to

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evaluate existing and potential institutions and programs” (p. 5), an evaluation of outcomes based in three main criteria – equity, democracy, and diversity – which should be considered in the evaluation of all public policy decisions. The purpose is not to provide a theory of the ‘good city’ but “to recommend non reformist reforms directed at improving the lives of residents of cities within the Western Europe and the US…” (p. 19). In other words, its main goal is to guide urban policy to produce outcomes that do not disadvantage those already excluded. In a time of global (public) finance crisis, which affects more those already disadvantaged, this is a timely book for planners and other urban stakeholders.

In the first chapter, Fainstein discusses different philosophical approaches to the problem of justice, and explores, in the following chapter ("Justice and Urban Transformation: Planning in Context"), moral issues associated with urban revitalization programs and the application of theories of justice. The following three chapters examine urban redevelopment in three cities – New York, London, and Amsterdam – from the point of view of democracy, diversity and equity, and compare the three cases. The final chapter ("Conclusion: Toward the Just City") discusses issues raised in the three case studies and ends with a series of principles that should guide the formulation and evaluation of urban policy. Although e-planning as such is not explicitly addressed in the book, it seems clear from the discussion provided by Fainstein that a fair and just urban e-planning practice will need to consider and discuss these principles. For the author, equity of outcomes is the normative principle that should drive public policy in the city; a perspective that distinguishes her vision of a just city from the neo-liberal ideology, and from the communicative planning theorists, for whom, the key issue is the planning process and who takes part in the decision-making.

Despite this divergence with the communicative planning paradigm, on what should be the normative standard for planning, it is obvious, as Fainstein recognizes, that there is a relationship between the procedures applied during the planning process and policy outcomes, between the institutional frameworks within which planning takes place and the distribution of the benefits of the urban policy, between planning processes and who gets what and where within the city, although, as the evidence available in the literature clearly shows, and Fainstein emphasizes, democratic procedures do not always produce equitable outcomes in urban policy. For Fainstein, and contrary to the collaborative planning approach, it is not the same to lay down adequate decision-making processes and to adopt explicitly policy options that can produce more just outcomes within the city.

The application of these criteria of justice – democracy, diversity and equity – in the evaluation of these three cities revealed important findings although none of them unexpected. Overall, Amsterdam ranks first, followed by London and New York. Although not an ideal city, Amsterdam, as Fainstein points out, is still a model of a ‘just city’ that most cities might aspire, despite the changes in the past few decades. New York is strong in the diversity criteria and shows a decline in the other two criteria (democracy and equity), with no prospects that this will change in the near future. London has a larger public sector than New York and therefore performs better in the equity criteria, although less than Amsterdam. Therefore, compared to New York and London, Amsterdam continues to be a city with stronger equity across several policies, although diminishing compared to its own past, a city where democratic participation is stimulated and decentralized, and where diversity is a characteristic of most of its neighborhoods. For all these reasons, the qualities of a just city, as defined by Fainstein, have been better realized in Amsterdam than in the other two cities considered in her comparison.

In sum, with these principles and the example of the three cities examined, the book provides sufficient elements that can help policy makers, planners and other urban stakeholders to move towards the ideal just city. Even when substance (justice) and process (communication / participation) are seen as constituted, not separate spheres, as does Patsy Healey,
quoted in page 9, the arguments put forward by Fainstein in the book make a strong point in favor of a large consensus on universally accepted values of justice, which should be taken as the normative standard by participants in the urban policy process. Or, as Fainstein puts it, “discourse and outcomes are surely connected, but it is the substantive content of the discourse, not simply the process by which it is conducted that matters if justice is to be the outcome” (p. 184), a perspective that urban e-planning cannot ignore and should take into consideration.

In Seeking Spatial Justice, Edward Soja starts from the idea that justice, independently of how it is defined, has a ‘consequential’ geography. However, he sees this geography not as a simple background but as a formative component of justice itself, arguing that “seeking spatial justice becomes fundamentally, almost inescapably, a struggle over geography” (p. 2). To address the relation between Justice and Geography in the way Soja does is one of the innovative contributions and merits of his approach, in particular due to the rebalancing he offers between social, historical and spatial perspectives in the interpretation of the urban condition, making the spatial dimension a significant force shaping social action and the search for spatial justice. Differently from Fainstein approach to (spatial/city) justice, focused as she is on (policy) discourse content and outcomes, Soja emphasizes coalition building among social actors for action and struggles for social and spatial justice.

The book has 6 chapters and a final section of Notes and References with additional important details. It starts with an overview, in the Preface, of the Bus Rider Union decision in Los Angeles, seen as an example of spatial (in)justice (transit discrimination, transit injustice), the reaction to that decision, and how it illustrates the way social action must be conducted by all those seeking to remove injustices in the urban context. In the first chapter (“Why Spatial? Why Justice? Why L.A.? Why Now?”), Soja examines the spatial turn and the consequences it had on the study of the spatial aspects of justice in the social sciences, and discusses the urbanization and globalization of injustice in the second chapter (“On the Production of Unjust Geographies”). This is followed in chapter 3, “Building a Spatial theory of Justice”, by a theorization of spatial justice and a review of how different scholars approached the idea of spatial justice, with particular emphasis to David Harvey and the urbanization of injustice, and to Henri Lefebvre’s ideas about the right to the city. The next two chapters deal with the Los Angeles case (“Seeking Spatial justice in Los Angeles”) and with the experience of staff and students at UCLA Urban Planning department (“Translating Theory into Practice. Urban Planning at UCLA”). In both chapters the aim is to illustrate how productive can be coalition building and social action aimed at spatial (in) justice in the urban context and in other geographical scales in our increasingly urbanized world. The book ends with a discussion of social movements for spatial justice after 9/11, in particular in the context of the neoliberal financial crisis in 2008.

Although not directly examined in these two books, it seems reasonable to expect, based on the available evidence, that the widespread use of information and communication technologies in urban and regional planning, the emerging e-Planning paradigm, has the potential to enhance the three dimensions of urban justice – equity, democracy and diversity – considered by Fainstein in Just City, and to facilitate coalition building among social organizations, allowing greater control over the social production of urbanized space, as Henri Lefebvre originally argued in his writings on the right to the city, which in part influenced Soja approach in this book.

Improving and decentralizing citizen participation through the extensive use of information and communication technologies, namely through Web 2.0 technologies, wiki government, crowd-sourcing for urban governance, volunteered geographic information, and collaborative mapping, just to mention a few examples of the vast collection of new possibilities, expected to excel in the U-City, will most probably produce more control over
the urban process, by the most disadvantaged, compared to what they have now, more equitable outcomes, and will enhance democracy and diversity, if, among other conditions, the existing digital divide, both geographical and along several social dimensions, is addressed with justice.

Nonetheless, as the literature shows, technology, per se, is not enough for new forms of collective action to emerge and for spatial justice and a just city to develop. Even the most sophisticated Web technologies will be ineffective without real changes in the way social action and social coalitions are built, as Soja suggests, or without real changes in the way government at all geographical scales functions, as Beth Noveck shows, for a very specific issue, in her book on Wiki Government.

In sum, if it is certain, as Fainstein argues, and I’m in accord with her, that although process is important, as the collaborative planning paradigm proposes, it is the content of the discourse (policy) that shapes the just city and enhances spatial justice. It seems also factual that we need, as Soja argues in his book, to find new ways of thinking and acting about the unjust geographies in which we live, in particular through coalition building of those most negatively affected by the actual urban order, a process in which, I admit, methods and digital technologies of urban e-planning can offer a positive contribution, if used to empower those most dispossessed in our cities.

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