

The New Regionalism: A Conversation with Edward Soja

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We invited Professor Edward Soja from the Department of Urban Planning, University of California, Los Angeles, to talk with us about the New Regionalism. Professor Soja's publications include *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Blackwell Publishers 2000), *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso 1989) and *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places* (Blackwell 1996).

Ehrenfeucht: Let's start with a very basic question. What is the New Regionalism?

Soja: Today, regions and regionalism are being studied at a wider scope than ever before and applied to a more diverse set of areas and topics inside and outside of planning. This renewed attention extends also to studying cities and urbanism. Cities and regions are increasingly blending together, both in a concrete sense in what some call global city-regions, as well as in new theoretical debates. To reflect this, we now have a new area for doctoral research in Urban Planning that we call Critical Studies of Cities and Regions, in which urban and regional issues are always seen as interconnected. The New Regionalism goes well beyond planning, however, and is affecting a wide variety of fields and disciplines, from literature, politics and geography, to art, music and film studies. This comprehensive interest in cities and regions is generating new ideas and approaches across the humanities and social sciences, in theory building, critical analysis and practice.

Among the many concepts being given renewed attention are territory and territorial governance, the notion of scale and how human life is embedded in multi-scalar nodal regions, and the role of regions in understanding the relationship between the global and the local. All these concepts are interwoven and they all reflect the growing impact of globalization processes, economic restructuring and new technologies. These are the three most important forces of change affecting the contemporary world, and each is contributing in different ways to the larger resurgence of interest in regions, regionalism and regional analysis.

Using an old regional metaphor, there are both core and peripheral answers to the question what is the New Regionalism? At its core, the New Regionalism has involved an intensified interest in conceptualizing regions and regionalism as fundamental components of all social theory, of all social life, integral to the very nature of human society. Regions at various scales shape our lives in significant ways, and, at the same time, we shape our regions—the whole hierarchy of nodal regions in which we live, from our body space to the regional organization of the global economy and everywhere in between. In Michael Storper's work, for example, regions are presented as of equal significance to markets, states and families—the three major focal points of the social sciences in terms of the organizational structure of our lives. We live, he says, in a “regional world.” At the core of the New Regionalism, then, is a more assertive and powerful re-theorization of the basic concepts that have always been associated with regional studies.

On the periphery of the New Regionalism, something else is happening. There is an expansion outward of the relevance of regions and regionalism to more arenas of theory and practice than ever before. Here, the New Regionalism expresses itself more in terms of discovery and new opportunities for application rather than in re-theorization and assertiveness of core concepts.

Ehrenfeucht: How is scale becoming important? What is different about the scales that we are discussing now?

Soja: The concept of scale is central to all forms of spatial and especially regional thinking. Regions are particular spaces and places, and the concept of region—even in its traditional form—applies across many different scales. This means that regions exist at many different levels, from the neighborhood to the globe, and that each of these levels is intertwined with the others. A major focus of the New Regionalism has been not just to analyze these multiple, interacting scales but, in particular, to make practical and theoretical sense of the dramatic changes in the impact of different scales that have been occurring over the past thirty years.

These changes in scale and scalar relations have been shaped primarily by the forces of globalization and economic restructuring. One of the most interesting ways these changes have been studied in recent years is as a product of a double-side process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization. At one level, old forms of territorial governance and identity are breaking down, becoming less rigidly defined than they were in the past. And at the same time, new and different forms are beginning to emerge. This restructuring of territories is happening at all scales.

The global scale, for example, is becoming more powerful than before, at least relative to national and local scales. Globalization is also carrying with it advanced forms of urban industrialism and industrial production that are affecting all scales below the global. Large segments of what was once considered the periphery, where there was little evidence of advanced industrialism, have become intensely industrialized. The NICs, or newly industrialized countries, are the

best example of this, but I would also include other new industrial spaces such as Silicon Valley and Orange County.

Also becoming more powerful and important are supra-national regions, the scale between the global and the nation-state. Many new trading blocs have formed and play an increased role in shaping what is happening in globalization and the global economy. Even more dramatic has been the formation of the European Union as a supra-national region. This is something unique. Never before has a collection of advanced industrial nation-states coalesced together into a larger supra-national state.

Then there is the restructuring of the nation-state, a very controversial process that has led some to proclaim the end of the nation-state. Many debates are still going on as to whether the power of the nation-state is really disappearing or just reasserting itself at different scale, supra-national as well as sub-national.

Whatever is actually happening to the nation-state, there has been a very major resurgence of sub-national regionalism all over the world. Some are revivals of older cultural regionalisms, others are new reactions to globalization and economic restructuring. Whatever the mix of the old and the new, regionalism below the level of the nation-state, from Quebec and Catalonia to the global city-regions of Shanghai and Southern California, has become a very important issue in the contemporary world.

All these changes at larger regional scales are affecting local communities as well. In some areas, such as here in Los Angeles, this has generated a new kind of community-based regionalism. Regionalism and

regional thinking have spread to areas that thirty years ago would have paid very little attention to regional issues. Again, this relates back to globalization and economic restructuring. Decisions affecting local communities are increasingly made elsewhere, not only within the immediate local government context but at regional, state, national and global scales. In reaction to these external forces and especially to the many negative effects of globalization and economic restructuring, many communities are beginning to see the need to organize at a regional scale, to form new regional coalitions and alliances, to develop specifically regional strategies to attain their community development objectives. Here, scale and region become very important political and strategic issues.

Ehrenfeucht: With regard to community-based regionalism, is there something different about spatial arrangements that makes regionalism interesting to community-scale activities and activism? Or is it a change in the theorizing and work around it that has made regional thinking more relevant?

Soja: Well, I often answer such either/or questions with both/and also. There is an element of both in this. On the first level, yes, the conditions of the world around the community have been rapidly changing over the last thirty years. Among other things, regions and regional economies have become more important in the global economy. At the same time, globalization has reduced the autonomy of the local, so what used to be handled at the community scale is increasingly less susceptible to local control. This means that it is more difficult for communities to engage successfully in their traditional forms of

organizational struggle. Community leaders and activists are beginning to realize that they have to organize at a larger scale and create coalitions across race, location, gender, class. Coalitions are not new, of course. What is new now, though, is the scope and scale of the coalitions. More than before, they are moving into all different kinds of areas, not just labor, but as I said earlier, across racial boundaries, class boundaries and other kinds of boundaries that used to be fairly impermeable.

One can also see a significant contribution to this community-based regionalism coming from the debates and discussions in the academic world, including those from the New Regionalism. To use Michael Storper's word in a different way, there is a kind of "buzz" about regions all over the world today, and this buzz is spreading well outside academic circles and reaching into such areas as community organizing, where regional thinking was almost non-existent before.

Ehrenfeucht: What are the major debates in the New Regionalism?

Soja: There are many, but we might as well start at what I called the core of the New Regionalism, which has to do with the development of the field of regional political economy. Regional political economists have taken the lead in re-theorizing the importance of regions, pushing the importance of regions and regionalism into more and more arenas, and each step is being discussed and debated in significant ways. For example, there is going to be a whole series of sessions at the geography meetings¹ on what is called the relational turn. The relational

turn is, in large part, an attempt to move away from mechanical spatial location theories into looking at the softer, cultural, social and political relations that shape regional development. These include such things as the atmosphere for entrepreneurialism, for cooperation and trust, for technology sharing and learning. These softer features are not easily captured in hard statistics on income and skill levels, wages and productivity changes—the data that have traditionally been the focus of how one looked at development. Now there is a digging underneath the hard data to these softer layers of human relations as well as spatial relations that are at the basis of regional economies. This rich theorization of regional relations and conventions is coming mainly, but not exclusively, from this area that formed fifteen to twenty years ago as regional political economy.

Related to this has been a vigorous new debate on the importance of proximity and agglomeration in the stimulation of innovations and regional development more generally. This is where the urban and the regional come together in the most exciting and interesting ways. There has been a kind of re-discovery of the importance of clustering people and economic activities in space, in what can be called the generative force of cities, of urban agglomerations. Michael Storper calls this *buzz* and relates it directly to the face-to-face contacts that arise from proximity and clustering. In my recent book, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, I call the same thing *synekism* and define it as the stimulus of urban agglomeration. We can go on and on talking about this topic, which I think is one of the most impor-

tant and exciting ideas coming out of the New Regionalism.

Perhaps the most interesting debate relating most directly to planning and policy studies is about governance. The debate about regional governance is related up and down the scale hierarchy—down to community-based regionalism and all the way up to the organization of the global economy. The discussion begins with recognizing how regions play a vital and increasing role as a driving force of the global economy, especially the 300 or so global city-regions that today contain most of the world's population. These global city-regions have become the leading power in the highly competitive global economy, and often relate to one another more intensively than they relate to other major metropolitan regions within the nation-state. But what we are discovering is that there are very few governmental structures that exist or are effective at the level of the global city-region, and that new structures have to be created. But how do we do this, especially given the continuing power of older, long-established local government units? Do we have to eliminate counties and municipalities and states to create effective regional governance? This is making regional governance an extraordinarily complicated challenge today. One thing that nobody wants to do is go back to the older notions of formal metropolitan government. But what else is possible?.

Adding to the challenge of regional governance is the realization that the same restructuring processes behind globalization and the New Economy of flexible postfordist production are also intensifying so-

cial and economic inequalities. We know now that what is making regions more competitive and powerful, if left uncontrolled, tends to lead to increasing social polarization, intensifying inequalities and greater injustice. The greatest challenge of regional governance today is how to continue to be competitive economically and control the rising inequality and polarization between the rich and the poor at the same time.

Ehrenfeucht: Inequality and injustice within a region?

Soja: Yes, within cities and within regions, but also between regions. Before, the all-powerful nation-state was responsible for dealing with problems of poverty, social inequality and geographically uneven development. Even regional planning was an arm of the state or federal government. Today, for many reasons, we need to find ways of regionalizing governance and governmental power.

Ehrenfeucht: How does the spatial turn relate to the New Regionalism?

Soja: Where do I begin? For me, the New Regionalism is one of the most important outgrowths of the spatial turn, which I see as a broad-ranging shift in critical thinking and analysis affecting nearly all fields. Very briefly, the spatial turn means that such concepts as place, location, territory, scale, proximity, agglomeration, landscape, environment, region—all the aspects of what can be called the spatiality of human life—have become much more important than ever before in a much wider set of disciplines

and areas of study. So the New Regionalism is not synonymous with the spatial turn, but is directly related to it and has expanded, in part because of the more widespread recognition of spatial thinking and analysis. More people are now aware of the importance of regions and regionalism, and how regional geographies affect our lives, our communities, our identity, our economic conditions, and so forth. We can see more clearly the ways in which power and social control are embedded in the spatiality of cities and regions, how this can hurt us and oppress us.

Getting back to the issue of scale, another part of the New Regionalism that has been affected by the spatial turn has been the leading role played by regional and spatial scholars in studying the effects of globalization and economic restructuring, the formation of the New Economy, and especially the relations between the global and the local. In earlier periods of restructuring, such as during the Great Depression or the last decades of the nineteenth century, critical spatial thinking was rarely an important part of how new developments were analyzed and interpreted. But in this period of restructuring, since 1970 or so, spatial and especially regional thinkers have been at the center, right at the core, in understanding what has been happening

Ehrenfeucht: This raises a question about the need for new kinds of activism that are informed by the spatial turn, by thinking across scales and regionalist thinking. How do these new concepts help us better understand what forces affect us and our neighborhoods or communities?

Soja: Here I would start with the broader impact of the spatial turn, particularly with regard to activism and political movements at every geographical scale. There is a new kind of spatial consciousness that was not widespread twenty years ago. It almost did not exist at all, even in geography and among regional planners. It begins with the notion that space is socially produced, that we make our geographies, shape our spaces from the local to the global; and that they simultaneously shape us, shape our behavior and our thinking, shape our identity and our class consciousness, our designs, our buildings, our communities, cities and regions. This is the first step. Once we see that we produce our spaces, we realize that we can change them as well. So the next step is the awareness that the spaces or geographies that we produce can oppress us, can harm us, can seriously constrain our lives. In other words, the geographies in which we live, the multi-scale hierarchies of nodal regions in which we live, play a role in shaping our lives both positively and negatively. Thus, we can conceive of geographies to be more or less unjust or oppressive. This is vital. It leads to another realization, that gaining greater control over how our geographies are produced can be a powerful political target for community mobilizing, organizing, and activism.

The environmental justice movement can be seen as arising from something very much like this new spatial consciousness, the spatial turn moving into political practice. The same can be said for the development of community-based regionalism. People become aware that the internal problems of the local community are, in a significant way, being shaped by what is happening in the region. And in order for these community problems to be addressed, there

must be some changes made at the regional scale. The Bus Riders Union (BRU) is a great example of this new spatial and regional practice. It was able to convince the court that the geography of the fixed rail transit system that the Metropolitan Transit Authority was producing was unjust, that the plan was not only racially discriminatory but also spatially discriminatory, that it would benefit predominantly white and wealthy suburban households much more than the transit-dependent and largely immigrant working poor who live primarily in the central city, that investing billions of dollars in improving the bus system would be more democratic and beneficial to those that were most in need of public transit.

Ehrenfeucht: Are there qualities about LA itself that affected the emergence of the BRU?

Soja: Yes, of course. Everything is affected by the local geographical context in one way or another. Given what we have been discussing, however, there is something of unusual importance in the Los Angeles context that I think played a key role in the emergence of the BRU, although this role is not very visible or easy to measure. This has to do with the extraordinary agglomeration of the immigrant working poor in the core of the larger Los Angeles region. This concentration at the center of LA of about four to five million people, most of whom are foreign-born workers unable to achieve incomes much above the poverty level, is one of the largest such concentrations in the world. Although fragmented into different ethnic communities and super-exploited in the New Economy, with little choice but to become domestic workers, gardeners and street vendors, the high densities (and proximities) also bring with it

increased face-to-face contact and social interaction that can lead to innovative new ideas. This resembles what I earlier called *synekism* and Storper calls *buzz*, the stimulus of urban agglomeration, the stimulus of nodality, of concentrated density creating new ideas and new movements. These clusterings of people can be highly generative of innovation. Sometimes this stimulation is expressed in art and music, at other times it works to create new kinds of innovative labor and community coalitions.

The factor of proximity and agglomeration also relates to another feature of Los Angeles that I think has been important in these new developments. This has to do with the relations between communities and the university, and the related feedback between theory and practice that can occur when these relations are close and maintained over a long period of time. I have a small research project I am working on now looking at the history of the Urban Planning Department's connections with community and labor groups, which has been very intense for more than thirty years. I can't get into this very much here, but I do think it is at least part of why these new, spatially conscious examples of community based-regionalism are happening in LA more than in most other big city-regions.

Ehrenfeucht: Is there a California School or a Los Angeles School of regionalism?

Soja: If you see regionalism and urban studies together—say, in the critical study of cities and regions, or in the analysis of global city-regions—then I think one can speak of an LA School. There has always been something special about LA as a city and region, and there has for the past few decades been an

unusual concentration of innovative urban-regional-spatial thinkers at UCLA and other universities. There are good arguments to expand the definition to a California School, to recognize some very important contributions made in northern California, especially at Berkeley. But the leading edge of creative spatial thinking and consciousness, especially with regard to the New Regionalism as I have been discussing it here, has fairly clearly been in LA.

Ehrenfeucht: Would you say that the LA School's approach is most important? Or, is it that there is something distinctive about the region itself?

Soja: Again, I will answer by saying that both need to be seen together, the approach and the context interact in important ways. Like Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, when there developed a very distinctive Chicago School of urban studies, Los Angeles has been an extraordinarily rich laboratory in which to study the city and, more broadly, urbanism as a way of life. LA has been prototypical for a lot of urban trends over the last hundred years, and one can see these trends more clearly since they are less complicated by a longer history of urbanization, as in New York and other eastern US or European cities. But I think the approach that has developed to study the city is more important than the distinctiveness of the city in defining an LA School.

There are several different ways this distinctive approach can be defined. Michael Dear at USC sees postmodernism as the defining feature. But what I see at the core of the LA School approach—and this is not unlike what was at the core of the old Chicago

School—is an emphasis on what can be described as spatial causality, the ways in which the specific geography of the city affects all aspects of urban life. In the Chicago School, this causality or explanatory factor was rooted in ecological patterns and processes, that is, more environmental than spatial. Today, Los Angeles is at the forefront for the development of a specifically spatial notion of understanding and explaining contemporary urban and regional life, and for a more general theoretical framework for the critical study of cities and regions all over the world.

It is all interrelated, the spatial turn, the New Regionalism, the question of scale, the study of globalization and the New Economy, the emphasis on spatial explanation and causality, the links to planning and public policy, and the connections that are being made between good theory and progressive political practice. I think this may be an appropriate place to end the interview: with the hope that these achievements are only the beginning of something bigger and better.

Endnote

¹Association of American Geographers, Los Angeles, 2002

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