

BOOK REVIEW

Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions

reviewed by Carl Grodach

Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions. Edward Soja.
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In *Postmetropolis*, Edward Soja foresees the day when tourists entering Los Angeles will be provided with “a visitor’s passbook to hundreds of cultural worlds, with rights to one meal in an appropriately ‘ethnic’ restaurant, an authentic cultural encounter, a musical event, and a brief language lesson” (342). Actually, the day may already be here. The Los Angeles Visitors Bureau has produced a film geared toward the regional tourism industry to call attention to the touristic potential of Los Angeles’ ethnic neighborhoods and businesses. This “simcity” is one of six manifestations of what Soja characterizes as the postmetropolis. Six discourses—the *postfordist industrial metropolis*, *cosmopolis*, *exopolis*, the *fractal city*, the *carceral archipelago* and the *simcity*—represent the postmetropolis, and in particular, Los Angeles, as a multinodal urban agglomeration in which new urbanization processes are emerging.

Following *Postmodern Geographies* and *Thirdspace*, which both influenced the recent spatial turn among a diverse array of academic disciplines, *Postmetropolis* is the denouement of Soja’s trilogy of critical urban and regional studies. In addition to continuing his pioneering work on the spatiality of social life, *Postmetropolis* can also be read as a conceptual framework for the new regionalism. In each of the three parts that comprise the book (primarily in the first two) Soja constructs an explicitly spatial and historical narrative to justify and demonstrate the theoretical power of a regional approach. Part 1 situates the urbanization of human thought and behavior into 11,000 years of regional geohistory. Part 2 outlines the six representations of the postmetropolis listed above to demonstrate the distinctive features of today’s urban regionalism. Part 3 consists primarily of quotations drawn from commentary that revolved around the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings

following the trial of Rodney King. As such, while the purpose of *Postmetropolis* is not to empirically apply a total regional approach, it lays the theoretical groundwork for new directions in regional planning.

In Part 1: *Remapping the Geohistory of Cityspace*, Soja establishes the new regional consciousness by constructing an alternative narrative of urbanization that situates the region as an historical fact of social life and human history. He embeds the terminology of the new regionalism into the history of urbanization to legitimate its vocabulary and to assert these concepts as intrinsic to human development. As such, regional thinking is essentially the culmination of 11,000 years of urban agglomerations. Soja arranges his history of city development as a set of spatial myths, that is, the reinterpretation of three urban revolutions: pre-agricultural settlements of hunters, gatherers and traders; the formation of the city-state; and the industrial capitalist city.

In reinventing the origins and development of urbanization, Soja seeks to reveal alternative perspectives on urban history. With each period, a *synekism* produces an increasing need and desire for more intense interdependencies and political and cultural conventions necessary to the urban agglomerations that have propelled social development since the dawn of humankind. *Synekism*—a term Soja disinters to describe the stimulus of urban agglomeration—is an ancient Greek concept that refers to a network of urban settlements within regional boundaries, where innovation, growth and development occur. It is through such competitive learning that cities have evolved. I must stress, however, that

Soja's reconstitution of the historical roots of regional planning is not simply to sanction these roots as historical fact. More importantly, it is an attempt to abolish the notion of cities and nations as bounded and atomized entities where the flow of people, goods and ideas remain contained within isolated spaces.

Moreover, Soja continually makes the point that, today, the postmetropolis attracts and participates in the economies and cultures of the entire globe. In today's urbanized areas, boundaries are porous and ill-defined—hence the growing attention to regional thinking. This sentiment is made most cogently in the core of the book, Part 2: *Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis*, in which Soja examines how scholars have attempted to make sense of contemporary processes of urbanization.

What Soja characterizes as the *postfordist industrial metropolis* is most closely associated with, and most actively conceptualized by, the new regionalism. Those who study the postmetropolis under this lens examine the role of industrial production within the processes of postfordist economic restructuring, flexible accumulation and geographically uneven development. In particular, this scholarship examines the geographic intricacies of the deindustrialization and de-territorialization of fordist economies, and their reconstitution into more flexible, and often regional, forms of production and location decisions. Furthermore, the significance of the region takes on increasing analytic power as the migration of culture, labor and capital intensify at a global scale.

No longer is the nation-state the unchallenged center of economic, political and social life. As Soja points out, new forms of economic organization, cultural identity and citizenship have emerged at regional and transnational levels amidst global restructuring.

Contemporary theories of globalization, which Soja summarizes under the heading *Cosmopolis*, engage in a rethinking of this ubiquitous term. The most recent theories attempt to break down the global/local dichotomy that characterized past scholarship on uneven development to examine the vast flows of international capital and culture entangled in the processes of restructuring. Consequently, these writings also point out that the nation-state, while still extremely powerful economically, politically and ideologically, is no longer the only territorial delineation of cultural identity and economic organization. Likewise, with the rise of flexible production, new forms of government are necessary to support new forms of capital accumulation and divisions of labor. Cognitively, if not physically, territories are being remapped and reconstituted. New coalitions and professional and group affiliations are characterizing local, regional and national spaces, and new forms of regional power have emerged (for example, and most prominently, the European Union).

Soja uses the terms *exopolis* and the *fractal city* to identify some of the major social and geographic outcomes of restructuring. Exopolis captures the physical mass of postsuburban development. The economic changes wrought under the postfordist economy have generated vast new built environ-

ments and have intensified social stratification. Out of exopolis come the “fictional histories” (249) of the new urbanism—its residents clinging to an imagined past—as well as an inner city which increasingly functions as a dormitory of transplanted, flexible, third world labor. Simultaneously, young urban professionals colonize downtown territory to set up a mythical urban life, while ethnic minorities claim the suburbs. Exopolis is indeed the city both turned inside-out and outside-in, twisted and densely layered, for as demographics belie a simple urban-suburban dichotomy, somehow the city still retains intensified social and spatial polarization.

Likewise, the fractal city is meant to characterize increasing social and spatial inequality and polarization emerging within the geography of postfordism. The “restructured social mosaic” (265) that distinguishes many city-regions, however, is also marked by the rise of new space-based social movements and a political consciousness—which Soja touches on in Part 3 as well—that is slowly being defined at a regional level by groups in LA such as the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union (BRU) and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE).¹

The *carceral archipelago* and the *simcity* reflect different ways that social control is instituted in cities and regions. Out of the restructuring of public and private space, the carceral archipelago fashions increasingly balkanized private spaces and fosters the idea of a diminishing classical public realm that separates social groups both physically and psychologically. The *simcity* describes a softer manipulation of social per-

ception and the power of the urban imaginary to influence not only popular taste but also civic consciousness. Ultimately, both obscure the possibilities for spatial coalitions and the perception of common situations between socially disparate groups.

In Part 3, *Lived Space: Rethinking 1992 in Los Angeles*, the book concludes with a fascinating array of quotations that reconstruct the multiple perspectives surrounding the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings following the Rodney King trial. While perhaps lengthier than necessary, Soja's cut-and-paste approach succeeds in transporting the reader to multiple spaces and experiences around the city that a more analytic or objective account could not possibly provide. From here, as in Part 2, Soja touches on the current struggles toward spatial justice and regional democracy within LA.

Postmetropolis reaches across disciplinary boundaries in its conceptualization of the city-region and the multiple, colliding processes of urbanization. Soja's six representation types demonstrate that urban and regional change cannot be mapped or conceptualized simply in economic terms, by studying demographic movement or by mapping changes in urban morphology. The major strength of *Postmetropolis* lies in its ability to synthesize many of the major issues in urban and regional studies that are often negotiated separately. This comprehensiveness makes the book an ideal text for an introductory course in urban and regional studies. However, some might find this strength the book's primary flaw. Beyond the histori-

cal interpretations of Part 1, *Postmetropolis* does not assert any radically new theoretical insights in and of themselves. And, despite the book's comprehensiveness, some large omissions occur. Some readers may find the lack of non-western cases problematic, especially in the context of globalization. Others may find discussion of environmental regionalism conspicuously absent.

Soja does, however, open many new and exciting perspectives to the reader. He masterfully synthesizes the scattered interpretative strategies typically employed to make sense of contemporary urbanization and commands huge amounts of theoretical and empirical material in the process. *Postmetropolis* is an invitation to new explorations that will definitely inform urban and regional planning studies in the future. As Iain Chambers explains, "the metropolis is, above all, a myth, a tale, a telling that helps some of us to locate our home in modernity, there to find the new gods, the new myths..." (71). Quite simply, Soja's reinvention of the region is to postmodernity as the metropolis was to modernity. In *Postmetropolis*, the region is a new tool for grasping recent transformations in political, ideological and economic spheres, and a framework for thought and action.

Endnotes

¹BRU works toward improving the availability and affordability of mass transit for the working poor in the Los Angeles region. LAANE seeks to mobilize disenfranchised groups in Los Angeles through actions such as the Living Wage Campaign.

CARL GRODACH (cwg@ucla.edu) is a doctoral student in the Department of Urban Planning at UCLA.