

Bringing Space Back Into the Picture

Osman Keshawarz

Soja's main aim in *Postmetropolis* is to position spatiality at the center of social-scientific analysis. He points out that typical treatments in the realms of geography, economics, political science, and sociology treat space as sort of an output to a function that takes as arguments e.g. non-spatial social, historical, economic facts, and generates the patterns of spatial development, including distributions of wealth and income, regional cultures, and urban forms. In this framework, space is simply reduced to time, in the sense that spatiality is simply a parameter on which historical processes operate in a unidirectional manner. In the *Introduction*, Soja claims that this is not necessarily the case— that the particular organization of society can *itself* have an independent effect on those historical processes of development and progress. In other words, space *is explained*, but does not *explain*, “...little more than a constructed stage-set for dynamic social and historical processes that are not themselves specifically urban.” The skeptic's mind here brings forth a few questions— is there anything in particular about spatiality *in itself* that we could ascribe causal power to, outside of a-spatial (i.e., simply historical) processes such as simple dynamic equilibrium effects of density and technological change? In other words, why *not* reduce space to simply time? How does one *conceive* of a notion of space that is not strictly subordinate to time? These are both theoretical and empirical, and Soja spends the rest of the *Introduction* constructing the theoretical apparatus used for the re-interpretation of the facts of human society undertaken in the following chapters.

Soja's framework begins by explicitly placing space at the center of the analysis, terming it the “geohistory” of cityspace. His starting point is the *spatial specificity of urban space* – including the physical and social characteristics of a particular built environment, but critically expanded to include processes that are brought about by what Soja terms “city-ness” itself. Soja here relies on the Lefebvrian conception of spatial practices, which are specific to not only a particular geographic location, but to a particular cultural or political group, or (in my view) even to a particular individual body or brain. In my view, this is one of the more powerful implications of this framework; that the city-space can only be interpreted as the result of spatial processes operating simultaneously at a multitude of different micro- and macro- scales, dialectically interacting to produce a historically-specific urban social form. Practically, this has become an aggravating roadblock in my own work, where the cleavage between micro-

and macro-economic theory leads to immutable contradictions in the analysis of an urban space that is being simultaneously constructed from both above and below.

Following Lefebvre, Soja introduces the (somewhat goofily coined) *trialectic of cityspace*: The *firstspace* constitutes the *percieved* space, encompassing the built environment of a particular city-region and all of the material objects (and relations) that are themselves constitutive of it. The *secondspace* is the city as constituted within the human brain. At first glance, this seems like a somewhat trivial distinction, as we imagine that one's mental map should map relatively accurately onto the actual material characteristics of the "real" city. But consider that the material experiences of a specific urban inhabitant are heavily shaped by one's experience of the city— for example, the area of safety around a local police station (and hence, a zone of avoidance that could become culturally-engrained) can be totally inverted, depending on the color of one's skin. In fact, gentrification-as-urban-policy is explicitly designed to exploit the incongruity of the *secondspace* mental map of the city and the *firstspace* material structure of the urban space. Finally, the *thirdspace* consists of the actual lived experience of individual urban residents and neighborhoods, ethnic groups, etc. as determined by the interactions between the *firstspace* and the *secondspace*. This final space constitutes the biography of the city.