Title
In Memoriam: Edward W. Soja, 1940-2015

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Edward W. Soja, 1940-2015
Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Urban Planning
Ed Soja died in the evening of Sunday November 1st, 2015, after an extended illness. His departure represents a huge loss to his many friends and colleagues both here in Los Angeles and all over the world. 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 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.

Over his long scholarly career, Ed produced a remarkable corpus of published work, as represented in particular by a series of highly influential books (see list at end) that seemed to appear with increasing frequency as he approached retire-
ment. Many of these were translated into foreign languages. At the time of his
death he was working intensely on a new manuscript about the early historical
origins of cities. His intellectual commitments evolved in various ways over the
years, but they were always passionately focused on what he called “spatiality”
or the dialectical and more latterly “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 imagina-
tive way. Among the numerous original ideas that he teased out of these materi-
als was the concept of “third space,” of which he was inordinately proud. Ed
frequently told me that I had a tin ear in regard to his cherished triadic concepts
so if he is reading these lines up there, he is probably already complaining that I
got it wrong all over again.

Of course, a central substantive concern in Ed’s work was the city, and above all
the development and character of Los Angeles and Southern California, a city
and a region that occupied much of his attention over a period of thirty years
and more. He was a leading light of the so-called LA School of Urban Studies
that for a period in the 1980s and 1990s rose to international prominence as a
major if controversial theoretical alternative to the then prevailing ideas of the
Chicago School, and which offered an interpretation of the city as a postfordist
(and in Ed’s later formulations, a postmodern) expression of capitalist social and
economic relationships. In all of this work, Ed was ardently committed to issues
of social justice and to the quest for urban planning practices that enlarged the
democratic potentials of modern society and that fostered what Henri Lefebvre,
one of his intellectual heroes, called the “right to the city.”

Ed’s influence on students and colleagues alike was enormous. Many of his
Ph.D. students now occupy prominent academic positions in universities across
North America and Europe. His scholarly impact is manifest in the continually
expanding references to his work in the published papers and books of scholars
from many different countries and diverse disciplines. Just a few weeks before
his death he was awarded the Prix Vautrin Lud, an accolade that represents the
highest formal international honor in the discipline of geography. I imagine that
he must have felt profoundly gratified by this mark of recognition, though un-
fortunately he was unable to attend the award ceremony at Saint Dié des Vosges
in France.
We shall all miss his assertive presence, and all the more so because he had still so much to say and to write. I personally am greatly saddened by his departure. While he and I shared a basic intellectual groundwork in common, we didn’t always agree, and over the many years of our association we often argued furiously about our academic differences. I particularly regret that I will no longer have him as an intellectual sparring partner, even though I almost always lost. Above all, I miss him deeply not only as a friend but also as someone whose incredible honesty and steadfastness never faltered.

Allen J. Scott,

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Department of Geography and Department of Policy Studies,
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Selected publications of Ed Soja:


