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Social or spatial justice? Marcuse and Soja on the right to the city

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justice et injustices spatiales

Le débat sur la justice et l'injustice est central et urgent dans les sociétés démocratiques, et la justice sociale est l'horizon de la plupart des politiques d'action sur les territoires. Mais le doute sur les grands récits explicatifs du monde a conduit souvent à relativiser tout discours sur la justice. Ce processus est renforcé par l'émergence de mouvements sociaux divers (féministes, écologistes, anti-racistes...) et par le développement du multiculturalisme : en un même lieu et au même moment se confrontent des acteurs qui ont des conceptions différentes du « juste » et de l'« injuste ». Dans le même temps certains discours ultra-libéraux se passent de plus en plus de la notion de justice sociale. C'est dans ce contexte que se placent les auteurs réunis ici pour interroger spécifiquement la dimension spatiale de la justice sociale. Celle-ci peut être aussi présentée comme l'acceptation de la différence et donc conduite à prôner une politique territoriale attentive aux droits des groupes et une définition procédurale et non plus structurelle de la justice ; de ce point de vue la question des identités et des minorités est d'une actualité brûlante...

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Seeking Spatial Justice: Part Three

Social or spatial justice?

Marcuse and Soja on the right to the city

Kurt Iveson

This paper offers a brief comparative reading of how Peter Marcuse and Edward Soja conceptualise the spatiality of justice and the right to the city. The work of both of these authors has been featured in City in recent issues, and while there are clear differences in their approaches, I argue that there are also points of convergence. In particular, both Marcuse and Soja insist that working towards the ‘right to the city’ is not only a matter of re-ordering urban spaces, it is also a matter of attacking the wider processes and relations which generate forms of injustice in cities. In making this case, the paper provides an illustration of my belief that both Marcuse and Soja are right in arguing that a commitment to the ‘right to the city’ can serve as the ‘common cause’ or ‘glue that binds’ for radical theorists and activists across their differences.

Key words: social justice, spatial justice, right to the city, Peter Marcuse, Edward Soja, Green Bans

In 2008, a conference called *Justice et Injustices Spatiales* took place in Paris. The conference was held on the campus of Université de Paris X–Nanterre, which had been one of the epicentres of the events of May–June 1968. These events, of course, were of profound significance for Henri Lefebvre’s subsequent formulation of the ‘right to the city’—a concept which has been taken up widely over the last few years, even if its meaning remains contentious.

Two thinkers who have been influential in putting Lefebvre’s concept of the ‘right to the city’ on the agenda for urban studies are Peter Marcuse and Edward Soja. Among its many

highlights, the Nanterre conference was notable for putting Marcuse and Soja on the same stage during the opening session (in a lecture theatre named after Henri Lefebvre, no less). While this wasn’t quite the equivalent of having Biggie and Tupac share a stage, it certainly did add a little ‘east coast versus west coast’ flavour to the proceedings.

The Marcuse and Soja papers, along with several others from the conference, have recently been published as chapters in a book (Bret *et al.*, 2010). Given that *City* has recently carried features devoted to the work of both Marcuse and Soja (see issues 13(2–3) and 14(6), respectively), the publication of

these chapters provides an excellent opportunity to consider both the common themes and the key differences in their respective frameworks. So, while the conference collection contains a number of excellent papers worth an extended review, in this piece I intend to restrict my focus to the Marcuse and Soja papers, focusing in particular on the meaning and place of space in their different approaches to justice and the right to the city.

As their respective chapters (and other recent writings) make clear, both Marcuse and Soja are increasingly focused on the question of 'what is to be done?' In their different approaches to justice and the right to the city, both are engaged in an effort to establish the basis for radical and progressive alternatives to injustices of actually existing cities. For this reason, both have recently been keen to explore the potential of Lefebvre's formulation of the 'right to the city' for contemporary urban justice movements. As such, while their approaches of course deal with the question of injustice, both are impatient with 'critique' which is so focused on identifying the injustices of contemporary capitalist urbanisation that it fails to take the next step of identifying the possibilities for justice in the present. And yet if both are convinced that the job of critical urban theory is to clarify the 'right to the city' and contribute to its advancement in theory and practice, they set out quite different paths to this goal.

In a recent paper for *City*, Marcuse (2009, p. 187) asked: 'how can we understand the Right to the City today, and how can a critical urban theory contribute to implementing it?' He posits the right to the city as a common cause around which groups of the deprived and the alienated might mobilise (p. 192). However, this appeal to the right to the city is not, for Marcuse, an appeal to spatiality as such. Indeed, he is wary of conceiving the ultimate goal of the right to the city spatially:

'A spatial image for the seeds of the future can be helpful ... and whatever is done will

surely have a spatial aspect also. But a spatial focus has its dangers too: most problems have a spatial aspect, but their origins lie in economic, social, political arenas, the spatial being a partial cause and an aggravation, but only partial.' (Marcuse, 2009, p. 195)

Instead, Marcuse argues that the common cause underlying diverse groups who might struggle alongside one another for a Right to the City is the rejection of the profit motive in favour of other forms of solidarity and collectivity (i.e. cities for people, not for profit). The roots of this position, articulated in his article for *City*, are elucidated in the chapter which appears in the *Justice et Injustices Spatiales* collection.

Marcuse's paper is called 'Spatial Justice: Derivative but Causal of Social Justice', and this very neatly sums up the case he seeks to make. In his chapter, he opens by summarising recent work from New York scholars on the 'just city', and notes that there continues to be debate about whether such a thing is possible if capitalism remains hegemonic. He then outlines his own position in this debate, by setting out five propositions intended to 'put space in its place'. The first draws attention to what he calls the two 'cardinal forms of spatial injustice': involuntary confinement and unequal allocation of resources across space. Second, he argues that these 'spatial injustices are always derivative of broader social injustice', while his third proposition is that 'social injustices always have a spatial aspect', and as such require 'spatial remedies'. However, following the earlier point, his fourth proposition is that these spatial remedies are 'necessary but not sufficient to remedy spatial injustices—let alone social injustice'. The fifth proposition, finally, is that 'the role of spatial injustice relative to social injustice is dependent on changing social, political, and economic conditions' which have to be empirically specified as they are 'historically embedded' (Marcuse, 2010, p. 88).

Soja, on the other hand, is not prepared to concede that space is 'derivative', and is

adamant that 'spatial justice' is not simply a sub-category that could be absorbed in some wider concept of the 'just city' or 'social justice'. In his chapter 'The City and Spatial Justice', he is critical of the 'tendencies among geographers and planners to avoid the explicit use of the adjective "spatial" in describing the search for justice and democracy'. He argues instead that putting 'spatial' in front of 'justice' is 'crucial in theory and in practice to emphasize explicitly the spatiality of justice and injustice, not just in the city but at all geographical scales, from the local to the global' (Soja, 2010a, p. 56).

As with Marcuse, Soja elaborates on this argument in his chapter through a series of propositions. The first set of propositions concern spatiality and the 'spatial turn', emphasising in particular three principles of critical spatial thinking: the ontological spatiality of all being; the social production of spatiality; and the socio-spatial dialectic (that the spatial shapes the social and vice versa). These principles, he argues, 'expose the spatial causality of justice and injustice as well as the justice and injustice that are embedded in spatiality' (Soja, 2010a, p. 60). This leads him to a second set of propositions on the concept of spatial justice. Among the common forms of spatial injustice Soja highlights are locational discrimination, the political organisation of space and the unequal distributive outcomes of capitalist urbanisation. However, he is also keen to emphasise that spatial injustice is not just a matter of outcomes but also process (a point to which I will return shortly). Given this, he argues that 'spatial justice as such is not a substitute or alternative to social, economic, or other forms of justice but rather a way of looking at justice from a critical spatial perspective' (Soja, 2010a, p. 60). His next set of propositions, concerning justice more generally, advance the argument that because 'justice' is increasingly being mobilised as a rallying cry by progressive political movements (favoured over other concepts like 'freedom' or 'equality'), it is particularly important for critical spatial thinkers to

advance the cause of combining 'spatial' with 'justice'.

At first glance, it might appear that in fact there is not much dispute here at all, and that their disagreement is in some ways a matter of emphasis. After all, both are keen to temper their respective claims about the place of space. While Marcuse wants to keep space 'in its place', he is nonetheless clear in his third proposition that 'social injustices always have a spatial aspect', and this certainly echoes Soja's (and Lefebvre's) point about the ontological spatiality of all being. For his part, Soja has also acknowledged in a recent piece for *City* that 'Caution is necessary in promoting this assertive critical spatial perspective to avoid simply replacing social and historical determinisms with purely spatial ones' (2010c, p. 629). Indeed, at various times he is prepared to acknowledge that his assertive foregrounding of spatiality is a matter of political and theoretical strategy. Thinking spatiality has suffered from relative neglect in the face of a 'hegemonic social historicism' (Soja, 2010c, p. 629). As such, 'Until these ideas are widely understood and accepted', he argues, 'it is essential to make the spatiality of justice as explicit and actively causal as possible' (Soja, 2010c, p. 629). For him, this is 'almost a form of affirmative action' in which the spatial is 'strategically and assertively foregrounded' (Soja, 2010c, p. 629). And yet, in the same paragraph in which Soja counsels caution about spatial determinism, he nonetheless argues that the 'ontological struggle' over the place of space must involve 'going beyond the timid lament that space matters to recognize more cogently the far-reaching causal and explanatory power of the human geographies we produce and within which we live' (2010c, p. 629).

Reading these two chapters together, what seems to be at stake between Marcuse and Soja is the appropriate language and framework for capturing the duality of justice/injustice as both *form* and *process*. When Marcuse argues that spatial justice is causal but derivative, his key point seems to

be that spatial *forms* of injustice such as segregation and unequal resource distribution are derivative of broader *processes* of injustice. He exemplifies this point with a brief discussion of Harlem in New York City, where he notes that the spatial ghettoisation of African-Americans is linked to a broader process of discrimination against African-Americans derived initially from slavery and compounded in the centuries since, such that 'the spatial injustices of segregation and resource distribution are derivative of these broader injustices' (Marcuse, 2010, p. 88). So, while he is clear that 'these broader injustices cannot be dealt with without attention to their spatial aspect' (p. 88), the spatial is causal and yet ultimately derivative. As such, the situation of folks in Harlem demands 'non-spatial as well as spatial remedies' (p. 90). He is concerned that spatial remedies might not move much past 'gilding the ghetto', and as such:

'spatial remedies are a necessary part of eliminating spatial injustices, but by themselves insufficient; much broader changes in relations of power and allocation of resources and opportunities must be addressed if the social injustices of which spatial injustices are a part are to be redressed'. (Marcuse, 2010, pp. 90–92)

Here, then, Marcuse makes space 'derivative' by distinguishing between spatial *patterns* or *forms* of injustice, and broader *processes* of injustice which are 'social' rather than specifically 'spatial'.

Soja, like Marcuse, is clear that unjust outcomes such as ghettoisation and uneven resource distribution are linked to broader processes. Unlike Marcuse, however, he asserts that these 'broader processes' of social injustice are fundamentally spatial. So, Soja's focus on spatial justice is not designed only to highlight unfair or uneven patterns or outcomes of development. While he also lists ghettoisation and uneven distributions as examples of spatial injustice, he asserts that:

'Spatial (in)justice can be seen as both outcome and process, as geographies or distributional patterns that are in themselves just/unjust and as the processes that produce these outcomes. It is relatively easy to discover examples of spatial injustice descriptively, but it is much more difficult to identify and understand the underlying processes producing unjust geographies.' (Soja, 2010a, p. 62)

Following this, I don't think Soja would accept that there are 'non-spatial' remedies of the kind proposed by Marcuse. Rather, any remedy would have its own spatiality, and spatial effects.

This different reading of the spatiality of justice/injustice is the source of contention between Marcuse and Soja, then. Soja puts the case for his assertive spatiality in the following terms:

'Combining the terms spatial and justice opens up a range of new possibilities for social and political action, as well as for social theorization and empirical analysis, that would not be as clear if the two terms were not used together.' (2010a, p. 66)

He is concerned that not putting 'spatial' in front of 'justice' will

'draw attention away from the specific qualities and meaning of an explicitly spatialized concept of justice and, more importantly, the many new opportunities it is providing not just for theory building and empirical analysis but for spatially informed social and political action'. (Soja, 2010a, p. 56)

He argues that this point of view is confirmed with reference to contemporary urban politics in Los Angeles, which he believes has been a 'primary center not just in the theorization of spatial justice but more significantly in the movement of the concept from largely academic debate into the world of politics and practice' (Soja, 2010a, p. 70). The LA-based movements Soja describes briefly in this paper, and in much more depth in his book *Seeking Spatial Justice* (2010b),

vividly demonstrate the fundamental importance of spatiality in both organising for, and theorising, justice. And yet, while some of the folks involved in those movements similarly are quick to assert the fundamental spatiality of their political theory and practice, they did not themselves consider or use the explicit term ‘spatial justice’ in their organising work (see Gibbons, 2010; Liss, 2010). The fact that they have developed a spatial approach without necessarily putting the word ‘spatial’ in front of anything means that what Soja would call ‘spatial consciousness’ can emerge in all sorts of ways. This perhaps takes us back to Marcuse’s final proposition (2010), that the ‘place of space’ in politics is historically and geographically variable.

In any case, while Marcuse and Soja might have quite different approaches to spatiality and its relation to form and process, the fact that they are both so insistent on the need to address both form and process is also a source of considerable overlap in their work. In particular, both are emphatic that the ‘right to the city’ is not something that can simply be achieved locally, without attention to wider processes (which Marcuse would call ‘social’, and Soja would still call ‘spatial’). Both, for instance, are excited by the ways in which ‘local’ social movements are increasingly networking, through events such as the world and regional Social Forums (Marcuse, 2005; Soja, 2010a, p. 72). Certainly, Soja would be horrified if his ‘spatial justice’ framework was reduced to a form of ‘militant particularism’ which never escaped the localism in which it was rooted, and he is very explicit in this regard. Indeed, for him one of the advantages of an explicitly spatial approach to justice is that the attention to space can help to highlight the spatial relations in which place-based issues and actors are enmeshed. Of course, this is also a point that he shares with folks like Doreen Massey (1991, 2005), although as Jane Wills (2010) pointed out in her comments on Soja’s *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Massey’s spatial framework does tend to suggest a different inflection for urban politics than Soja’s.

The capacity of urban social movements to conceptualise and address the ‘wider processes’ and relationships in which ‘local’ concerns are enmeshed has always been a core theoretical and practical challenge for those involved. For instance, in the Green Ban movement in Sydney in the 1970s, activists constantly struggled with these questions (Figure 1). In a brief discussion of that movement in my earlier response to *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Iveson, 2010), I argued that Soja’s spatial justice framework provided a useful lens through which to understand the Green Bans. Extending on that point here, we could observe that the capacity of Green Ban activists to both conceptualise and organise their struggle *spatially* was crucial to their extraordinary (if ultimately limited) success in moving beyond ‘local issues’ to attack some of the ‘wider processes’ which were generating injustice in Sydney. In particular, Green Ban activists successfully linked local struggles over the physical fate of particular places by drawing explicit attention to the *undemocratic production of urban space* in Sydney, where a cabal of politicians, planners and developers had simply assumed the ‘right to the city’ as theirs alone to exercise. One of the lasting legacies of the Green Bans was the introduction of democratic reforms to the planning process, which introduced important new requirements for public participation that were enforceable in the courts (Cook, 2006). These requirements may not have been as radical as the more radical Green Ban activists might have wanted, but I and many of my fellow Sydney-siders are frequently reminded of their importance now that they are being systematically wound back through a process of neoliberal planning ‘reform’.

Now, if we can read the Green Ban movement as an example of Soja’s ‘spatial justice’ approach in action, so too we can recognise Marcuse’s concept of the right to the city in the movement’s explicit concern with wider capitalist processes of urbanisation. Marcuse’s slogan ‘Cities for People, Not for Profit’, intended to position the struggle

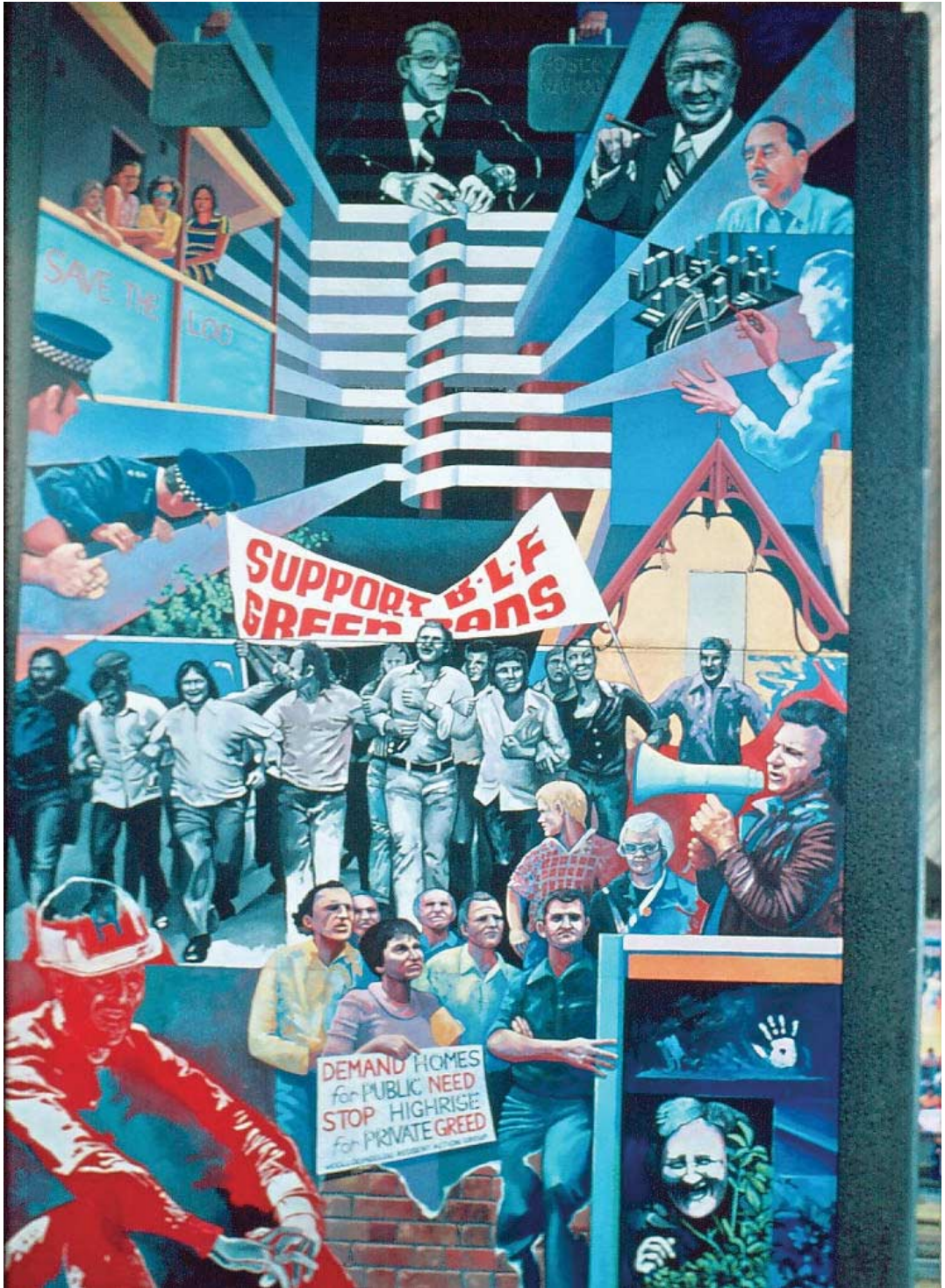


Figure 1 Mural depicting the Green Ban struggles, Woolloomooloo, Sydney. Mural designed and painted by Marilyn Fairskye and Michiel Dolk, 1982. Photo: Mattias Tomczak, 1982, used with permission.

against profitability as the common ground for disparate groups concerned with the right to the city, would surely have struck a chord with many of those involved in the Green Bans. In 1972 Jack Munday, Secretary of the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation, responded to criticism that the bans were destroying jobs in the building industry in the following terms:

'Yes, we want to build. However, we prefer to build urgently-required hospitals, schools, other public utilities, high-quality flats, units and houses, provided they are designed with adequate concern for the environment, that to build ugly unimaginative architecturally-bankrupt blocks of concrete and glass offices. Likewise, we wish to build for those aged people who gave their working lives to improve our country only to end up in some pent-up squalid room in the City....

Though we want all our members employed, we will not just become robots directed by developer-builders who value the dollar at the expense of the environment. More and more, we are going to determine which buildings we will build.... Those of us who build must be more concerned with what we build. The environmental interests of three million people are at stake and cannot be left to developers and building employers whose main concern is making profit. Progressive unions, like ours, therefore have a very useful social role to play in the citizens' interest, and we intend to play it.' (quoted in Thomas, 1973, pp. 56-57)

If it is possible retrospectively to identify the co-presence of what we might call 'spatial justice' and 'cities for people, not for profit' agendas in the Green Bans, this suggests at least two things to me. First, it suggests that these two agendas as championed by Soja and Marcuse are by no means incompatible, and there is indeed some overlap. Certainly, an analysis of the Green Bans based on one or the other framework will have a different inflection. But the experience of the Green Bans seems to show that both approaches can be useful in building a

movement which transcends a militant localism only concerned with outcomes rather than wider processes.

Second, as I am sure both Soja and Marcuse would concur, the experience of the Green Bans also demonstrates that both of these agendas for justice are incredibly difficult to enact. Even as activists drew on what we might retrospectively call a 'spatial justice' and/or a 'right to the city' frame, neither guaranteed success or a resolution to ongoing tensions between form and process. For instance, the call for attention to wider planning processes was at times advocated and interpreted rather bureaucratically, such that 'participation' became almost an end in itself for some. Here, limited reforms to wider planning processes eventually turned out to be easier to accomplish than concrete local outcomes such as the expansion of affordable housing in the inner city. Perhaps this is an example of the difficulties of achieving 'spatial justice' in a capitalist system, as Marcuse would argue.

On the other hand, the call for people to be put before profits similarly generated its own contradictions, especially on the question of *which* people were to be put before profit. For all their criticisms of undemocratic planning and greedy corporate developers gobbling up green spaces, some middle-class participants in the movement were accused of participating only to protect their own particular interests in maintaining leafy urban environments which remained out of reach for the working class and the poor. As Leonie Sandercock (1974, p. 126) caustically observed at the time:

'Environmentalists ... do care about the urban environment. They are concerned to protect it. But, "though of course not consciously", they want to protect it for themselves. In all of the concerned statements by middle class environmentalists ..., there is never a mention of protecting the inner suburbs for the poor, just of the need to protect the inner suburbs. But in the urban environment there is no escape from the

rigours of scarcity. If the rich increasingly value the amenity of the inner suburbs of Australian cities, they simply use the market system to satisfy their preferences, forcing poor tenants out.'

Now, my point here is certainly *not* to suggest that the ultimate defeat of the Green Bans was the product of a conceptual failure on the part of the activists! It might also have had something to do with an extraordinary and at times violent counter-mobilisation which, like the Green Ban movement itself, involved a cross-class alliance of developers, politicians and rival segments of organised labour. My point is simply that achieving the 'right to the city' is no easy task, even if a promising conceptual framework for waging that struggle is in place.

These two points suggest to me that both Soja and Marcuse are right when they acknowledge, in their different ways, that the decisions made by social movement activists about the conceptual framework they adopt are as much informed by strategic, historic and geographic considerations as by calculations informed by ontological reflections on the relationship between space and justice. These questions about what the 'right to the city' means simply cannot, indeed should not, be answered in the same way in different times and places.

This should not be misrecognised as a practical point, as it is also a theoretical observation. That is to say, as I argued in my previous contribution to these discussions (Iveson, 2010), that progressive alliances across difference are founded on the basis of hard work. Commonalities and alliances, in other words, are not out there waiting to be found. They do not pre-exist political labour, but rather they need to be *made*. To be sure, this work of making alliances includes the difficult work of selecting, developing and/or refining a conceptual basis for solidarity that works in a given space and time. But these conceptual frameworks cannot be fully evaluated without reference to examples of how they have been, and might be, put to work.

Just as the failures of a movement cannot be blamed on their conceptual frameworks alone, neither can their successes. For the extraordinary success of the Green Bans and other urban social movements (such as those in Los Angeles discussed by Soja) is only ever the result of the patient and fraught work of organising across difference to conduct struggles on the plane of wider processes as well as local issues.

Ultimately, I think this point puts the conceptual dispute between Soja and Marcuse that I have discussed in this piece in context. Optimistically, I would argue that the 'right to the city' might just be a concept whose space and time has come as a useful basis for alliance building and radical urban politics. Marcuse offers the right to the city as a useful concept around which different groups might find 'common cause', and Soja believes it can serve as the 'glue that binds' apparently disparate struggles. Yes, there are important differences between their interpretations of its meaning. But if they are both right, then a shared and genuine commitment to excavating the radical potential of Lefebvre's provocative and yet sketchy concept is surely also the basis for making common cause across their differences—and indeed for building even wider alliances between a growing number of thinkers and activists who have sought to put this concept on the agenda for radical urban politics today. And speaking as a member of the wider editorial collective of this journal, it is my hope that *City* can play a part in the work that needs to be done to build such alliances through the (mostly!) comradely expressions of agreement and disagreement in its pages.

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