

## Book Reviews

**SEEKING SPATIAL JUSTICE**, by Edward W. Soja. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8166-6688-3 (\$24.95 Paper)

Reviewed by

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*Seeking Spatial Justice* begins with an account of the 1996 class-action lawsuit brought by the Bus Riders Union of Los Angeles against the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority, a lawsuit that produced a consent decree forcing the MTA to make investments in its neglected bus system. Soja sees this case—and the struggle that led to it—as a paradigm for establishing spatial justice.

In Soja's view, scholars fail to understand both the nature of injustice, and the possibilities for remedying it, if we do not take seriously its spatial dimensions. *Seeking Spatial Justice* seeks to establish and help define the idea of "spatial justice" and demonstrate its relevance in practical political struggles, while also showing how academic work informed by a spatial justice framework can contribute to those same struggles.

How are justice and space interrelated? Soja takes a strong position on this question, asserting that the "spatiality of (in)justice . . . affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice" (p. 5). Soja wants scholars and activists to take geography as seriously as they do social processes in analyzing social justice, and to recognize that there is a "dialectical" relationship between spatial arrangements and social processes.

The degree to which Soja pushes this idea, however, strains plausibility. It is one thing to argue that space is an important mechanism by which social injustices are realized or perpetuated, and that the specific ways space is organized has implications for social life. It is another thing to suggest that "spaciality, sociality and historicity are mutually constitutive, with no one inherently privileged a priori" (p. 18). Soja repeatedly critiques not only the "space-blinkered social historicism" of many social scientists and historians (p. 19), but also the work of scholars who while giving attention to spatial questions continue to "privilege" social processes in their analyses. But if social processes and human choices are responsible for converting raw geographical elements into "socialized lived space," it seems natural that most analysts will privilege the study of social processes, because it is through such processes that spaces have been created and that spaces might in the future change.

In Chapter Three, Soja provides a short review of theories of social and spatial justice, beginning with the work of John Rawls and culminating with particular attention to the work of David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre. Soja correctly points out that since social processes are necessarily realized in particular places and spaces, we must be attentive to the

geographic dimensions of inequality in developing accounts of justice. Unfortunately, Soja presents a straw man and an inaccurate portrayal of John Rawls and his liberal egalitarian theory of justice: Soja (like many left theorists) mis-reads Rawls as a sort of welfare state liberal who is concerned with making corrections to excessive inequalities generated by markets but not with addressing the mechanisms that generate those inequalities.

In fact, Rawls was a critic of capitalism, and believed that only liberal socialism or a “property-owning democracy” could be consistent with his principles of justice. It is certainly true that Rawls’s writings do not deal with geography or spatial processes in a serious way, but Soja underestimates the critical leverage available in Rawls’s theory to launch such an inquiry (even today). For instance, one could easily extend Rawls’s theory to state that no one should be unjustly disadvantaged (e.g., lack liberty or equality of opportunity) on account of where they live.

Soja clearly prefers Lefebvre’s emphasis on the fundamental significance of space to Harvey’s accounts of social justice and the city on the grounds that Harvey excessively privileges emphasis on social processes (such as the process of capital accumulation). But if injustice refers fundamentally to a particular kind of social relationship, why should we not in the first instance focus on the social processes that generate and perpetuate those social relationships? Put another way, given that the spatial dimensions of social processes must always be considered, if those spatial patterns are ultimately rooted in the logic of capitalism, isn’t the analytical (and political) priority to develop (and publicize) a better understanding of how capitalism actually works?

The remainder of the book is more useful, particularly for those interested in the Los Angeles case. Soja provides a short history of spatial struggles in the Los Angeles area from the 1960s leading up to the Bus Riders Union case in Chapter Four, and in Chapter Five provides an insider’s account of the role of the UCLA Urban Planning program during these years in partnering with labor and community organizations addressing spatial injustice. Certainly the UCLA model of producing both research and planning professionals oriented toward the concrete problems and needs of community groups remains an impressive and attractive counterpoint to traditional academic research programs aimed solely at professional journal publications.

The closing chapter describes several conflicts over spatial justice in the Los Angeles area over the past decade, such as the successful struggle to prevent a Wal-Mart from opening in Inglewood, CA. Soja devotes the final pages to a commentary on a 2009 speech by David Harvey assessing the financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009.

Soja finds much to admire in Harvey’s analysis, but faults Harvey for suggesting that questions of urban injustice can be reducible simply to “struggles against capitalism” (p. 198). Here he cites a list of familiar spatial practices (zoning, public facility location) and factors (race, gender) that influence the spatiality of the city. Soja’s apparent hope is that “spatial justice” and the idea of the “right to the city” might be the banners for linking these diverse concerns.

Framed in this way, Soja’s case for the equal priority of spatial processes is more plausible—as a political tactic, a way to unify diverse social struggles and forge alliances among diverse constituents in a single space. In the absence of a serious anticapitalist politics—that is, a politics directly challenging private control of capital—this perhaps makes sense.

Nonetheless, it is telling that almost all of the concrete examples of a positive politics of spatial justice in Los Angeles cited by Soja essentially concern redistribution of particular

public and private goods or mitigation of unjust spatial inequalities rather than efforts to alter fundamentally the social and economic processes generating such inequalities. This observation opens the deeper question of whether the greater blind spot in current discourse about justice and the city is not an inability to recognize the important spatial dimensions of injustice, but rather inability to imagine a city not dominated by private control of investment and capital.

**HOW TO HOUSE THE HOMELESS**, by Ingrid Gould Ellen and Brendan O’Flaherty. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-87154-454-4, 190 pp.

Reviewed by

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Contrary to contemporary lore, homelessness has always been a problem in the United States. Historical records kept in cities such as Boston, Chicago, and New York clearly illustrate ebbs and flows, with numbers fluctuating depending on economic conditions. Yet the early 1980s experienced perhaps the largest increase since the Great Depression—a surge disproportionately high even for the uncertain economic state of the times. And despite the subsequent boom during the 1990s those levels have persisted, suggesting that policy interventions to combat homelessness have not been effective.

*How to House the Homeless*, edited by Ingrid Gould Ellen and Brendan O’Flaherty, takes on the challenge of rethinking policy solutions to homelessness. The volume begins with a simple but frequently ignored premise: homelessness is a housing issue. Therefore, it cannot be addressed adequately outside the realm of housing policy and will require changes to how housing markets and subsidies work. The book is innovative because it is organized around the gray area between two opposing views: housing market impotence and omnipotence, neither of which fully explains the persistence of homelessness. According to Ellen and O’Flaherty, the impotence argument contends that homelessness happens because of individual problems such as mental illness, substance abuse, and other “personal pathologies.” However, Ellen and O’Flaherty demonstrate how this argument is flawed when situated within a historical context. For example, deinstitutionalization of people with serious mental illnesses—an initiative frequently blamed for current homeless levels—began in the early 1960s, yet homeless numbers were low a decade later.

On the other hand, the omnipotence argument contends that the only way to end homelessness is to build more housing. But, if construction was all that was needed homelessness would have disappeared during the construction boom of the early 2000s. Ellen and O’Flaherty conclude that the answer lays somewhere in the middle—specifically that both housing and targeting matter. Housing needs to be made accessible to those who are homeless regardless of their problems. Implicit here is affordability—people who are homeless have little if any income.

There are six subsequent chapters, each addressing a different dimension of this middle ground. Chapters Two and Three focus on helping people leave homelessness. In Chapter Two, Robert Rosenheck examines the nonhousing interventions of supportive housing for people with serious mental illness. He concludes that it is the housing that keeps people off the streets, not the treatment. In fact, the impact of treatment on housing outcomes is quite modest. In Chapter Three, Sam Tsemberis, the founder of Pathways to Housing, which is the original Housing First program, discusses the evidence-based research demonstrating the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of this approach. The model's core is offering housing without insisting on treatment compliance. As Tsemberis argues, traditional programs for homeless people with serious mental illnesses typically require treatment compliance to maintain housing. But such rigid requirements tend to discourage stable participation and therefore many people end up homeless again. By providing housing that is not contingent on treatment compliance, residential stability increases significantly and over time mental health outcomes improve as well.

Chapters Four through Six shift the focus to how to use housing policy to prevent homelessness. In Chapter Four, Jill Khadduri discusses how expanding the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program could significantly reduce the number of homeless individuals and families. HCV (formerly known as Section 8) provides rental subsidies to private market rental property owners in an effort to keep housing affordable for those with very low incomes. Khadduri argues that an expansion to HCV should include more targeting of subsidies to the poorest households, including both singles and families, as well as to the localities with very tight rental markets where the risk of becoming homeless is greatest.

In Chapter Five, Edgar Olsen turns to the issue of current housing policy reforms to end homelessness. Unlike Khadduri, who recommends an expansion of vouchers at current subsidy levels, Olsen argues for shallower subsidies so more low-income households can benefit. Currently there are such long voucher waiting lists that millions of low-income households do not receive any housing assistance. Vouchers are allocated at the federal level and have never met the demand. Thus, it is unlikely that policy makers would approve a significant increase at current subsidy levels. By reducing the subsidy amount, though, a substantially greater number of low-income households could obtain assistance even at current voucher allocation levels.

Chapter Six, written by Steven Raphael, addresses the connection between housing market regulation and homelessness. Raphael contends that places with stricter housing and land use regulations are associated with greater incidences of homelessness. He estimates that reducing housing regulations in areas with the greatest regulatory burden could decrease current homeless levels by up to 13 percent.

Chapter Seven, written by O'Flaherty, focuses on managing the risk of homelessness. O'Flaherty argues that risk matters because homelessness cannot systematically be predicted in advance. As he points out, bad things can unexpectedly happen to people, such as job loss, the onset of a chronic health problem, or some other hardship. At the same time, the best predictor of who will need emergency shelter at some point in time is the current shelter population. From his analysis, O'Flaherty concludes that the neighborhoods where people at the greatest risk for homelessness live *before* they become homeless are typically those areas that have the lowest quality housing. Thus, policy interventions that focus on such neighborhoods have the potential to prevent homelessness.

All the chapters in the book are thoughtful, thorough, and provide realistic policy solutions to homelessness. However, because the basic premise of the book is that homelessness cannot be tackled outside the realm of housing policy, it is perplexing that the volume includes little about public housing transformation initiatives that have been going on for almost two decades. Since the early 1990s, when the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) VI was enacted, more than 150,000 traditional public housing units have been demolished or sold. HOPE VI did not require one-for-one replacement. Therefore only a small fraction of the eliminated public housing units have been replaced. Consequently, this type of low-income housing is disappearing, which creates more dependence on the use of voucher subsidies. The increased burden on vouchers means more low-income households cannot obtain assistance because public housing is often no longer an option. The fact that a chapter on public housing transformation is not included in this volume is my one criticism, but it is a major one because this is an important dimension of current housing policy and debates about residential instability.

Nonetheless, what is currently in the volume makes a very valuable contribution to current policy debates on how to house the homeless.

**GETTING AHEAD: SOCIAL MOBILITY, PUBLIC HOUSING, AND IMMIGRANT NETWORKS, by Silvia Dominguez.** New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8147-2077-6, 288 pp. (hardcover \$45.00)

Reviewed by

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In the late 1990s, social scientists set out to study the effect of “ending welfare as we know it” on the well-being of low-income children and families. In *Getting Ahead*, Dr. Silvia Dominguez supplements data collected from a larger project—Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study—to examine the social networks of immigrant women living in public housing in two Boston neighborhoods. Dominguez conducted repeated in-depth interviews with 19 women between 1999 and 2003, supplemented with ethnographic observation, to provide a vivid portrait of first- and second-generation immigrant women struggling to get ahead against a backdrop of urban poverty.

Through her sustained contact with these women, Dominguez discovered that their experiences were not consistent with the dominant discourse of the urban poverty literature, which she contends has focused overwhelmingly on “the experience of low-income African Americans living in areas of concentrated black poverty” (p. 12). She also discovered that her respondents’ experiences were not consistent with the dominant discourse of the immigration literature, which she argues treats “assimilation as the same as social mobility” (p. 13). The women in her study diverged from the expectations of these two literatures because they were able to utilize a diverse array of network ties to achieve

some degree of social mobility within high poverty settings, and they did so without assimilating.

Dominguez integrates perspectives from the immigration, social mobility, and urban poverty literatures to create a new theoretical framework in *Getting Ahead*, which she calls “Social Flow,” to explain how individuals utilize social networks to attain social mobility. In brief, Dominguez introduces the concept of “self-propelling agents,” efficacious individuals with goals of social and economic advancement, who use their social networks to access social support and social leverage to get ahead. When a population has enough individuals acting in this way, Dominguez considers it an “efficient population,” meaning it is able to produce social mobility for its members. Dominguez finds that most of the immigrant women in her sample are self-propelling agents embedded in efficient populations. She contrasts the Boston immigrant women of her study with groups she characterizes as “inefficient” populations—African Americans in high poverty neighborhoods and immigrants in Southwest locales with histories of oppression—for whom structural barriers and generations of exclusion have hindered individual agency and performance in the formal economy.

Although it is unclear how much the theoretical concept of “social flow” advances the literature on social mobility—the mobility literature has long focused on the role of social networks—the book’s grounded approach adds much to our understanding of the fabric of life in public housing for immigrant women. Dominguez has unique access to this population. In the introduction, we learn that she is a Chilean immigrant and that many of her interviews took place exclusively in Spanish. She shares her respondents’ life stories in great detail, mapping the structure and content of each woman’s social ties. She devotes three chapters to describing the myriad ways women used their social networks to produce social mobility.

Dominguez then devotes two chapters to cases in which her respondents were not successful in utilizing their networks to produce mobility. Dominguez attributes these failures to the trauma the women experienced as a result of interpersonal violence. Although her argument that “the only factor keeping women from getting ahead was the trauma inflicted by neighborhood and domestic violence” (p. 12) may be an overstatement, she calls attention to an important (and gendered) determinant of self-efficacy often overlooked in the social mobility literature.

Dominguez positions her respondents against the dominant discourse of the urban poverty literature, finding that “the majority of women in the sample had highly efficacious agencies” and “a drive to develop trajectories toward social mobility” (p. 17). Yet Dominguez never discusses how her sample—19 immigrant women living in public housing—might be a selective subset of all immigrants. These 19 women have shown initiative by securing public housing and Dominguez tells us that they view living there as a mobility strategy because it allows them to save money. Perhaps one should not be surprised to find that this group of women is efficacious and has mobility aspirations. This leaves one wondering how broadly her findings apply to immigrants in high poverty neighborhoods.

Dominguez repeatedly contrasts her sample of immigrant women living in poverty to African Americans in high poverty neighborhoods. She characterizes the latter as an “inefficient population” without sufficient access to role models or bridging social ties. However, Dominguez does not include African Americans in her sample, and her characterization of the urban poverty literature produces a somewhat oversimplified depiction



of African Americans living in high poverty neighborhoods. A close ethnographic study of African American women might reveal similarly efficacious individuals utilizing their social networks to get ahead.

*Getting Ahead* brings two worlds of research—immigration scholarship and urban poverty scholarship—together in a grounded, textured description of social networks and social mobility among immigrant women living in public housing. Scholars from both research traditions would benefit from reading this book. Dominguez raises provocative questions about how immigrants transform, and are transformed by, high poverty neighborhoods and she challenges our understanding of how neighborhoods and networks interact to produce social mobility.

**THE SELMA OF THE NORTH: CIVIL RIGHTS INSURGENCY IN MILWAUKEE**, by Patrick D. Jones. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by

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In *Selma of the North*, Patrick Jones has written a detailed and fascinating account of African Americans and the civil rights movement in Milwaukee. He makes a convincing argument that Father Groppi, the NAACP Youth Council (YC), and a segment of the YC—the Commandos—developed a unique Black Power movement and served as an alternative model to the Black Panthers. Unlike the Panthers, the Commandos avoided the extremes by practicing nonviolent, direct action and welcomed integration and white allies. *Selma of the North* also amply documents the massive level of white resistance to black demands for racial justice by Milwaukee's political and economic elites, as well as acts of violence that included fire bombings, physical attacks by white mobs, and police harassment and intimidation.

For seven months, through the heat and humidity of a scorching summer and the icy cold winds of a gripping winter, from August 28, 1967, to March 14, 1968, an interracial movement led by Father James Groppi, a white Catholic priest, and Ms. Vel Philips, the only black member of the then-19 member city council, was searing the largely blue collar city of Milwaukee, WI. Groppi and Philips led marches with groups of up to 5,000 followers, comprised largely of African American young people, with a smattering of white teenagers and young adults, across the city's Sixteenth Street Viaduct, the symbolic boundary that divided the north side of Milwaukee, where almost all African Americans resided, from the city's predominantly white working class south side neighborhoods.

The intense hatred and violence these peaceful demonstrators suffered at the hands of white counter-demonstrators and Milwaukee's police department eventually caught the attention of the nation. The result was that thousands of individuals from across the country, including many northern white clergymen and women, came to Milwaukee to participate in the demonstrations, earning the city the title of "Selma of the North."

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What Vel Phillips, the city's NAACP Youth Council, and the rest of the demonstrators were demanding from city leaders was an open housing ordinance to eliminate rampant racial discrimination in the rental housing market. Working class and upwardly mobile African Americans wanted the option to move out of the dilapidated inner city housing in the north side and gain access to the better quality and affordable housing stock in the south side of the city.

The catalyst of the civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee's African American community was the unjustified shooting death of a young black male, Daniel Bell, by two white patrolmen on February 2, 1958. The subsequent all-white inquest panel cleared one of the officers of any wrongdoing.

Although the African American civil rights consciousness was born in the 1920s, the youngish Father James Groppi, who marched with Martin Luther King Jr., was the heart and soul of the modern day rebellion against racially unfair practices. In this book, Patrick Jones argues that the interactions members of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council had with other students from the south (who had participated in freedom rides and marches) while attending the 1962 NAACP convention in Chicago radicalized the group into a more engaged participation in local civil rights campaigns. The Milwaukee Youth Council repeatedly asked Father Groppi to serve as its advisor, a position he accepted by the spring of 1965. By the spring of 1966, Father Groppi and the YC opened their first headquarters in a dilapidated slum structure they called "Freedom House." Before that, Father Groppi's home parish, St. Boniface Catholic Church, provided space. In 1966, the YC targeted the Eagles Club (EC), a whites-only private club with the city's prominent political and economic elites as members. When the group marched in affluent suburban Wauwatosa, to the home of then-Circuit Court Judge Robert Cannon, demanding he resign his membership in the EC, it ignited a media frenzy. White counter-demonstrators, including some dressed as Ku Klux Klan members, made the situation so tense that then-Governor Warren Knowles dispatched the National Guard to protect the demonstrators.

Perhaps the most controversial decision taken by the YC was in 1966 with the formation of a splinter group called the "Commandos," an unarmed, but militant, YC police force. The author considers the bombing of the NAACP office in August of that year, the violence against YC members during the EC protests in Wauwatosa, lack of trust in the local police, and Father Groppi's desire to cultivate leadership and self-respect among poor, young black men as the main causes for the formation of the Commandos. Commando duties included enforcing order on picket lines and in marches, providing protection against violent white crowds, and serving as a buffer against police intimidation. The Commandos drew intense criticism from many whites, such as Police Chief Harold Breier. Frequently Breier personally sent some of his officers to harass Father Groppi (who was arrested several times) and the YC.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 14, 1968, and the massive wave of urban violence that followed, finally allowed President Lyndon Johnson to extract from the U.S. Congress the previously defeated Civil Rights Act containing an explicit open housing measure. Milwaukee's Mayor Henry Maier, who had previously resisted an open housing ordinance, changed his mind, and on April 30, 1968, the Milwaukee Common Council surprised most people by passing a citywide ordinance that surpassed the federal open housing law.

Father Groppi re-directed his energies into the anti-war movement and resigned as advisor to the YC in November of 1968. He would go on to lead protests against the



Allen-Bradley Company (now Rockwell International), demanding increased job opportunities for minority workers, and would get involved in a massive march for welfare rights that ended in the takeover of the state's capitol. Other leaders like Lloyd Barbee persisted with a school desegregation lawsuit until victory in 1977, but by 1970 the era of militant direct action had ended and was replaced by community organizing and electoral politics.

Milwaukee remains one of the most segregated cities in the country, graduation rates in inner core high schools are depressingly low, and black male unemployment is very high. *Selma of the North* is a detailed story of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee, focusing on how some of its leaders embraced a unique type of Black Power politics grounded in black cultural heritage and history.