



## **Towards a regional democracy?**

### **An Interview with Edward SOJA (Paris, 30 September 2010)**

by **Frédéric Dufaux** and **Edward Soja**

*To achieve a better democracy, Edward Soja defends the idea that we need to change the way we think about the social and political organization of urbanized territories. He suggests that we now need to consider City-Regions instead of metropolises if we want to overcome the challenges raised both by a continuous urbanizing process and by repeated financial crises.*

#### **Postmetropolis, the crises and a new regional model of urbanization**

*Frédéric Dufaux:* Edward Soja, you are a distinguished Professor of Urban Planning at UCLA, and a critical Geographer. You have written major books in urban and spatial theory, in which Los Angeles is central: *Thirdspace, Journeys to Los Angeles and other real and imagined Places; Postmetropolis; The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century;* and, very recently, *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Can you describe what you analyze as the “Postmetropolitan Transition” and its challenges? What are its links to what you see as the turn from crisis-generated restructuring processes to “a new era of restructuring-generated crises”?

*Edward Soja:* Yes, I can go back and talk in some detail there, but just to start in a new direction, which is the direction that I’m going to be taking in what I think might be my next book... And that, going back to the concept of Postmetropolis, first of all, was a kind of holding term. On one level, what I wrote about was the modern Metropolis was changing very dramatically in the last four decades of the twentieth century, but I wasn’t sure what it was turning into. And so I used “Postmetropolis” as a general term to encompass all of these changes, without specifying anything about it. What I had to notice was the fact that things were blowing up in the last decades of the twentieth century, and that’s why, in a very lefebvrian play on the words and symmetries of the words, I made this argument about a shift from crisis-generated restructuring, which was how I described those forty years, to an era of restructuring-generated crises, new kinds of crises that were emerging from the new capitalism, the new cities, the new economies, and spaces and geographies, that were produced in those forty years. This was starting with 92 [1992] and the riots in Los Angeles, and in many ways was crowned not just by 2001, but by 2008 and the economic crisis, which was as deep as I could have imagined, and it was not just a crisis in the old capitalism, and the old economy, it was a crisis that reflected the very new and still poorly understood economy, so that argument is still there.

But what I have been feeling recently is that now I think I understand what has been happening in a more specific way. And so what I am writing and thinking about today is what I am calling the transformation, a major shift from a metropolitan model of urbanization, to a regional model of urbanization -from metropolitan to regional urbanization-, a fundamental change in the very nature of the urbanization process. Now, in order to make this understood, I have to break down the way of thinking that dominates urban studies all over the world. And that is that the modern metropolis is

the end form of the city, and that we will always have a kind of metropolitan model. But it's that metropolitan model that's changing, even though most people are still writing as if it still existed.

The metropolitan model was classically defined around a dualism: There was the City, with excitement and density and heterogeneity, and Suburbia, as another world: dull, safe, green, family-life, young people, detached homes, etc., etc. And the libraries on urbanism that we have around the world have one section on Suburbia, and one section on -I don't know- Urbia, the Urban. And the other thing that we saw was a very steep density decline. The City was very dense, and then declined very rapidly, and Suburbia was sprawling, low-density.

What I am saying is that structure, that model, that fundamental form, is being transformed into a new kind of urbanization process that we don't really understand very much yet, but it's definitely not the old Metro [Metropolis] model.

And so *Metropolitics*, and *Métropolitiques*, in a way, should be regional *Metropolitics*. It's interesting that the term *Metropolitics*, in the United States, is the name of a book by a regionalist who is talking about Minneapolis and regional strategies, talking about, for example, new coalitions of local government units in the metropolitan region, or in the urban region, in what now is called the city region, to find coalitions from different parts of the area to come together, to pull their tax resources into a central fund that could be used to develop, to work against poverty, and poor areas, a kind of regional coalition building. So that was what was called *Metropolitics*, it's opening up the new regional politics. And what I am calling regional urbanization is: what's happening is destroying the duality, there's an urbanization of the suburbs, this traditional suburbia is still there, but is progressively disappearing, and so the urban / suburban boundary is disappearing in many places. And, you see, the density gradient goes like this. The inner city loses population, that's why everybody is worried; we have to find something to help the inner city because traditionally, in the old model, the inner city was seen as the heart beating. If there was anything wrong with the inner city, everybody is unhealthy and miserable. And so there is this obsession with the inner city (I see a new obsession in Paris: the old obsession emptied it out, that's the other story from the sixties).

### **Towards a regional democracy?**

*Frédéric Dufaux*: It is quite astonishing for us because you give a picture of the City which is quite far away from our clichés of the North-American City, where the realities of fragmentation, and secession are very important. What you show is the possibility -or the glimmers- of this regional democracy. Why is it so important? Why does it bring, in your view, "glimmers of hope and optimism" against the bleak picture you draw of the Postmetropolis?

*Edward Soja*: Well -before we're getting into the optimism-, the regional urbanization process, as I say, is erasing a lot of the old structures and creating new ones. One of the things is that the old metropolitan boundaries have now also begun to disappear. And so we're getting a kind of multi-scalar urbanization process that I described in another paper on the urbanization of the world. This is, by the way, a concept that is Lefebvrian. He mentioned this in the early 1970's, nobody understood what he was talking about. Cities everywhere? No, that's not what he was saying. But what he said, what he was observing, has happened, that the whole world is being urbanized, that is what globalization is about. And it's a regional process, at multiple scales, and so what's happening to the old city is that it's becoming a City-Region, polycentric, networked City-Region. And this is the new urban reality that is emerging, and it's forcing a necessity to rethink the City on a regional scale.

And here, if we intersect it with *Seeking Spatial Justice*, we have this notion that I sometimes talk about in the book, of working towards regional democracy. This example I gave with the book *Metropolitics*, is an example, a very small example, that was tried in Minneapolis, and worked, and is now being tried in several other places. He [Myron Orfield, the author of *Metropolitics*] came to

Los Angeles, and Los Angeles he gave up, he said there's no hope of doing this in terms of any traditional kind of regional cooperation in Los Angeles. It wasn't just too fragmented, but the sub-units were too powerful, the mayors and the counties, the supervisors... just would not really allow a more democratic kind of regional governance system coming.

But what's happened in Los Angeles is regionalism from below. The book *Seeking Spatial Justice* spends a lot of time on the social movements in Los Angeles, and these are community-based regional movements. And there is even a new concept called "community-based regionalism" that's been coming out of Los Angeles and the Bay Area, and spreading to other cities as well. And this is another way of trying to achieve regional democracy. It's not just the top-down process. It's got to combine top-down and bottom-up, as they say. And so, this is what I'm talking about, among other things, an adaptation to this new regional urbanization process that is not the same as what we've all been taught in our schools to be the universal kind of urban form.

The urban form is experiencing a metamorphosis: a lot of the old aspects are still there, but now we have to think regionally, and in Paris and in almost every country of the world (one of the earliest was Catalonia and Barcelona, who asked me to come, and apply my ideas from Postmetropolis to new regional planning forms in Catalonia. And Paris, I was also contacted, I'm not sure if it's happening, but this sort of greater -"le grand"- Paris, it's happening...). All kinds of unusual things are happening, that's reviving the regional concept, but in a kind of fusion with the urban. It's almost as if the urban scale, and the metropolitan scale, and the sub-national/regional scale have all collapsed together into these giant City-Regions. The United Nations, for example, no longer lists the larger cities according to metropolitan area, which they used to. Now it's listed according to City-Region. It's still a difficult concept, and maybe it's not different statistically from what they would call a metropolitan region, but it's another indication of people recognizing that something very different is being happening to cities. And we really need to think, not just in our analytical and theoretical work, to try to understand the new dynamic, and not just to go back to say it's the same old city. It's a very different city, and the regional notion is central and vital to it. So planning democracy, whatever we're talking about, politics, urban politics has to, more than ever before, be a kind of larger scale regional politics. And that global politics, even -what's his name- Richard Florida is doing "megapolitan regions" or something. But in Europe for example, when I lecture...

By the way, going back, I don't think that there is any longer a "North-American City". You were using this concept. I come to Europe and I say, there is no such thing as a European City either. What we are seeing is a similar process: reshaping Cities in very distinctive and particular ways, each city beginning to develop certain general features that are reflecting regional urbanization, but with very particular kinds of other features, politically, and otherwise. And so Paris is going to be both its own model but also reflecting this change in the very nature of the urbanization process. Obviously in Paris the vital thing is to understand what's been happening with *banlieue*, and so much else. Someone, I think it was Philippe [Gervais-Lambony], was telling me that the diversity of central city is being lost because all the immigrants are being pushed out again. I haven't seen this in the parts of Paris that I have been to, where the immigrant presence is enormous still, but maybe it's happening elsewhere.

So, the suburbs are becoming cities, I mean really dense cities, but the *banlieue* were sort of precursors to that, whereas the inner city is becoming challenged to think differently. Every inner city is different, is experiencing different kinds of process. Almost everyone did experience a small emptying out, in this period of crisis and restructuring generated crisis, a small emptying out of the indigenous population. But, in one city it's been replaced by millions of immigrants, another city, like Detroit, just lost 600,000 people, and so the inner cities vary. That's why there's this city branding and city marketing process that's become so preeminent. Because everybody just tries: what do we do with the inner cities? It's also related to the cultural cities and creative cities. You know, this is desperate. How do we promote the health and the development of the inner city, which we always think of, which we are obsessed by. In Los Angeles, everybody is still talking: we must

make the inner city of Los Angeles. And I just sat back and I said: it's never going to happen! You're not going to make the inner city of Los Angeles look like New York... did, years ago! New York is going to start looking more like Los Angeles, the Bronx is getting suburban, the Bronx I went back to my own home. It's now little row houses, from tenements, it's very strange.

So there is a very new urbanization process that I... In *Postmetropolis*, I knew the background to it and I had some idea of the trends that were coming out of it. But now I think I have a much clearer understanding of what actually was coming out of the new kinds of crises. And out of this whole period of restructuring, because in some ways, we haven't completely come out of it, we're still trying to deal with the problems that the restructuring generate. And so, again, that makes up with regional democracy and links of the planning, that there is a much larger shift from the modern metropolis to the new city region, polycentric, networked City-Region. And this is exploding the size. The Chinese know this, the Chinese are really trying to adapt their planning to this new regional concept, and they have conferences on the new regionalism, frequently. But now, the Pearl River Delta and the Shanghai-Yangtze Delta... Last time I was in Shanghai, I said: how big is the new greater Shanghai, whatever you call it, the Shanghai City-Region? They said 72 million people. I mean, what is this? If you put Tokyo, Yokohama, and Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto together, just the southern two thirds of the Honshu island: 100 million people! I mean, what is that? Regional city! Yet another term: city-region and regional city. We're going to have to understand this notion of the regional city more than before.

### **Glimmers of hope from Europe and China?**

*Frédéric Dufaux:* To come back to these "glimmers of hope", how can these mega/gigantic regional cities be the container or open the possibility of these glimmers of hope that you think are possible?

*Edward Soja:* Well, not in themselves. I think the glimmers of hope have to come from people beginning to recognize that we have to shift away from the old models, into taking regional governance issues more seriously. I see, without having transformed anything significantly, places like Catalonia, and the European Spatial Development Perspective, and the EU [European Union] as a promoter of new regional thinking, and spatial planning at multiple scales. For me, there are very few glimmers of hope in the United States. The real places that I see this new understanding coming is in Europe -though the Eastern problems in Europe is overwhelming some of these other issues, and so is the economic crisis- and China! China has been thinking about these grand city-regions from the beginning, and maybe this is even bigger than a glimmer of hope. It depends how one sees the Chinese experiment, but right now, as I said, I think the Chinese are seeking regional democracy, in their policies now, whether they are going to be successful or not (I mean it includes things like Tibet, and Xinjiang, and so on). They may never be able to do it. But at least they think they see the issues and the problems, and they are trying to develop some policies to do something about it.

One hopes that maybe something happens in the United States, but I don't know. United States is doing it, but in a negative way: there is a new South, as you know from Texas perhaps, but emerging that's really strange, that's foreigner places than any place I know for me, for me it just seems like another world is emerging in the Southern States. But this community-based regionalism and the regional social movements that I talked about Los Angeles, are now spreading, and there are right to the city alliances, to go back to an earlier discussion, many of the optimistic moments that are there in *Seeking Spatial Justice*, also relate to the regional democracy kinds of arguments, a little bit, as well.

*Frédéric Dufaux:* Well, Edward Soja, thank you very much for this very stimulating talk!

Edward Soja: Good! Thank you.

### Further reading

*Books by Edward Soja referred to in the interview*

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*Other book referred to in the interview*

Orfield, Myron. 1997. *Metropolitics: a regional agenda for community and stability*, Brookings Institution Lincoln Institute of Land Policy Washington, DC, Cambridge, Mass.

*Texte d'Edward Soja traduit en français*

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Edward Soja's University page:

<http://www.spa.ucla.edu/dept.cfm?d=up&s=faculty&f=faculty1.cfm&id=251>

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[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xhex6y\\_towards-a-regional-democracy-interview-with-edward-soja-1-3\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xhex6y_towards-a-regional-democracy-interview-with-edward-soja-1-3_news)