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Edward Soja in Barcelona: tracks and traces

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For twenty-five years, Edward Soja visited Barcelona repeatedly, at least on six occasions. He was attracted by its urban atmosphere – so very European for someone coming from North America – and by the architectural designs of Gaudí, which tourists today now visit so avidly. Ed, of course, saw these through different lenses. Even more than that, he came to Barcelona attracted to its urban planning, which he so greatly admired for its regional and notwithstanding human scale. Ed always took advantage of any opportunity or invitation to make a worthwhile visit to the city. His stays in Barcelona were always special occasions that stimulated us all and taught us to think spatially.

We each met Ed in 1990, thanks in large part to connections that Carles



Figure 1. Edward Soja at Núria Benach's home in Barcelona (2007).
Photograph by Abel Albet.

Carreras (Universitat de Barcelona) and Maria Dolors Garcia Ramon (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) had provided. However, it wasn't until much later, in 2001, when we crossed paths. During one of Ed's visits to Barcelona, we discovered that we shared the same perspective on geography, which, for the most part, Ed himself had motivated. All of our later work, which, to a great extent we have done together, has been inspired by this encounter.

In this contribution, we want to retrace some of the moments that we shared with Ed that have enhanced our spatial perspective. At the same time, we want to show how our recent aims to understand social processes through the spatial vision that Ed advocated for throughout his lifetime.

1. Tracks: things we learned with Edward Soja

Los Angeles in Barcelona: understanding urban restructuring

Long before anyone began to talk incessantly about the existence of a "Barcelona model" regarding urban visions and strategies, those of us who studied urban processes did so trying to learn from the "Los Angeles model." As it happened in the past with the industrial city in Manchester and even

more so in Chicago, the postmodern focus of urban studies at the end of the 1980s was undoubtedly Los Angeles. The urban scenes in *Blade Runner* (1982) impressed us to such an extent that we saw there the dystopian future in Los Angeles, and through that vision of Los Angeles, we saw the future of our own European cities.



Figure 2. Edward Soja in a helicopter over Barcelona's metropolitan area (2001). Photograph by Abel Albet.

The magnitude of the metamorphosis of urban spaces was difficult to comprehend. The simplicity of the aforementioned examples provided a degree of light relief that, after some time, gave way to more complex and elaborated reflections that focused on each city's own particular characteristics. Ed had published *Postmodern Geographies* in 1989. It took us some time to understand what the first part was about (everything seemed so new back then!), but the second part, dedicated to Los Angeles, seemed like something that we could definitely learn from.

When Ed visited Barcelona for the first time in 1990—taking advantage of an invitation he had received to attend a series of conferences in Valencia on the internationalization of cities—his reading of the city grew out of long walks during which he observed the urban landscape, being a direct translation of his knowledge of Los Angeles. There everything was much clearer, he said: the processes of social polarization, spatial segregation, and

the concentration of capital. But he could also read these processes in the small details which people living in Barcelona all their lives easily overlooked. Of course, Barcelona was not Los Angeles, and neither could the analytical model (in some ways the product of the so-called “Los Angeles school”) be applied directly. However, Ed gave us the tools that we needed to read our own reality, in the world periphery but at the same time in an intensely desired position of relevance in the context of Southern Europe. In this way, we were able to interpret the urban transformation of Barcelona, beginning in the 1980s, and its progressive focus, into a model that became increasingly aligned with the interests of global capitalism. Today, Barcelona’s questionable specialization in tourism cannot be understood without first considering this framework of urban and regional restructuring, and the adaptation of cities to meet global demands spatially.

On the roof-terrace of La Pedrera with Fellini: the spatial imagination

In his visits to Barcelona, Ed always showed a special fascination for the works of Gaudí. We remember him with his mouth wide open, amazed at the overflowing spatial imagination which Gaudí demonstrated in the façades of his buildings: the basilica of the Sagrada Família almost literally melting before our eyes, the Casa Batlló on Passeig de Gràcia with its naturally inspired ornamentation or its balconies like carnival masks. On the same Passeig de Gràcia, you can also find the colossal Casa Milà, known as “La Pedrera,” which in 2001 was bought and restored by the Caixa d’Estalvis de Catalunya (a major savings bank), rediscovering the paleness of its wavy façade, which had been blackened by pollution.

For personal reasons, which were abundant on these occasions, we were invited to an evening concert on the roof of La Pedrera taking place during a cycle of summer concerts, which continue to this day. The rooftop of La Pedrera is always an extremely unique space to experience: with its stairway exits, ventilation towers, and its chimneys simulating warriors which served as inspiration for the helmets of the Stormtroopers in the *Star Wars* movie. On that hot night in July, in this totally unreal space with multiple levels and dreamy lighting, a quartet of strings was playing the music of Nino Rota from the Fellini films.

We remember the look on Ed’s face, a glass of Catalan *cava* (champagne) in hand, which seemed to tell us (or perhaps he was telling himself), that this was one of the most incredible and magical moments he had ever experienced in Barcelona. It seemed that we were witnessing his sensitivity for reading the world just as much through what wasn’t real as what was. With Ed’s guidance, we learned to transcend the double illusion of transparency (the intelligible space that isn’t hidden) and opacity (any given objective space in which the

only reality consists of “things”) of which Lefebvre had written, and thinking spatially in other terms, with a liberty that our conventional indoctrination of geography seemed to have stolen irremediably.

The “trialectics” of spatiality, the existence of real-and-imagined places was not so easy to comprehend. But that day, these cri(p)tical concepts seemed to open up naturally in that particular space between Gaudi and Fellini. We are not very accustomed to moving—at least in our culture—with ease between the sensory and the rational; it is curious that in light-hearted moments like those, so far away from a rational and wise viewpoint, one can approach such views with the complicity of someone who has also lived them.

Flight over the metropolitan area: the regional dimension

The helicopter flight was the idea of Eva Serra, a restless architect who then worked in the public agency of territorial planning “Barcelona Regional.” The agency was headed by the architect José Antonio Acebillo, who was responsible at the time for all public urban planning in Barcelona. Acebillo, a great fan of Ed’s work, had invited him to visit Barcelona and to write up a formal assessment on the future development of the city. Acebillo’s fascination with Ed was not shared by the rest of the architects on his team, who considered his work to be rather incomprehensible. This meant that they were perfectly happy to share Ed with us, the geographers, with whom he seemed to share a common language.

So, first thing in the morning, we met up at a place where a helicopter and pilot were waiting for us, ready to fly over the regional metropolis. Ed boarded the six-seat helicopter enthusiastically as if it was something he was used to doing. For the rest of the travelers, it was something of a new experience. To contemplate the metropolitan area of Barcelona from the air at the same time as Ed was to see it in a different way. Of course the noise of the helicopter wouldn’t allow us to comment adequately on what we were seeing at the time we were observing it.

There were a number of head-to-head debates between Ed and Acebillo. We remember one discussion in particular which occurred in the impressive penthouse of the Ziggurat Building on Saffron Hill (London) that Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen had lent to Ed during his semester teaching at the London School of Economics. Debates involving Ed and the advisory reports he produced never featured any of that (unfortunately all too common) arrogance shown by many experts, which, combined with ignorance of the context, often results in a type of conceptual colonialism or condescending paternalism which renders debates and reports utterly useless and empty. In contrast, Ed’s perspective always maintained an enormous respect towards

Barcelona's own reality, as evidenced by his extensive knowledge and forethought (to a surprising level on the smallest of details) and for his willingness to learn and incorporate ideas before attempting to put them forward. With principles such as neo-metropolitanism or new regionalism, Ed proposed the idea of treating the whole of Catalonia as one metropolitan reality. This is another way of saying that the metropolis of Barcelona should reach out to include the entire region of Catalonia. Beyond what would seem an easy adaptation of the urban scale of Los Angeles to that of Barcelona, it represented the confirmation of a profound knowledge of this corner of the European territory, and the validity of the implementation of some theories (in other words, of the ability of a real geographer to understand a region, based on its essential variables and conceptual filters).

From the moment Ed put forward this concept, the confirmation of this regional-metropolitan reality of Barcelona-Catalonia became an uncomfortable truth for politicians from both sides of the political spectrum, and as much for regionalist culture as the metropolitan culture. But it also provided an optimum vision of opportunity for the Catalanian region, and the way in which Ed presented this was typical of his visionary and provocative character.

In the vineyards: the specialized economy of the metropolitan region

In his successive visits to Barcelona, Ed's mobility began to decline, and pains in his feet and knees affected his desire to see the city. During his last visits, he enjoyed traveling by car more than strolling through the city on foot. On one occasion, he asked to visit the extensive area of vineyards of Penedès. We were once again in the month of July, and the vineyards were there to see in all their glory before the harvest in September. Though we tried, we did not get the chance to visit the wineries or wine cellars (as it was a holiday), but we were still able to witness the beauty of the spectacular vineyards, and to also attest to the notable presence of industrial zones in the area. "Why has Barcelona deindustrialized?" Ed asked. "Haven't you noticed the change in scale of this city?" Well, of course, urbanization has never been an object, but rather a process which progressively occupied a growingly specialized space. The presence and words of Ed made you see space as being open and dynamic, changing constantly before your eyes.

It was where spatial agglomerations act as sparks which detonate changes and the continuing processes of selective centralization and decentralization of the economic activities as the result. Since *Postmetropolis* (2000) Ed wrote a lot about the generative effects of urban agglomerations. Linking Jane Jacobs' groundbreaking ideas on the economy of cities with Lefebvre's statements on the urban society, Ed developed a powerful argument about the spatial/

urban causality of all economic development. Arguable as it could be, his overwhelming enthusiasm in defending a new geographical perspective based on these insights was at least the spark we needed to start thinking anew our own metropolitan regions.

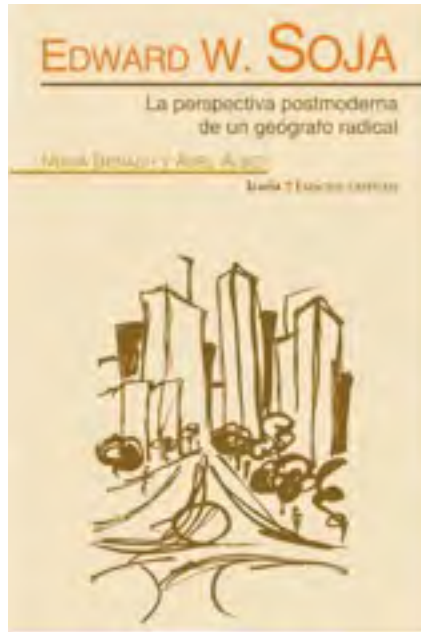


Figure 3. “Edward W. Soja. The postmodern perspective of a radical geographer”, by Núria Benach and Abel Albet (Barcelona: Icaria, 2010). First volume of the Espacios Críticos series.

Andorra: the urge for knowing the whole world

In the summer of 2007, Ed was invited to Barcelona to give an inaugural conference speech at a conference on tourism, and we took advantage of it to have a long conversation. To take a break from an intensive work schedule, we offered to take him on a visit to the city or to one of the surrounding areas. Ed made a surprising request which left us all stunned: “I’d like to go to Andorra.” Thinking of the eminently urban character of his intellectual work, we racked our brains to understand what interest Andorra could possibly have for him. But the answer was personal rather than intellectual. Quite spontaneously he declared, “It’s just that I’ve always wanted to go to Andorra ever since I was a boy.”

There wasn’t anything special to do or see in Andorra on that occasion, we were just trying to fulfill a desire from the past, filled with the naïvete of a

child who discovers a little territory in an atlas, where no one would suppose one existed. It was an exhausting trip, back and forth the same day, and which didn't fill any expectations. Or maybe they just didn't exist. Often Ed would simply go with the flow just out of curiosity, expecting to find the unexpected, hoping that the space itself would reveal something interesting to study. On a number of occasions Ed would confess, beyond a shadow of a doubt and without false conviction, that he had felt like a geographer very early on in life. The streets of the Bronx, where he was born and raised, constituted a sort of microcosm where all the children's games seemed to have a geographical relationship: baseball (of which he had been a huge fan his whole life, following games inning by inning by internet from whatever corner of the world he found himself in), "four corners," marbles, even Bridge, which, surprisingly, he would play with his childhood gang. But Ed admitted that he was already restless back then, with a real compulsion for knowing what was beyond the microgeography of that sector of the Bronx where he grew up. As other geographers affirm having done as children, Ed buried himself in the pages of the school atlas fantasizing and, moreover, analyzing the information contained in those atlases. "I think I was born to spatialize," he asserted in his autobiography (Soja, 2008). In the beginning, it seemed rather surprising to have such a vocation so early on in life. Later on, one begins to understand the real meaning of this statement. His work on his "theory of critical space" that he had been developing since 1980 responded to this instinct—as if it were something natural in him—to spatialize all social processes. The look of happiness on his face when Ed was photographed on the Andorran border may have closed one of the vital chapters of those initial microgeographies: after a life of spatialization and geographic conceptualization, the space brought back memories of his childhood atlas (and of that little smudge of color in the Pyrenees between France and Spain), culminated in perceiving such an absolute space as a physical reality.

2. Traces: the *Espacios Críticos* project

The initial stimulus

In 2001 Ed had made possible the contact between us, suggesting that we share our concerns, which he perceived as being very close. It was in 2006 when, in an unusually rapid manner, the *Espacios Críticos* [Critical Spaces] project was organized and defined. In one of so many conversations we had, we realized that it had already been ten years since the publication of *Thirdspace* by Ed (1996). This was a work that, even though it had stirred up great controversy in English academic institutions, had gone almost unnoticed in the Spanish-speaking world. Well, maybe not entirely: Ed, after all,

was a world-renowned geographer whose name resonated strongly in leading academic circles who prided themselves as being à la page. For this reason, he was often considered as an essential bibliographical reference. However, due to the complexity of the work, we suspected that it was simply cited more than it was applied. So, we had the daring initial idea of writing an article to highlight the principle elements of his work for a Spanish-speaking audience. Half an hour of discussion on the difficulties of such a job, however, was enough for the concept of an article to be made into a book. This wasn't just about *Thirdspace* – Ed's entire body of work was covered, and the book included a translation of texts, an interview and a number of essays about his work, including an unpublished article that the author would write *ex profeso* for the book (Benach and Albet, 2010).

We weren't content with simply translating texts or writing some kind of critical essay: we wanted to learn more about his life and the intellectual trajectory which gave rise to such intricate ideas to understand the logic underlying them all. We needed to talk with the author about the backdrop for these theoretic constructions, the places in which he'd worked and the people who had influenced him throughout his life. We wanted to portray all of this, in some way, in a work that would serve to put a temporal and spatial context to ideas, which could be used in some other time and place. It didn't take much time for ideas of a book project to develop into an entire collection, for which we even compiled a list of recognized figures of critical thought who would be the hypothetical (we wished, at least) protagonists of future volumes.

The editorial series

We were working on the design of this first book on and off for some time, while we thought about which publisher in our environment could be interested in such a project. We considered the effect of a product of the collaboration between the authors, geographers from two nearby universities which in those days had been insisting for years on turning their back to each other. After a few frustrated attempts, we finally found the perfect publisher: *Icaria*, a specialized publisher of critical social sciences and essays whose objective is to “proportion tools for reflection and transformative proposals of the most relevant issues of our present-day world.” There could not have been a better fit.

Icaria welcomed the idea, at first with some caution (due to being bombarded by a barrage of ideas which had no concrete structure), and later with astounding enthusiasm as the project began to take form. The final result of all of this was the editorial collection, *Espacios Críticos*, a series of volumes that can be really described as neither biographies, anthologies, nor strictly as critical essays about the authors. “The project achieved these functions, while

also striving for a broader vision of connecting complex spatial ideas with practice around the world.”

We purposely avoided the old academic exercise of pointing out the weak points of another’s work for the author’s own self-glorification; in this case it was the other way around. We were looking to bring out, above all, the principal ideas that, in the end, could help us in the job of analyzing our immediate problems, and reinforce this spatial vision which contains many of his key concepts.

The first volume was published in 2010 and dedicated, of course, to Ed. New volumes dedicated to Doreen Massey, Richard Peet, Francesco Indovina, Franco Farinelli, Neil Smith, Horacio Capel, and Neil Brenner followed it. Soon, volumes dedicated to Jean-Pierre Garnier, Claude Raffestin, David Harvey, and Yi-Fu Tuan will be published, while more are in preparation. In each volume, our objective is to analyze ideas that have been useful in their particular context, and take from that anything that can be applied to other contexts to fulfill its purpose—as a tool—in the service of providing critical and transformative spatial analysis.

The collective project to spatialize our understanding of society

After some time, and with the series being already a consolidated reality, *Espacios Críticos* has become something more than another editorial series. All this material about critical space that we considered to be truly useful only made sense if it were to be applied to a wider context, and go further than just academia. From the beginning, we didn’t want the walls of academic institutions to represent barriers; but rather the starting point of an intellectual project that seeks to connect thoughts on critical space, research, activism and public debate about present-day spatial-political questions. We live in times of outrageous academic neoliberalism with very little attention to debate, and a philosophy of productivity that has little to do with critical intellectual work. We believe that only the assertion of an authentic spatial perspective, as Ed would put it, can provide us with a critical understanding of the global crisis we live in and, therefore, provide us with keys to its transformation.

A cosmopolitan personality such as Ed surely had a very special and unique relationship with many cities in the world, but in Barcelona he forged a number of particularly close ties of friendship. These friendships were the fruit of many long conversations at the dinner table, and other even longer discussions and confessions that he shared with us during our time together. He also made great strides and laid out a clear path which will serve as inspiration and a guide for the future. Ed’s legacy will remain for a long time to come.

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Lead Photograph

In 1962 Malvina Reynolds and Pete Seeger sang "I want to go to Andorra, / it's a place that I adore. / They spent four dollars and ninety cents / on armaments and their defense, / did you ever hear of such confidence? / Andorra, hip hurrah!". Like them, Ed was also fascinated by Andorra since he was a child: while visiting Barcelona in July 2007, he could finally step on that little smudge of color in the Catalan Pyrenees, as shown in his childhood atlas. Photograph by Abel Albet.