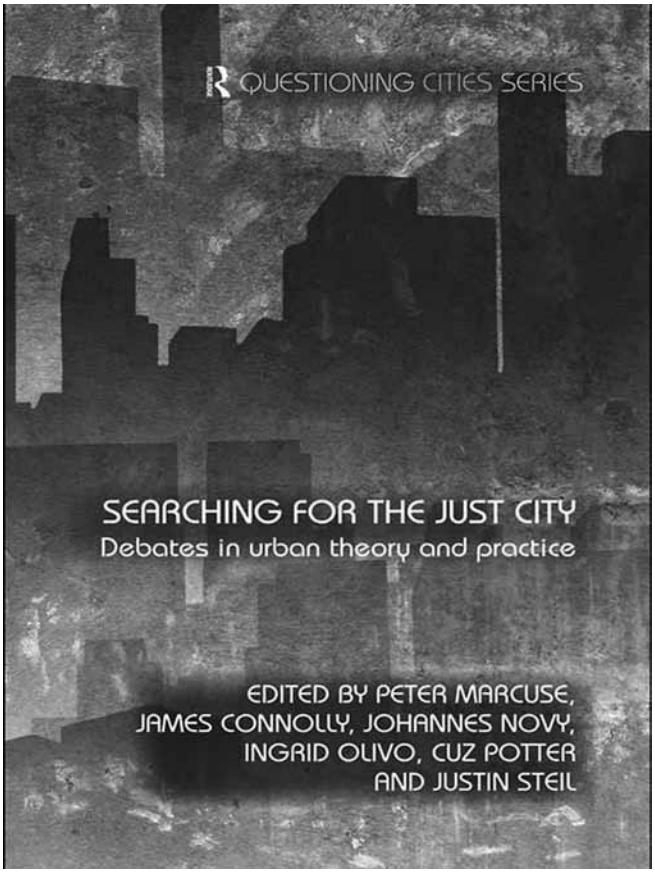
Searching for the Just City: Debates in Urban Theory and Practice

Review by Tom Angotti

Searching for the Just City: Debates in Urban Theory and Practice
Edited by Peter Marcuse, James Connolly, Johannes Novy, Ingrid Olivo, Cuz Potter and Justin Steil. Routledge, 2009.



This is a fascinating and important book with only one major flaw: Since it retails at $150, it is likely to be out of reach for most activists and practitioners, and available only at university libraries. But there's much in here of value to progressive planners.

This book is important because it engages some of the toughest theoretical and practical questions we face. Is there such a thing as a "just city?" How do we shape a more just city? What does it look like? How is the just city different from "the right to the city?"

The starting point of this quest is an essay by Harvard professor Susan S. Fainstein, who roots the search for a just city in contemporary urban struggles. She uses the example of the Bronx Terminal Market in New York City, a project in which the city administration displaced small ethnic businesses and turned over the land to a shopping mall developer. She focuses on issues of social justice at stake, moving away from approaches that emphasize the planning process as the key route to social justice, specifically what is known as communicative planning theory:

> Communicative theorists are right in emphasizing the importance of words, but for justice to prevail, it is imperative that the content of speech include demands for recognition and just distribution. Changing the dialogue, so that demands for equity are no longer marginalized, would constitute a first step toward reversing the current tendency to exclude social justice from the aims of urban policy.

One of the fascinating things about this collection of essays is that it doesn't shy away from this and other debates. Contributions by James DeFillipis, Mustafa Dikec, Frank Fischer, David Harvey and Peter Marcuse draw out this debate, and in the process bring up yet another way of looking at the city—the Right to the City approach, which they tend to see as a vehicle for a system of basic social and economic rights and not simply individual rights before the law. Peter Marcuse also introduces the concept of "commons planning" as an alternative to "justice planning." Commons planning seeks to address underlying structural

issues relating to the land and urban space. Overall, the collection is a rich polemic, with Fainstein's formulation that respects it by launching a discussion that moves far beyond it. The only thing missing is a final chapter in which Fainstein gets a chance to comment and reflect on the debate.

This collection would not be as rich if it were not for the contributions from outside North America. Too much of urban theory is rooted in the limited experiences at the center of the empire. Erminia Maricato's chapter discusses the meaning of justice in Brazilian cities while another chapter by Oren Yiftachel, Ravit Goldhaber and Roy Nuriel discusses Israel and urban neocolonialism in the city of Beer Sheva. Johannes Novy and Margit Mayer also take on the myth that the European City is a model of social justice. However, even these are not enough to serve as a counterweight to debates that are too often Eurocentric and uninformed by the rich diversity of struggles and urban experiences throughout the world.

Finally, one of the most significant achievements of this collection is the leading role taken by a group of urban planning Ph.D. students in compiling it. James Connolly, Johannes Novy, Ingrid Olivo, Cuz Potter and Justin Steil are all in the Columbia University planning program. Peter Marcuse suggests in his preface that they bear major responsibility for the rigor and frankness in the debate, noting "…their audacity at suggesting to much more senior scholars that this or that logic did not quite hold up, this or that needed evidence, this or that seemed internally contradictory." Too often academic discussions remain abstract, unchallenged and inaccessible. If you can get a hold of this book, you'll also see what can happen when theoretical and political differences are constructively engaged and not obscured. (Attention readers: If you would like to get a hold of this book at a more affordable price, please send an email to the publisher to support the editors' proposal for a paperback edition. Complete the form at: http://www.routledge.com/info/contact.)

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paid gardeners represent two-dimensional, ignorant characters with few redeeming qualities.

Conclusion

This short essay sheds light on the plight of paid Mexican gardeners in Los Angeles and beyond. Much more research needs to be done by planning scholars and practitioners to better understand this informal niche and address the needs of this mostly immigrant workforce. While planning scholars and practitioners mostly work within the confines of the formal economy, too many vulnerable workers toil in the informal economy without the benefits of governmental protections and regulations taken for granted by most workers in this country.

The answer should not be for policymakers or planners to encourage strict regulations and adopt draconian laws that punish these honest, hardworking individuals. For instance, in an attempt to appease affluent Westside residents concerned with noisy leaf blowers, in December of 1996 the City of Los Angeles banned these devises in residential areas. This law aimed to criminalize paid gardeners by punishing them for using these work devises with a misdemeanor, $1,000 fine and up to six months in jail. In response, these mostly immigrant workers formed the first Latino group to defend their interests: the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA). Assisted by a small group of Chicano organizers, such as Adrian Alvarez, Antonia Montes and myself, ALAGLA successfully forced the city to soften the penalties of this harsh ban and to demand that paid gardeners and other domestic workers be provided with legal protections and treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

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