

[Fran Tonkiss](#)

## Searching for the just city: debates in urban theory and practice [Book review]

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## Book review

### **Searching for the Just City: debates in urban theory and practice.**

Peter Marcuse, James Connelly, Johannes Novy, Ingrid Olivo, Cuz Potter and Justin Steil (eds) (2009)  
*London and New York: Routledge, 2009.* ISBN 9780415776134261

Fran Tonkiss, *London School of Economics and Political Science*

Debates over urban injustice, and the call for certain rights to the city, have gained increasing prominence in recent years. *Searching for the Just City* responds to and builds on a gathering body of work spurred by David Harvey's (1973) *Social Justice and the City*, Iris Marion Young's engagement with the city in her 1990 work on *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, the English translation of Henri Lefebvre's essay on 'the right to the city' (see Lefebvre 1996), and Don Mitchell's (2003) development of that idea in his *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. This edited collection – a collaborative project between established and emerging scholars, and led by a group of doctoral students in Urban Planning at Columbia University – includes contributions by Harvey and two other key figures in these debates in the US, Susan Fainstein and Peter Marcuse. The book arises from a 2006 conference celebrating – and, on the evidence of the pieces published here, energetically criticising – the work of Fainstein on the occasion of her leaving Columbia for Harvard.

The book is organised into three parts. The first deals with theoretical arguments concerning the just city, and attempts to 'urbanise' broader debates – liberal, communitarian and Marxist – on justice (John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, Amartya Sen, Nancy Fraser and Young all figure here). The second section extends the debate both conceptually – Peter Marcuse's piece suggests that 'justice planning' is largely concerned with post facto or processual problems of distribution and deliberation, and argues for 'commons planning' as a more radical understanding of how power relations shape urban conditions – and spatially, with pieces on the European city and Amsterdam in particular as (increasingly compromised) models of what a just city might look like, and on the severe injustices produced within processes of Israeli city- and nation-building. The final section looks to cases of urban activism, from local movements for environmental justice in New York City, to urban politics in Brazilian cities, to the baleful exemplar of urban injustice offered by pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans.

On my reading, the strongest insights are to be drawn from those pieces that bring together original critical arguments with a compelling analysis of specific urban contexts. The chapter by Oren Yiftachel, Ravit Goldhaber and Roy Nuriel on the differentiated forms of 'recognition' afforded different ethnic groups (Russian Jews, Middle Eastern Jews, and Bedouin Arabs) in Israel's government and planning of the Beer Sheva metropolitan region, enlarges the theoretical discussion of justice, recognition and difference in a context of stark spatial injustice. James DeFilippis' study of deregulated and unregulated service labour in New York offers a compelling counter-argument to the thesis that globalisation and the race for competitiveness drive the downgrading of labour protections, conditions and rewards in advanced urban economies. While the sectors he considers rely on lower-wage immigrant and female labour, driving taxis, caring for children and old people, cleaning houses and offices, washing dishes and

securing buildings is not work that can be outsourced to distant low-income economies. Labour violations in these urban settings occur in decidedly *local* labour markets: while the pressures of global competitiveness can offer an alibi for sharp practices, they are not a convincing explanation of them. It follows, DeFilippis argues, that economic injustices in places such as New York 'are more often the result of class-based competition within cities than they are functions of any extra-local competition' (p.144).

City governments, both local and metropolitan, appear as key agents of urban injustice: especially through planning processes that reinforce the power of economic or ethnic élites - not only in Beer Sheva, but in New Orleans or New York. They also appear as potential and effective agents *for* justice. Local government approaches to participatory budgeting, or local Agenda 21 commitments, have become common points of reference in current debates, but the role of local city governments in older forms of collective consumption and social provision – transport, utilities, public space, education, health and social services and housing – as well as the regulation of private exchange (notably through the oversight of workplace conditions) remain key instruments in both distributive and 'commons' approaches to justice planning. The pieces collected here equally emphasise the role of non-governmental and community organisations in identifying and addressing urban injustice.

The editors recognise that the United States provides both the chief framework for the theoretical debates and the primary context for the urban case studies their collection addresses, but are alert to the broader and more varied problems of injustice in cities internationally. It might indeed be argued that a focus on the United States is not misplaced in any study of the problem of urban injustice – the UN Habitat 2008/9 report on the *State of the World's Cities* shows that the world's largest economy, in a democratic society governed by the rule of law, with a foundational commitment to its citizens' equality and various formal commitments to their basic welfare, has levels of urban inequality on a par with many low-income economies with few or none of America's legal, constitutional and democratic protections. New York was adjudged to be the ninth most unequal city in the UN's study of 120 cities worldwide, with race a major factor shaping inequality in US cities. It may be a small hope, but is nonetheless an important one, that a book such as *Searching for the Just City* might contribute not only to the awareness of, but the response to, such a condition.

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