

Re-entering the Thirdspace? re-evaluating Ed Soja's spatial theory in and for the postsecular city

The aim of this paper is to re-evaluate Soja's concept of the Thirdspace some 15 years after its inception to see if it has anything to say to the new postsecular spatialities that have emerged as objects of reflection and research during the last few years. Or put another way, how does Soja's Thirdspace theory help us to unpack the potential of the postsecular city. But as a way of getting us into the complexity of the postsecular space, here is a single case study.

The Salvation Army homeless project

The Salvation Army has a long and proven track record of working in this area of social care, and this space represents a well established research field in respect of showcasing an example of transformative faith-based urban praxis (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010). Most recent research in this area, whilst flagging up some interesting overlaps between faith based and non faith-based homeless service providers is inconclusive with regard to possible 'added value' with respect to faith-based provision (Cloke, May and Johnsen, 2010:56). A new and embryonic approach to this research area suggests seeing this field as a volunteering space might be more fruitful – a space which attracts an extraordinary variety of people into what is, on the surface at least, a faith-dominant environment. UK researcher Greg Smith has done some preliminary reflection on the nuanced complexity of this postsecular space based on his management experience of a Salvation Army Homeless project in the UK. The project includes support of homeless people, the elderly, the unemployed and informal IT classes in the community computer suite. He manages a team of around 25 external volunteers who give at least one session a week. He reflects on the core mission of the Salvation Army to proclaim and build 'The Kingdom of God'. As a church, 'it remains an unashamedly evangelical and evangelising movement' whilst as a 'deliverer of public services it remains impressive as one of the largest charities in the UK with an annual budget of many billions and a workforce of thousands of paid employees' (Smith, 2010). This potential clash between spiritual and political agendas is to some extent resolved by the prohibition placed by external statutory authorities on any proselytisation of clients. But neither is it the 'style of the Army in its community programmes to "Bible bash" or aggressively proclaim the importance of Christian faith and the need for salvation' (Smith, 2010).

The result of these dynamics is the creation of a space that one might characterise as 'implicitly religious and open access'. Whilst the core identity

and mission values of the Salvation Army couldn't be any more specifically Christian (including the importance of evangelisation) its commitment to social justice as part of the core mission means it tempers this *explicit* identity in order to be able to provide public services to the widest possible groupings in society. Thus a more *implicitly* religious identity appears to be at work within these publicly sponsored projects which also welcomes volunteers from a variety of faith backgrounds and those with none. The key to the success of this project is that this hybrid religious identity, that strategically deploys both explicit and implicit identities (see Baker, 2007, 2009), not only attracts a diverse selection of volunteers. It also makes them feel comfortable and motivated to work in this challenging yet rewarding area of social care.

Simply put, the diversity of volunteers attracted to this postsecular space is quite remarkable. Smith records his initial mapping in the following ways:

- three of four retired people who would probably call themselves Christian but are not actively practising but who want to keep active and connected with other people;
- a Filipino woman recently arrived in the UK who is a practising Roman Catholic, but who was recommended to do voluntary work by employment advisors as a way of improving her skills and fluency in English while she is waiting for permission to work to be granted;
- three well-qualified people of working age with no overt faith commitment who have become unemployed in the recent recession, who want to do something worthwhile while they seek work;
- two well-qualified and 'hi-flying' working age men recuperating from ME/Chronic fatigue syndrome who are testing out possibilities in the hope of being able to return to part-time work. Both are highly committed evangelical Christians who worship in other local churches;
- half a dozen female students from the local university of FE college (some on social work courses) mostly with no strong faith commitment (though one is a Muslim), who are doing voluntary work to gain experience and improve their CVs and/or as a course requirement ;
- an unemployed IT professional who is a convinced atheist from a previous church background in which his father is an ordained minister;
- a young, locally born Muslim woman who chooses always to wear Islamic dress including a full niqab face covering, but who wanted to offer service outside the confines of her own faith community ;

- a number of people with significant mental health issues or mild learning difficulties recommended to the project and often accompanied by their support workers who see volunteering as an element of therapy (Smith, 2010).

In order to understand its impact and potential, more research needs to be done in delving further into the motivations and benefits that such a wide variety of people are seeking to express and gain by engaging in this space. But the value of this case study offers two tantalizing insights into the postsecular space. First, it is perfectly possible to create a faith oriented space in which both religious and secular people can collaborate in and contribute to common aims and express common values. Second, the array of motivations and different needs being met within this space: religious, vocational, humanist, professional, ethical, educational, even therapeutic, reminds us of the complexity and multi-levelled nature of outcomes such spaces now represent. A functionalist or instrumentalist reading of this space (based on binary codes such as voluntary vs. professional, religious vs. secular, fundamentalist vs. liberal, top-down vs. bottom-up, network vs. institution) will no longer suffice to explain or analyse these 'blurred encounters' (Reader and Baker, 2009). We need to develop new categories of analysis and theory to represent properly these extraordinary micro-public spaces of encounter (Amin, 2006).

What is going on in these spaces?

- Radical hospitality
- An intuitive and/or strategic playing with identities?
- Mixing professional/institutional support and volunteers
- Intra faith, interfaith and faith-secular
- Clear moral frameworks
- Flexible and adaptable
- Approaches to healing and wholeness that is both science and faith-based
- Both measurable and immeasurable outcomes
- Both individual and community dimensions

In terms of postsecular theory, I concur perhaps most with Habermas who, refers to 'a postsecular self-understanding of society as a whole, in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularizing environment must be reckoned with' (2005). This last observation suggests that the idea of postsecularism is not describing the replacement of secularisation within liberal democracies by a resurgent public expression of religion. Rather, it

suggests that ongoing dynamics associated with secularisation and secularism, now compete within the public sphere with some unexpected expressions of a emergent and confident religion that is perhaps more culturally resilient and adaptable than expected, especially within the experience of disenfranchised minority groups.

Soja's Thirdspace

Soja's Thirdspace emerges in the mid 1990s as a critical tool to help geography discern the full political and creative power of the spatial. The irony is that in his opinion geography, despite its avowed interest in the production and reproduction of space has been seduced by the linear, modernist analysis that prefers to read space as products of historicity and sociality, rather than spatiality. This has the effect of rendering opaque real processes of power as experienced by people living in urban space. It also simplifies the growing complexity and diversity of urban space ignoring the voices from the underside of human experience whose stories don't fit into neat dialectical meta-narratives of progression or class exploitation. By contrast, Soja's more complex theoretical framework combines a moral or ethical imperative towards creating a just and inclusive city whilst at the same time fully acknowledging the diverse and plural needs and dynamics of the postcolonial, postmodern city. So at the heart of his project is what Deborah Dixon refers to as Soja's 'deep moral concern for human welfare...that leads him to investigate the origins, dynamics, and impacts of class-, gender-, race-, and sexuality-based oppression that cut across all aspects of social life, from economy and culture to politics and environment, and to consider appropriate collective politics and resistance strategies aimed at erasing such forms of oppression' (1999:388).

So Soja's Thirdspace has two strands which he attempts to combine into a coherent theoretical framework. The first is a spatial understanding of the Third Space (for which he is inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre) and the second is a cultural understanding of Thirdspace for which he relies heavily on the work of Homi Bhabha.

Lefebvre was keen to enrich the hegemony of modernist linear philosophy and Marxist dialectical thought by giving a proper emphasis to the spatial, thus creating a three dimensional framework for analysis – the historical, the social and the spatial (or what he calls triple dialectic). Via this triple dialectic, Lefebvre devises a three-fold typology of space:

- Perceived space (perçu) is the materialised, socially produced space that is directly open to accurate empirical measurement and

description – in other words it is Spatial Practice. Under Soja's rebranding of triple dialect (what he calls trialectics) this is the First Space.

- Conceived space (conçu) is the conceptualised space of sociology - the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers. It is therefore also related to the production of space because of the order and design creators of this space impose. It is space that is created by the control of knowledge, signs and codes. These Representations of Space are Soja's Second Space.
- Lefebvre's third space is lived space (vécu) which encompasses the previous two because it represents the 'clandestine or hidden side of social life – as well as an attempt (unlike espace perçu) to emphasize to 'partial unknowability, the mystery and secretiveness, the non-verbal subliminality of space of representations' (Soja, 1996:67). This is space as it is directly lived and deciphered by artists writers, philosophers, rather than analysed by social scientists. This deciphering is subversive but also creative in the sense that it overlays physical space with symbolic representations. This is therefore the space of the power of spatial representations – by combining the power of both the real and the imagined these lived Spaces of Representation are thus the creative counter spaces – spaces of resistance to the dominant order that usually emerge from the periphery and the margin. Soja says, 'with its radical openness and its teeming imagery, this third space of Lefebvre closely approximates what I am defining as Thirdspace' (Soja, 1996: 66-68)

The other main source of Thirdspace thinking is the work of cultural theorist Homi Bhabha who in the light of postcolonial theory and experience, identifies the essential fluidity and contested nature of cultural identity. Just like spatiality, the new cultural politics of the Thirdspace eschews colonial historicism (linked to narratives of modernism and progression) to talk about the radical power of difference and otherness. Thus under the new spaces created by the collapse of colonialism and modernity, those living on the margins of society (the borderlands) or those uprooted by processes of globalisation or poverty (the diasporic experience) come centre stage to claim their space, and their right to create new identities forged from both old and new traditions. Key to these processes of production of new and evermutating identities is the notion of hybridity. A key quotation for Soja from Bhabha runs thus: 'All forms of culture are in a process of hybridity. But... the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is for me the new 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new

are of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhabha, 1990: 211, quoted Soja, 1996:140).

Soja's latest work, written thirteen years later is essentially a reworking (indeed often a straight reproduction of his 1996 work) of both his and Lefebvre's typology. He does however, helpfully recap on the five dimensions of his Third Space. These are:

- A way to understand the spatial dimension of human life
- A integral part of the often neglected trialectics of spatiality
- An all-encompassing spatial perspective (which as the same potential as historical views
- A mutual political strategy against all forms of oppression
- A starting point to so many new approaches (2009:57)

And herein is the problem – strong in rhetoric, but weak on substance – and even more critically perhaps Soja has not been able to add anything in the last 15 years. So there is perhaps limited appeal to those working and engaging in the postsecular space. However, religious actors and others will largely warm to the following elements of the Thirdspace approach:

- The broad commitment to urban justice and transformation of spatialities into more just and inclusive spaces of production and representation
- This reflects a shared ethical commitment to ideas of the commons or the common good (but how much is this actually developed)
- Postsecular space is the ultimate Thirdspace – leading to the creation of new practices emerging from the ongoing dynamics and processes of secularisation and the re-emergence of a publicly and politically significant religious presence.
- The ideas of the real and the imagined city are deeply attractive to religious groups, pointing as it does towards engagement with the real city (i.e. engaging in a form of religious realism which is ultimately pragmatic and partnership based –i.e. creating those **practical** conditions that promote equality and human flourishing). The imagined city, as I interpret it, refers to the utopian aspects of the city the city of vision, of values and virtues, an inspiring and inspirational space – with strong appeal to religious communities in terms of a space in which to live out what their theo-ethics and thus express something of their core and energising identity.

Towards a richer Thirdspace

But there are three dynamics that religious groups (and others) who engage in the postsecular bring into the Thirdspace and some of these dynamics are perhaps observable in the case study at the beginning of this paper.

1) *The motivating force of ethics, virtue and visions of transformation which often encompass both material and immaterial outcomes.*

In other words, spiritual and moral transformation is as important as material transformation (or regeneration). Elsewhere I have written about this motivational force in terms of spiritual and religious capital, as subsets of social capital. So here are the definitions of spiritual and religious capital and their role as important sources of contribution to social capital as a whole.

Social capital, according to influential US political philosopher and sociologist Robert Putnam is, 'The importance of relationships, networks and norms [in society] that can be used to enrich individuals and communities.' (Putnam, 2000: 22)

Religious capital is, 'The practical contribution to local and national life made by faith groups.' (Baker and Skinner, 2006: 9, Baker 2009: 111)

Spiritual capital 'Energises religious capital by providing a theological identity and worshipping tradition, but also a value system, moral vision and basis of faith. It is often embedded locally within faith groups, but also expressed in the lives of individuals.' (Baker and Skinner, 2006:9, Baker 2009:111)

Thirdspace is more accommodating to this spiritual capital than old-fashioned secular neutralism that seeks to privatise spiritual and religious beliefs and keep the public space uncontaminated from them. The reality is of course everyone has spiritual capital (not just religious people) and the Third Space is a space for everyone to express their motivating worldview and vision for change (albeit with conditions attached)

2) *The pedagogical value of the Thirdspace*

This links to Soja's ideas of Othering as Thirling. The Thirdspace is potentially a space for radical hospitality that opens you up for a series of encounters with other people and contexts that are different to yours. The encounter with the Other spins you into a Third Space beyond binary norms. In pedagogical terms this confronts you with a challenge – to either suppress the cognitive dissonance that the challenge of the new brings to your existing worldview - or to stay with the difficult learning in the hope that the new

insights and methodologies will bear fruit for you and for others. New insights tend to bring not only new creativity (i.e. an opportunity to enjoy new experiences and ideas that deepen ones' own identity and sense of mission, but a greater compassion and willingness to stay with difficult contexts and see if they can be resolved. However as well as the opportunity to deepen and enhance one's learning, part of the performativity of the Third Space which Soja never really develops is the willingness and ability to be *reflexive*.

Part of the performativity of the Thirdspace is the ability to be reflexive about how ones' identity and practice has changed in the light of the encounter with another. For example: reflecting on the ethical issues at play in a certain context, and how that shapes your methodology and the outcomes you want to achieve; reflecting on your methodology in order to enhance and develop better practice in order to achieve more effective forms of intervention; regularly reflecting on how situations and contexts change (and in Thirdspace they are extremely fluid) so that a feedback loop is established between context and practice. Only if these reflexive and pedagogical elements are built into Thirdspace will it be in a place of real change (rather than simply a two-dimensional accretion of cultural styles that essentially mimics the hegemony of the market rather than challenging it).

3) *The Thirdspace should only be a temporary space*

In saying this I want to pick up on Soja's rather thin account of hybridity. The danger of emphasising constant change and the production of new identities is that the Thirdspace itself becomes as reified as the binary space which it is supposed to critique. Hybridity does incarnate new practices and methodologies and possibly new identities, but these will only come about if the critical learning and reflective input identified above is implemented. And this will involve a constant interplay between implicit and explicit boundaries and between solid and liquid identities. In other words, the strong historical and social dimensions of our identity (i.e. our roots in First and Second space don't disappear once we enter into the Thirdspace). But our journeys into the third space deepen our perceptions of our historical and social roots. In other words our identities are deepened rather than stretched. We learn to be better Christians, humanists, Buddhist, Muslims, researchers, teachers, social entrepreneurs (whatever we are). Indeed, in the fullness of time, we may even change our identities altogether, but even if this is the case, we still carry those original roots somewhere within ourselves. I suppose the point I am really trying to make is that we can't stay in the Thirdspace all the time – the continually restless energy of change will ultimately do our heads in – but if we chose to step temporarily into the Thirdspace then it undoubtedly deepens

our sense of hybridised entities, but in such a way this is life-enhancing rather than soul-destroying.

Conclusion

I started this paper with a key question about how does Soja's Thirdspace theory help us to unpack the potential of the postsecular city; actually it is the other way round. Our understanding of postsecular space helps to reinvigorate and deepen Soja's critical Thirdspace tool by putting at its heart a more solid and nuanced understanding of the importance of: the motivating power of ethics derived from our teleological worldviews; the pedagogical challenges and opportunities the Thirdspace creates and the fact that the Thirdspace is a temporary space we come in and out of which helps new facets to our identity and practise evolve, rather than locating ourselves permanently in the open yet difficult terrain it offers.

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