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Urban justice and the populist challenge

Interview with Susan S. Fainstein

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Dr Susan Fainstein has been a professor of planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, and the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. Her book ‘The Just City’ was published in 2010 by Cornell University Press. Among her other publications are ‘The City Builders: Property, Politics, and Planning in London and New York’; ‘Restructuring the City’; and ‘Urban Political Movements’, as well as edited volumes on urban tourism, planning theory, urban theory, and gender and over 100 book chapters and articles. Her research interests include planning theory, urban theory, urban redevelopment, and comparative urban policy. She has been a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam and the National University of Singapore, among other institutions. She has received the Distinguished Educator and Davidoff Book

Awards of the Association of American Schools of Planning (ACSP) and the Sir Peter Hall Award of the Regional Studies Association. She was an editor of the ‘International Journal of Urban and Regional Research’ and of ‘Ethnic and Racial Studies’ and has been a consultant to various public organisations.

Dr Oliver Dlabac is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau (University of Zurich), and founder of the start-up VILLE JUSTE Ltd. He led the international research project “The Democratic Foundations of the Just City” (see contribution in this issue, pp. 84–99), and he developed an algorithm supporting the creation of socially mixed school catchment zones that he currently implements in two Swiss cities. His research interests lie in the fields of democracy and social justice in urban contexts.



Oliver Dlabáč: In your book 'The Just City', published in 2010, you define equity, diversity and democracy as dimensions of social justice, while emphasising potential tensions between the three dimensions. Where do you observe these tensions in the field of urban planning?

Susan S. Fainstein: In order for people to make full use of their 'capabilities', to use Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's term, you have to feel that you participate in governance. Democracy gives you ownership of governance, and it gives the government legitimacy. The problem with democracy is that people, and often majorities of people, do not always honour the other two values of diversity and equity. For example, homeowners may not want people in their neighbourhood who are different from them or who are poorer than they are, because they feel that this will lower the value of their property. Homeowner associations are democratic and participatory in a sense, but they can

also be very strongly anti-diversity and discriminatory, and they may not be at all concerned about issues of equity. Democracy in itself is a value, but democratic participation may lead to decisions that are illiberal.

In fact, right now in the world, we have many examples of illiberal democracy. Besides people's regard for their self-interest, they can follow demagogues, and they can get very concerned about what they see as threats to their culture. In the field of planning, we find resistance to any change in their neighbourhood. There tends to be, especially among planning students, a reflexive call for participation – have 'the people' come up with the appropriate policies. However, the people often do not come up with policies that achieve greater equity or greater diversity. Therefore, the relationship between these three principles has been problematic and context-dependent. Some places clearly require greater democracy. In other places, suppressing democracy and having progressive leadership would be better.

In your book, you regard homogeneous neighbourhoods as compatible with social justice dimensions, as long as the boundaries remain porous. Yet research on neighbourhood effects shows that concentrations of disadvantaged people lead to additional disadvantage – in schools, professional careers, dependency on social care, violence, among others. Shouldn't spatial planning and housing policies proactively work against existing levels of segregation?

Certainly, if segregation is based on discrimination, where people are in the ghettos because we are not letting them move anywhere else – that would be very contrary to the principle of diversity. Then it

depends on the particular group of disadvantaged people and the context in which they are located. For example, the United States has been very good, much better than Europe, I think, in absorbing immigrants. Right now, we hear a great deal in the United States about people of colour, including African Americans and Latinos. I would argue that the situation of these two groups is quite different. For Latinos, when they first come, living with others who speak their language, who sell the kinds of food they like, and who provide jobs for them in ethnic businesses can be greatly to their advantage. If you look at the history of Italians coming to America, they were completely despised initially and lived in 'Little Italys', but Italians are now simply part of the American public. Yet it took a couple of generations. Asians in the United States have the highest median income of any group, higher than whites. Some of this is because people come who already have professional status, but another reason is that, within Chinatowns, there is a good deal of financial and social capital gathered, which people can take advantage of.

Now, if you are talking about the United States, ghettos of African Americans, who are descendants from slaves, or if you are talking in Britain about Pakistanis, who seem to have a lower status there than Afro-Caribbeans, these groups are often ghettoised simply because they are discriminated against. At the same time, they do not necessarily have advantages from being together in a neighbourhood.

Persisting structural disadvantage of particular population groups is particularly evident when looking at access to educational opportunities.

School segregation is a huge issue. But what happens when you have integration of

schools is that parents belonging to the dominant class often feel that their children are getting a worse education because of exposure to people who come from much less educated backgrounds. They will pull their children out of those schools, they will move, or they will put them in private schools. When my children started school, we were in a white working-class area, and a couple of the kids in the school basically shook them down for their lunch money. This kind of contact does not lead to people feeling better about these others in the school. Kids who grew up in communities where there was criminality do not necessarily leave that behind when they move to a different, more middle-class area. This is not tied to particular groups – rather, it is tied to their having a family background that is not supportive of education, of their feelings of insecurity, of their seeing role models who make their money from unapproved practices. Simply putting people together without addressing people's economic disadvantages is not going to solve their problems and will not necessarily make them do better in school.

In New York, there is a new movement for more equitable schools. People hear about segregation and ask themselves: do I really want to be part of these segregation processes?

I wrote my doctoral dissertation in the late 1960s, at which time, in New York, progressive white parents joined black parents calling for desegregation in the schools and for community control and for parents participating in school governance. These demands precipitated a citywide teachers' strike. Eventually, the city set up new school districts with greater roles for parents, but it then all developed back to being the same thing as it was. Right now,

there has been controversy in Brooklyn over desegregation, redrawing the school districts. This is also the case in Montgomery County, Maryland. There is enormous opposition to it, as well as support for it – and there is simply no consensus.

You recently did research on the strongly regulated housing system in Singapore. How does this system play out in terms of equity, diversity and democracy?

Singapore has an ethnic integration policy, and all public housing buildings have to house ethnic groups in line with their proportion in the general population. Eighty per cent of Singaporean citizens live in such public housing. You can live in it up to a very high income. The same rule of proportional composition also applies to schools. The adults in the different groups do not necessarily socialise much, but the kids go to school together and they socialise on the playground, as do their parents.

While the system maximises diversity, it is difficult to say whether it provides equity. Measured by the Gini coefficient, there is quite high-income inequality, but so much is provided by the public sector and out of the market, that nobody is destitute in Singapore. If you are poor, you get very cheap rental housing. Almost all the land in Singapore is state owned, so there is no market in land, and there is no price of land that can be built into the price of housing. There are locations that are more desirable than others, but Singapore does not have serious gentrification, and there are no slums. From many perspectives, it is a wonderful place. Yet democracy is virtually non-existent. So I would say, what Singapore needs is more democracy – making people feeling that they are part of the governance of the place.

What do you think of the French approach to tackling segregation? Municipalities with more than 3500 inhabitants are to reach a minimum of 25 per cent social housing. The metropolitan government of Lyon has recently introduced social mixing zones in more than half of its municipalities.

The French refuse to recognise difference. There is also a question, often raised in countries like France that have many Muslim immigrants, of the suppression of women. Frequently, they keep them in the house and will not let them be educated, so the attitude exists in France that it is up to the government to change that. Even though I am totally opposed to conservative Islamic rules about women, I do not think that you can force people to give up their culture without a huge cost in terms of the legitimacy of the government. A parallel example in New York is the ultra-orthodox Jews who impose similar restraints. If you have cultures that are that strong and are that restrictive, it is hard to say what the government should do, but it is certainly better if reformers within these groups attempt change, rather than it being from the top down. This is why, in France, banning headscarves for girls just produces resistance. If you have social mixing and people have contempt for and resentment of each other, then social mixing is not going to do much.

The city of Zurich aims to raise its share of non-profit housing from a quarter to a third by 2050, while also aiming for mixed neighbourhoods. Since non-profit housing associations often strive for residents to represent a wide income range, they contribute to social mixing not only within their estates, but often also in relation to their neighbourhood.

I think it is wonderful if they can do it! There is a big difference between voluntary social mixing and involuntary social mixing. If you are producing new housing that people want to be in, you are going to get voluntary social mixing, because everybody wants to be in it. It is when you say this is a ghetto that needs to be broken up – so we just displace the people whether they want to go or not – that is when you have a problem. Democracy means participation in government, but democracy also really means giving people choices.

In your presentation today you explored that right-wing populism can work against the planning of a “just city”. In a comparative case study on the cities of Zurich, Birmingham and Lyon we noted that the planning of “just cities” is hindered by diffuse fears among the inhabitants of social mixing – even in cities governed by the left. Would you qualify this as a form of populism as well?

Well, yes. I talked about communities like the one in which I live, Branford Connecticut, which is a town with 30 000 people. It is very diverse in terms of income and economic structure. Yet it is 95 per cent white, and only two per cent African American, even though it is in the New Haven area, which has a substantial black population. It has public housing, but the public housing had been restricted to senior citizens and people with disabilities. The city engineer declared that the housing had to be torn down and replaced. They received federal money for it, but the federal rules said that they had to let in families as well. You would think the end of the world had come! There were people screaming at public meetings, there was a successful attempt to get rid of the head of the housing authority. The fear was that African Americans would occupy the family

housing. So, you have, even in a liberal city, a great deal of antagonism to people who are different, to people whom residents see as threatening their way of life, or whom they see as potentially dangerous. So they mobilise, and although they are not a majority, they are a populist group effective enough to scare the politicians completely.

So, against this background of national populism, and populist resistance to “Just City” policies: do you nonetheless see any signs of hope for more socially oriented urban planning in the future?

Yes! For one thing, the people who become planners tend to be progressive. I think they can influence politics by creating plans, which will get backing. These need not necessarily involve enlarging public housing, but may, for example, involve increasing density, so that people who might not be among the poorest, but are nevertheless people who are different, can simply move in. One of the plans in the same town, Branford, involves densification around the train station. This is being resisted too, because some people are terrified of higher densities, which they think will ‘change the character of their community’, but there are plenty of people who support it. Once it is built, there is not much that populists who are afraid of anybody different can do about it. There are different kinds of planning approaches that can, in fact, change things without provoking such strong populist resistance.

Nevertheless, I do think that populism is a threat, and we have seen it mobilising strong backing in many countries at this point, including my own. Populists define themselves as ‘the people’ and think that everybody else are not the real people and should be disqualified. We have had an attempted coup in Washington, so we are

talking about people who can be violent, very angry, while other people who might even be the majority, or, to quote Nixon, a 'silent majority', are too intimidated to stand up to them. So it depends on having a progressive counterforce to the populist force, but it also depends on having government officials who work for progressive causes. There was a book called 'Guerillas in the Bureaucracy', which refers to people within the government, including planners, who could silently make things better.

Note

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The video of the interview in full length is available online:

<https://youtu.be/a058wV3HQ74>

