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*A Theory of Justice as Ethical Consumption:
Ethical Materialism and Spatial Justice in the American Context
Une Théorie de la Justice comme Consommation Ethique:
Matérialisme éthique et Justice Spatiale dans le Contexte Américain*

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In this paper, I present a conception of justice as “ethical consumption” as one way to conceive “spatial justice”. Such a conception, rooted in classical republicanism and expressed in American pragmatism, sees justice as a property of material environments which produce a particular set of human virtues through a certain order of consumption. In contrast to most rationalist theories of justice (and liberal theories in particular), which insist on defining justice in terms of the priority of what is right (usually in abstract terms), a conception of justice as ethical consumption suggests justice should be defined in terms of conditions that produce some moral good. This approach follows what I call an environmentalist understanding of justice in Aristotle as opposed to the more dominant rationalist tradition inaugurated by Plato. This Aristotelian understanding of justice, I argue, constitutes an alternative narrative of justice carried through the ages mainly through the republican tradition by such figures as Cicero, Harrington, and Machiavelli. In the American political tradition, I argue, this way of thinking about justice was carried by Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but it had its fullest expression in the pragmatism of John Dewey. I next compare justice as ethical consumption to the rationalist socio-economic approach to justice in Rawls and the approach to justice that attends to difference in Iris Young and David Harvey. I argue that justice as ethical consumption better expresses the “considered judgments” of citizens in “reflective equilibrium” because it better captures the spatialized and practical character of most peoples’ thinking about justice. I also argue that abstract liberal conceptions of justice have the tendency to undermine what Habermas called “the lifeworld” and, paradoxically, cede the moral high ground to neo-liberal economic conservatives. Similarly, I argue that justice as ethical consumption offers a way to cast arguments for the recognition of difference, because it engages communities in a practical and spatialized hermeneutics. I illustrate these themes by demonstrating the political efficacy and spatialized character of arguments for ethical consumption during the American Progressive and New Deal eras.