

Absences and emergences: production of knowledge and social transformation

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SANTOS, Boaventura de Souza (2007).
Renovar a teoria crítica e reinventar a emancipação social
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ABSTRACT

The book presents three articles written from the conferences that Boaventura de Sousa Santos performed at the University of Buenos Aires – Social Sciences Faculty. The issues addressed on each chapter concern topics related to ethics and politics in contemporary societies, as well as the social relations implied on these themes. The growing inequalities among developed and third world countries, as well as local, regional and global relations are presented by the author in order to renew critical theory and to plunge into the political discussion through knowledge production and dissemination.

Key words: critical theory, social change, subjectiveness.

RESUMO

O livro reúne três seminários desenvolvidos por Boaventura de Sousa Santos na Faculdade de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Buenos Aires sobre questões relativas à ética e à política nas sociedades contemporâneas. Visando transformar as relações sociais implicadas nas crescentes disparidades existentes entre os países centrais e os periféricos, o autor discute questões locais, regionais e de caráter global no intuito de renovar a teoria crítica e aprofundar a luta política progressista visando a transformação social por meio da produção de conhecimento.

Palavras-chaves: teoria crítica, emancipação social, subjetividades.

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Translated by Alexandre Zorio.

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A singular character in the intellectual scene, the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Souza gave a series of lectures in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in 2005. Two years later, the translation of the three seminars in which he took part, at the College of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires is released in Brazil. An assorted audience of about 250 people – including postgraduate students, professors and researchers from diverse universities around the country, and members of social organizations – diligently attended the seminars. As Santos put it in the foreword to the book, the meetings made possible “this opportunity to expose my ideas and take part in a lively and enriching debate”.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, already known in Brazil through several of his books – *Pela mão de Alice: o social e o político na pós-modernidade* (Cortez, 1995) and, more recently, *A gramática do tempo: para uma nova cultura política* (Cortez, 2006) – promotes, at the same time, a theoretical debate and the ethical and political discussion of contemporary issues. In order to transform the social relations implied in the growing disparities between centric and peripheral countries, the author relates local and regional issues to those of a national and global character. The book, divided in three chapters, presents the themes that guided the seminars and the debates that followed these presentations. Each one of the chapters is related to one of the seminars, constituting an unit that is autonomous, yet integrated to the others, and in which, according to the author, “epistemological, theoretical and political dimensions” are synthesized.

In the preface to the Brazilian edition, written by Gaudêncio Frigotto, we are told that the three dimensions appear in each chapter at different levels. The first chapter, named “The sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences: towards an ecology of knowledge” presents the concept of social emancipation – and the necessity to reinvent it – with an emphasis on its epistemological dimension, and the two other chapters present its theoretical and political aspects, respectively.

In this first chapter, the author starts from the concept of social emancipation as a central element in western modernity, specially if we consider the tension between the manifestation of diverse social problems and the attempts to solve them in order to reorganize society. Experiences and expectations fluctuate in the search for these solutions, in which the aspirations of modernity – among them liberty, equality, solidarity – become impossible in the contemporaneity without even having been achieved. Social theory and practice are presented as discrepant, installing a hiatus of possibilities for thought and action, specially in the realities of the so-called peripheral countries.

The author's proposal to fight the hegemonic thought in social sciences from their very foundations is based in a "sociology of absences" and in an "ecology of knowledge", organized from new forms of rationality that emerge in the peripheries of the world as a form of resistance to an "indolent and lazy reason" – which does not feel the need to exercise, since it sees itself as unique and exclusive, and which does not open itself to the unending epistemological diversity of the world. It is in this setting that we are allowed to talk of a "sociology of absences", in the words of Santos, a transgressive and insurgent procedure to "try to show that that which does not exist is actively produced as non-existent, as a non-believable alternative, a disposable alternative, invisible to the hegemonic reality of the world".

In western sociology, the absences are believed to be produced by five methods (or "monocultures"): the monoculture of knowledge and rigour; that of linear time; that of the naturalization of differences; that of the dominant scale; and, finally, that of the capitalist productivism. In this picture, everything that is not productive in the capitalist context is considered "unproductive", giving rise to absences that leave aside, as non-existent, many forms of social experiences. The "sociology of absences" essentially aims to subvert this production of absences by turning them into present objects, making visible that which has been obscured by the dominant sociology. By substituting "ecologies" for monocultures, Santos offers a possibility of inversion of this situation through five methods: the ecology of knowledge; that of temporalities; that of recognition; that of local and global scales; and that of productivities. Each one of these ecologies refers to one of the monocultures listed above, presenting us with fruitful counterpoints between the sociology of *presences* and the sociology of *absences*.

Aside from the sociology of absences, a "sociology of emergences" also rises up to oppose sociological reason in its traditional sense. By attempting to identify the present signals – emergent signals that are disqualified exactly because they have not consolidated yet – as a possibility for the future, the "sociology of emergences" aims to exchange safe indicators for incipient clues, adopting a "not yet" attitude to think about reality as something that does not exist but is *emerging*. In the author's words, "in the sociology of emergences, we must operate a symbolic magnification, for example, of a small social movement, a small collective action", having a glimpse not of an abstract future, but of a future about which we have clues, presentifying the future.

In the end of the chapter, Boaventura de Souza Santos states that these two sociologies – that of absences and that of emergences – will produce a large amount of previously inexistent realities, more fragmented, chaotic and

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plural than the reality experienced before. Another challenge lies in the attempt to understand and resignify these realities, articulating them by means of a “translation procedure” that takes into account their heterogeneity and that points out, above all, the plurality of meanings in the contemporary world. After some considerations about the epistemological dimension that reveal the depth of the author’s reflections, the second chapter, named “A new emancipatory political culture” presents the fundamentals of theoretical production in the social sciences. In order to do that, it establishes the idea that Marxist theory, although it counts on a permanent effort for its renewal in many places of the world (and although the author does not question the relevance of this theory), presents limitations since it is linked to the ideas of progress and of overcoming given social conditions under the auspices of a rationalistic logic.

With that in mind, Santos criticizes the attempts at updating found in Marxism, and the possibility of its historical approach, disagreeing with the current idea that it is necessary to renew that theory. Instead, he proposes that other theoretical perspectives should be sought, a courageous statement that reveals his point of view, at the same time that it invites a forthright and polemical debate.

In Frigotto’s words, “the production or the reinvention of critical theory, for the Portuguese sociologist, face two problems that result from the western culture and modernity: silence and difference”. The first of them deals with a silencing that is a result of the colonial contact – and therefore a contact set within a hierarchy – of a hegemonic culture with other cultures; the second deals with a dual movement – problematic in both cases – between the denial of the existence of other cultures and the attempt to establish fundamentalist identities that recognize differences but make them incommensurable. The example presented by the author as he examines the possibility of an African philosophy is enlightening. In his words, this is a great debate between *traditionalists* and *modernists*, in which one can recognize the existence of an African philosophy connected to its origins and, therefore, unable to engage in a dialogue with western philosophy; or one can say that there is no African philosophy, only a universal philosophy to which other philosophies can be reduced. Boaventura de Souza Santos investigates a third possibility for theoretical thinking: how to develop a position “between those who want to recognize African philosophy, on the one hand, and at the same time, to think of a dialogue between the philosophies”?

REVIEW

Interdisciplinarity would be a way to get past these dichotomies, as well as the challenge of distinguishing between “objectivity” and “neutrality” in relation to reality. Besides these questions, the author points out the necessity of the production of “rebel subjectivities” instead of “conformist subjectivities” and, by the end of the chapter, poses the necessity of creating an epistemology capable of overcoming the western colonizing paradigm. At that moment, he moves towards the discussion about political forms capable of generating social transformations, presenting, in the third chapter, the theme “towards a high intensity democracy”, which aims at the reconstruction of a *critical utopia*.

In this last chapter, Santos affirms the necessity for a committed objectivity in order to think about the issue of current democracy, avoiding both subjectivism and a false view of neutrality of theories. A contradiction arises: how can something new be built from that which already exists? In other words, how to use the hegemonic tools that are available in the theoretical and epistemological plans – legality, democracy, human rights – in a counterhegemonic way and how to try to perceive, in that which is being forgotten and marginalized by western modernity, the vestiges and clues of something new? The discussion about democracy, enriched by the lively debates transcribed in the book, occupies a large portion of the final chapter, and it synthesizes the central issue of this work: the task of building, in theory and in praxis, “rebel subjectivities capable of producing an alternative to the conservative and neoconservative hegemonies and their deeds in the expansion of human-social barbarism”, as stated by Frigotto in his foreword to the book.

It is with the intention to “renew critical theory and deepen the progressive political struggle” that Santos presents us his conferences, exposed to the audience and to an intense debate that is given continuity in the pages of the book each time a reader as diverse and attentive as the participants of the seminars is faced with Santos’ ideas. The texts in the book are not mere transcriptions of those expositions, bringing with them new issues that emerged from the debates and pointing out not only their points of confluence, but also their dissonances. An intellectual always open to debate, Boaventura de Souza Santos creates and appropriates new terms, redefining their meanings, and he pushes us to exercise our thinking differently from the manner to which we are used, presenting us the permanent challenge of *renewing* the past and *reinventing* the present.