

Knowledge Decolonized

By Laura Singeot

While the “cognitive empire” feeds on a single conception of knowledge forged by European modernity, Boaventura de Sousa Santos advocates epistemologies of the South. These validate the knowledges produced by the resistance of groups having systematically suffered oppression.

About: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: the Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Duke University Press, 2018, 392 p., 29.95\$/22.99£.

In *The End of the Cognitive Empire: the Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos starts from the premise that there is still an “abyssal” line drawn “between the metropolitan and colonial societies and sociabilities,” (3) decades after the end of historical decolonization. This assumption has two main consequences that he develops in his theory: the conventional divide between North and South is questioned while he asserts that colonialism is still one ruling principle in today’s world. The same world order still prevails today because knowledge—understood as the way societies represent the world, change it while positioning themselves in it—is only defined by European modernity. Indeed, Santos argues that today’s lasting imperial domination rests on “epistemicide, that is to say, the destruction of an immense variety of ways of knowing that prevail mainly on the other side of the abyssal line—in the colonial societies and sociabilities” (8). Those encompass what he calls “artisanal knowledges”, whether they be “practical, empirical, popular [...] or vernacular” (43). As a consequence, he calls for turning towards the epistemologies of

the South, not as opposed to the “single epistemology of the North” (5-6), but as a way to effectively decolonize knowledge (7).

The cognitive empire

According to Santos, three modes of modern domination—capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy—still rule worldly relations and work together to maintain those power-based relations (259). They feed on the conception of knowledge as being single and unique, forged by European modernity leading to what he terms “the cognitive empire”. He states that mechanisms of struggle and resistance have to be acknowledged and privileged to overcome such a world order, while insisting of the intersectionality of such potential struggles, relying on a common experience of oppression, whether it concern feminist, LGBTQ, social or racial exclusion.

This book becomes part of a continuum, of an on-going reflexion, and inserts itself logically in the author’s body of works. Santos convincingly weaves his way through Western assumptions while advocating “epistemologies of the South” (part 1) that is to say “the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy” (1). Such epistemologies aim at making it possible for those groups to represent and appropriate the world in their own terms, so as to be able to change it according to their needs and ambitions. Sousa Santos achieves offering new ways of looking at knowledge while advocating cognitive justice and democracy and respectively investigating what he terms “postabyssal” methodologies and pedagogies.

Beyond the North/South divide

As is conventionally believed, colonization divided the world into North/South, Occident/Orient or even West/East or non-West. World order has remained thus ever since, and this may lead to a misunderstanding of Santos’s definition of the South when he writes about “epistemologies of the South”. He debunks the conventional

North/South dichotomy, since the South as he considers it is not a geographical south anymore: “The south of the epistemologies of the South is epistemic and political rather than geographical” (271), as he writes. As a consequence, epistemologies of the South may also concern the geographical North, in so much as the distinction Santos makes does not follow the conventional geographical borders but what he terms the “abyssal line”. This line “divid[es] metropolitan and colonial societies and sociabilities in Western-centric modernity” (3): the first step for the epistemologies of the South is thus to acknowledge the existence of that line and the exclusions it brings with it, whereas it tends to be forgotten or erased in Western-centric thinking.

The well-known divide between the geographical North and South leads way to other divides within the North for example, since that abyssal line can even be traced within European cities. It occurs when people are attacked because of their skin color, religion or gender. Indeed, gender is also one of the main issues which leads a specific part of the population to struggle from domination and to find strategies of resistance: Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains thus the convergence of feminist claims and those of the South. They are both sites of resistance and women may encounter exactly the same kind of abyssal exclusion, based solely on the fact they are women, than other religious or ethnic minorities. Consequently, even though those people live in the West, they may cross the line from the metropolitan sociability to the colonial sociability. That abyssal exclusion encapsulates an ontological dimension because it denies humanity to the victims of such assaults and necessarily inscribes them as inferior, non-human. In Santos’s vocabulary, that line comes to delineate the “sociology of absences”, the groups that are made non-existent or invisible, and it can only find its counterpart in the “sociology of emergences” (25) that the epistemologies of the South seek to bring forth.

However, because that line also appears in the North, the epistemologies of the South are not to be understood as the exact, symmetrical opposite of the epistemologies of the North, since they cannot be considered as definite entities confronting each other, “in the sense of opposing one single valid knowledge against another one” (x). Consequently, epistemologies of the South do not seek for replacing those of the North and to operate a shift in power, the South becoming in a way the “new North”. Conversely, they tend to overcome that dichotomy between North and South that finds its foundation on a hierarchical and dual division of power, to follow rather than this vertical division of power a horizontal and equal relation.

Towards postabyssal epistemologies

In the epistemologies of the South, the definition of knowledge appears to be even more multi-faceted than in the epistemologies of the North since the former take into account nonexistent knowledges, meaning for example those that are not considered as valid options as yet: that question of validity is one of paramount importance, as well as that of authority and authorship. It is important to take some distance with knowledge as regulation, as the monoculture of the West would have it, and to reach for knowledge as emancipation, as a way for the South to take possession of the world in different ways and to take action against those structures of domination. Indeed, knowing subjects must come to encompass collective subjects since such epistemologies rely on events of struggle and resistance that are performed by whole social or political groups for example. In that case, it is not so much about knowledges than ways of knowing, such as cultural practices of resistance. What Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls postabyssal knowledges relies on a dialogic process leading to “conscientization”: people become co-investigators, since knowledge is perceived as being a “co-construction” based on reciprocity and action. This enables them to enhance their critical awareness of reality and finally to take possession of it (260).

Thus, the epistemologies of the South do not aim at simply formulating kinds of knowledges that already exist, but rather at showing how those may strengthen the struggles against any type of domination. Similarly, it is not so much about offering alternative versions of knowledge to the science-based epistemologies of the North—since epistemologies of the South encompass all kinds of knowledge without rejecting any, including the Western-centric one. Instead, it is about presenting an “alternative thinking of alternatives” (6): it means that the South does not want to replace the epistemologies of the North by its own or to take its place, as an “alternative”. Instead, what is more important is to go against that standardized dualism that has imposed this cognitive hierarchy (or Empire) and finally to efficiently overcome that constitutive dichotomy—to offer an “alternative thinking” that should not imply any kind of hierarchy anymore and to aim at “cognitive democracy” (294). Only this will enable a real epistemological diversity to develop and being recognized, or what is referred to by Santos as an “ecology of knowledges, that is, the recognition of the copresence of different ways of knowing” (8).

Decolonizing knowledge needs first decolonizing methodologies, mostly relying on co-presence or contemporaneity and collaboration. As a consequence,

“knowing-with (subject-subject knowledge)” is preferred to “knowing-about (subject-object knowledge)” (156) by the postabyssal researcher, whose aim is to help with the “emergence of the collective unconscious” (173) in that struggle and resistance against oppression and domination. First and foremost, that researcher—interestingly referred to as a “she”—aims at rendering visible the invisible and at showing what is not even yet perceived as existent (what the invisible already is in a way even if it is hidden). “She” will only attain this thanks to her own critical distance, even though the main risk is that the group suffering from abyssal exclusion may consider her as part of the process of domination imposed on them. That question of the legitimacy of researchers is tackled in detail and offers deep insight in strategies or pedagogies to avoid such caveats. Sousa Santos departs from the idea that the goal of modern science is to disclose the invisible, but the problem is that it does not take into account the kind of invisibility it itself creates, by discarding other kinds of knowledges for example. As a consequence, the “postabyssal researcher” has to make visible the invisible, not to disclose the object as modern science would do, but to expose those patches of invisibility or mechanisms of invisibilization, to “[see] the unimaginable” (172). The “pedagogy of the postabyssal” would then lead to the emergence of the collective unconscious and to denunciation as well as political struggle (173). Once more, the final goal is to strengthen resistance. Thus, postabyssal epistemologies do not look for “completeness” and “universalism” but they “strive for a higher consciousness of incompleteness and pluriversality” (275), relying heavily on processes such as intercultural translation or cross-fertilization.

Conclusion

What is really enjoyable for someone who has already read Boaventura de Sousa Santos is that he strongly engages with concepts he has coined himself and already used beforehand—such as “ecologies of knowledge”, “sociology of emergence” or “abyssal exclusion”. However, someone who may not be familiar with Santos’s theory would not find themselves at a loss to understand his train of thought since his writing proves to be very clear and pedagogical as well as dialectical. Indeed, he implements through his writing what he is specifically calling for in his book: new epistemologies, methodologies and pedagogies—the points around which he builds the three sections of his book.

While his writing is indeed very conceptual, he nevertheless backs his ideas and theories with numerous examples from different contexts that greatly help understand what the stakes are exactly and tangibly. Consequently, another *tour de force* decidedly lies in his impressive references and consequential bibliography which contains as many non-Western works—if not more—as Western ones. The readers will be thus grateful to learn about examples and situations taken from contexts as diverse as South-American, African or even Asian ones—this list being of course non-exhaustive.

Reading this book would certainly broaden the intellectual horizon of anyone curious about cultural studies and about issues on decolonization or the building of knowledge, especially concerning how it has shaped—and still shapes—power-relations on an international level. More specifically academics and researchers will enjoy the parts about the “postabyssal” researcher and university as “pluriversity” or “subversity” as a way to self-reflect on their own teaching or researching practising as well as their positioning in this new cognitive spectrum.

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