

SYMPOSIUM

Commentaries on “The Active Role of Geography: A Manifesto”

Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke¹

**The Philosophy of Techniques:
The Real and the Concrete of Geography**

Sérgio Gertel

Department of Anthropology, Politics and Philosophy

São Paulo State University (UNESP)

Araraquara, Brazil

gertel@fclar.unesp.br

“Territory and society” (Santos et al. 2000:109) are what compose Geography, the humanity of which is their existence as a geographical space. This being is a “hybrid” (Santos 1996a) of dialectical complexity, given the entire focus of the “totality, in permanent process of totalization” (Santos 1996a:96; see also Santos 1978a). So much so that the starting point of all of the becoming experienced by the human community is its starting point.

Thus, “*Geography is a philosophy of techniques*” (Santos 1978b:60), in support of “less empirical and random forms, feelings, volitions, impulses, and the orientation of the personal happenings and important givens of the actions of men, individually over each other and over society as whole” (Santos 2000:16). Its discourse will be, for any human being who can understand it as “the space of man [*sic*]” (Santos 1978a:219, 1982:27), a “citizen Geography” (Santos 1996b). This is a Geography committed to “establishing the foundations of a truly human space, a space that can unite men [*sic*] to and for their work, one raw inert space that could be worked by man as a space of social nature open to direct contemplation of human beings, *an instrumental space for the reproduction of life*” (Santos et al. 2000:106). Included in this thought are past events of

Geography, with the promotion of fragmentation and specialization as components of the whole, to the disciplinary method. “A comprehensive, historical vision, and one that by the idea of *totality* gives us the word, because it is with that that things begin and end” (Santos 1998a:61).

It is not necessary to maintain the philosophical discussion as a metaphor, but as an ontological thought, regardless of whether it is important, since it exists as a principle. “An ontology of geographical space in which a set of epistemological propositions forms a coherent logical system through the construction of a ‘hard core’ of geography culminates in a totalizing vision” (Santos et al. 2000:108). The first point is to resume the critical role of philosophy, granting the geographer the freedom to create as others seek to do in any other philosophy, for example, “geophilosophy” (Deleuze and Guattari 1992:111-146); hence, a geography in which the informational nexus of art ceases to be an uncritical instrument (“the medium is the message” [McLuhan 1964]). “The theory is not a loose concept; it is a system of concepts, it is a network” (Santos 1999b), it is the territorial rhizome. With the *critique of Geography* incorporated into *critical Geography*, it is, in fact, being spread throughout the educational system, especially amongst those trained today as specialists and not as authentic geographers. It is essential that universities move “from conception to actual realization, to the belief in the human being as the highest value and to the existence of a national project freely accepted and clearly expressed” (Santos 1999c).

Territory and society make up the becoming of critical Geography, as “theory and *praxis*” (Santos 1978a). Defined as the philosophy of techniques, critical geography epistemologically creates its “entirety and the method” (Santos 1985:5-19). The known philosophical categories metamorphose into categories of geographical method by the conceptual integration of a geographical fact that possesses content, masterfully expressed in the *form-content* of space. From the appearance of the essence, this produces an intervention in the sense of the effectiveness of the “analytical categories of the geographic method: structure, function, and form-content” (Santos 1985:49-59).

The philosophy of techniques has the grounds of its spatial elements in the human dimension: “man [*sic*], firms, institutions, the so-called ecological environment,

and the infrastructure” (Santos 1985:6). It is, then, the place of human life and becoming permanent, the initial condition of their dialectical movement, in which the totality exists only between man and his place, namely, a used territory of the dialectical unity between subject and object, in the process of totalization of living. It is here that the citizen should be respected and considered in their concrete dimensions. Regardless of where, the starting point of Geography is the real, the present, and it is here that we find “the totality of the instruments of knowledge of the real-individual-concrete, that is, of the individual thing; that the dialectic is still the way to arrive at the reconstruction of genesis and thus to point to the future” (Santos 1982:135).

I am convinced that “it is the new ordering of facts that terminates itself in a new scale of values and requires the creation of a new theory” (Santos 1978a:157). The geographical theory has in the “ontology of the geographic space”, the “epistemological propositions” that, through the “hard core” reach a “total vision” (Santos et al. 2000:108). This vision is explained by the importance of the conceptual dimension of the territory and the human place, in which the technique and its engineering system influence the daily lives of human beings, making them dense, complex and of uneven valuation. The philosophical and epistemological foundations promote a human Geography where the citizen and the community have the greatest interest. It is possible to base a true human nature, in which the spatial elements and the philosophical and analytical categories constitute a theoretical basis and *praxis* for spatial planning, in which all citizens are included and not just the *hegemonic actors*. These are the ones who most enjoy the “existence of the two circuits of the urban economy, the *upper circuit* and the *lower circuit*” where both “maintain a particular type of relation with the space of city relations” (Santos 1979a:16). The fact is that *the shared space*, through the organization of labour, discusses “this contradiction within the capitalist system, between a vision of labour from above and a vision of labour from below” (Santos et al. 2000:108). The *non-hegemonic actors*, the *poor*, remain in the constant condition of creating their territorial shelter “to adapt to the local geographical environment”, recreating strategies that “ensure their survival in the places” (Santos 1999a). Only the

dialectic helps to attain the totality, in which the permanent condition of exclusion and selection stands out in the everyday dimension of the citizen and the place.

The geographical space requires that the explanation review the foundations and methods of the discipline, “because there is no dialectic of man [*sic*] with something that has no finality as nature” (Santos 1998a:62). To reaffirm dialectical thinking as the only one capable of withstanding the entropic movement that gives life to human existence; to combine the complexity that is contingent on organic life with the sense that we, as living organisms, need to accomplish; to establish the thought for purposes that only human beings have on this planet, but not as *the totality of the devil*, sick, perverse and harmful” (Santos 1979b:187,202). The world is a set of possibilities, and is therefore a place for human beings to find their fulfillment in “the concrete totality in its permanent process of totalization” (Santos 1996a:90-103). The place is the world, in its full cybernetic sense, “*the human use of human beings*” (Wiener 1968). It should be considered that the *form-content* is the geographical fact in essence, as the “credible witness of science” (Stengers 1990:85). By its unique aspect, form-content enflames the geographic thought with the meaning of “*rugosity*” (Santos 1978a:136-140, 1996a:112-113) (that is, the spatialization, the materialization of time: existence), since they have the role of dynamic inertia in the condition of inherited forms. “We should therefore ask ourselves, as does Sartre concerning materiality, why ‘no attempts at all have been made to study the type of passive action which materiality as such exerts on man and his History in returning a stolen praxis to man in the form of a counter-finality’” (Santos 1977:7).

It is the actual effect of the “unequal diffusion of techniques, when one portion progresses, another lags” (Santos 1996a:36). Its importance is feasible since the changes in the geographic space exist thanks to the role of the technical phenomenon in production and contributes to its own spatiality. Therefore, a concrete nexus of geographical reality, which still contains time and the aspect of movement within itself. In this way, it becomes intrinsic to the place and, adjusting itself to man, “constitutes a kind of time of the place, this spatial time that is *the other space*” (Santos 1996a:58).

These foundations are able to provide Geography with concepts beyond theory, toward the *praxis* needed by human beings. As it is of human design, as well as being a device, they should conduct themselves always toward the human being as an end, which consequently should contain the perception of the used territory in the individual's condition instead. Since "the citizen is the individual in the place" (Santos 1987:123) and each one has an importance, implying that there is inequality in the cultural and territorial rights of the citizen, in and by the geographical space, which then conditions "that citizenship is given according to different levels" (Santos 1996b:1). It is therefore also the human geography of man, humanity and the human being, community and citizen, in order to make a geographization of citizenship competently and with consequences. For this process to occur, it has to find "words that can be said anywhere" (Santos 1998a:62), and the everyday banal space is the place where "the bundle of all determinations is found" (Santos 1996c:2).

"The concepts fit one another (not in order to dodge the political dimension, after all), the everyday is a producer of the political phenomenon in that it shows how differences are established, counselling the taking of positions" (Santos 1996b:8). The advent of understanding each territory and its culture, aspirations, and desires of citizens in the places of everyday life is important. Today, the philosophy of techniques expresses in its object, space, the natural condition of the present citizenship as "the dimension of daily life that is the fifth dimension of banal space" (Santos 1999b:257, 1996b:11).

This achieved scale, *space*, par excellence, *the geographic object*, "is a factor" (Santos 1978a:131) organized by and for human beings. True Geography is a philosophy of techniques, with knowledge; it cannot abdicate from exerting, having, and being the role of acting in the organizational dimension that composes the instance of decisions. It is prepared to constitute politics for the human being from the perspective of the citizen and the community, regardless of the humanitarian rights that must be practised for a civic life, worthy of the sustainability of human necessities. Thus, Geography falls within the spatial dimension as strategic planning.

Here, my perception says that I may have been too quick in this explanation; however, it is necessary to have an ethical and critical interest in contemporary information: “What can be done is to live, hurried in order to earn a living, but without losing sight of the construction of a dream. *It is the dream which forces man [sic] to think*” (Santos 2009:4). I dreamt once that I had written with four hands, to revive *the thought of Milton Santos* and to keep it vigorously in the active role of critical Geography.

Endnote

[1] Lucas Melgaço (Department of Criminology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium; lucas.melgaco@vub.ac.be); Tim Clarke (Department of English, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada; tclar089@uottawa.ca).

This essay, together with nine companion pieces, are available online at <https://antipodefoundation.org/supplementary-material/the-active-role-of-geography/> (last accessed 8 December 2016). A translation of Milton Santos et al.’s “The Active Role of Geography: A Manifesto” by Lucas and Tim, together with an introduction by Lucas, are available in *Antipode* 49(5).

References

- Deleuze G and Guattari F (1992) *O Que é Filosofia*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34
- McLuhan M (1964) *Os Meios de Comunicação como Extensões do Homem*. São Paulo: Cultrix
- Santos M (1977) Society and space: Social formation as theory and method. *Antipode* 1(9):3-13
- Santos M (1978a) *Por uma Geografia Nova: Da crítica da Geografia a uma Geografia crítica*. São Paulo: Hucitec-Edusp
- Santos M (1978b) *O Trabalho do Geógrafo no Terceiro Mundo*. São Paulo: Hucitec

- Santos M (1979a) *O Espaço Dividido. Os Dois Circuitos da Economia Urbana dos Países Subdesenvolvidos*. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves
- Santos M (1979b) *Economia Espacial: Críticas e Alternativas*. São Paulo: Hucitec
- Santos M (1982) Novos Rumos para a Geografia Brasileira. In M Santos (ed) *Novos Rumos da Geografia Brasileira*. São Paulo: Hucitec
- Santos M (1985) *Espaço e Método*. São Paulo: Nobel
- Santos M (1987) *O Espaço do Cidadão*. São Paulo: Nobel
- Santos M (1996a) *A Natureza do Espaço: Técnica e Tempo. Razão e Emoção*. São Paulo: Hucitec
- Santos M (1996b) Por Uma Geografia Cidadã: Por uma Epistemologia da Existência. *Boletim Gaúcho de Geografia* 21:7-14
- Santos M (1998a) Interview for *Democracia Viva*
- Santos M (1999b) Interview for *Teoria & Debate*
- Santos M (1999c) “A Universidade: da Internacionalidade à Universalidade.”
Acceptance speech for the title of Honorary Professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, 24 September
- Santos M (2000) Revelações do Território Globalizado.
<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/mais/fs1607200007.htm> (last accessed 29 July 2016)
- Santos M (2009) O Sonho que Obriga o Homem a Pensar.
<http://labs.icb.ufmg.br/lpf/Entrevista-com-Milton-Santos.html> (last accessed 29 July 2016)
- Santos M with Bernardes A, Zerbini A, Gomes C, Bicudo E, Almeida E, Betioli Contei F, Grimm F, Nobre G, Antongiovanni L, Bueno Pinheiro M, Xavier M, Silveira M L, Montenegro M, Ferreira da Rocha M, Arroyo M, Borin P, Ramos S and de Lima Belo V (2000) O Papel Ativo da Geografia: Um Manifesto. *Revista Território* 5(9):103-109
- Stengers I (1990) *Quem tem Medo da Ciência? Ciências e Poderes*. São Paulo: Editora Siciliano

A Radical Journal
of Geography

ANTIPODE

Wiener N (1968) *Cibernética e Sociedade: O Uso Humano de Seres Humanos*. São Paulo: Editora Cultrix