

SYMPOSIUM

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

Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke¹

Space, Location, and Place

Cilene Gomes

Urban and Regional Planning

University of Vale do Paraíba

São José dos Campos, Brazil

cilenegomes2011@gmail.com

Several topics in Milton Santos’ books suggest that the validity of proposing geography as a process of transforming society lies primarily in consistent foundations, in the conceptualization of the nature of space, and in the method of study of society through the category of space.

In situations in which geographers are called to participate, it is hoped that geography includes a concern for the future of humanity—the human as project; no mere academic exercise, but a social commitment. Geography must be reformulated as a science of humanity. Due to knowledge of space and the prevalence of social interest, geography must cooperate to “control the future of Man [*sic*]” (Santos 1980:213), to the point of influencing it “for all men [*sic*] and not only for a small number of them” (Santos 1980:213), to work with firmness of purpose so as not to nourish processes of subjugation, dependency, and segregation.

In his book *Space and Method*, Santos (1989:5-8) defines the object of geography: the human space in its totality and social essence. Space is an instance of society that contains and is contained by other social instances—the economic-productive, the political-institutional, and the ideological-cultural. Beyond this, space is not a simple condition, but a matter of social evolution.

Santos does not conceive space as being limited to the allocation of “natural and artificial geographic objects” over the territory, but rather in consideration of its active principle: “all the social processes that express a society at a given moment” and “are carried out through forms”. In this way, he defines his notion of content-forms, social forms that eventually acquire territorial expression and new meanings over time; hence the dialectical movement between form and content over which space presides: “The action, inherent to the function, joins with the form that it receives, and thus the processes find their full meaning when they take body” (Santos 1989:6).

With this comprehensive conceptualization of the object of the discipline, Santos does not conceive of geography as a mere science of locations. However, the locations of space also take part in the questions of the geographer: “What characterizes the analysis of space? How does one pass from the productive system to space? How does one take into account the question of periodization, of the diffusion of variables, and of the meaning of the ‘locations’?” (Santos 1989:5). It is worth asking, therefore, if the locations are equivalent to the elements of geographical analysis, if we could operationalize through them the reconstitution of social space-time as a whole.

For Santos (1989:6-7), “each location is ... a moment of the immense movement of the world, contained in a geographical point, a place. And it is because of this social movement that the meaning of each place changes ceaselessly: at each instant, the fractions of society that concern it are not the same. Location and place are therefore two different things. The place can remain the same while the locations change. The place is an object or a set of objects. The location is a bundle of convergent social forces in a place”.

Following his theorization of events in his book *The Nature of Space* (1996:114-126), he would have been able to think of some possible conceptual correlation between location and event, when one considers that “the present connection between objects is given by events, that is, by time being made empirical, in order to find objects” (1996:126) in the precise place in which they are located. As he says: if “an event is not the equivalent of localization ... the content of the various areas has to do with the nature of the events that are extended in them” (1996:120).

Santos himself ends up guiding us, in the search to understand his own formulations, to ask: “What forces are capable of producing events that are imposed, at the same time, over extensive areas?” (1996:121). That is, social forces produce events that, being synonymous with actions (1996:117), “are simultaneously the matrix of time and of space ... an instant of time giving itself in a point of space” (1996:115). Thus, it is understood that the location is the place of the confluence of social forces—forces related to the differential value of the place—that assume the form of creative actions of the present happening; actions conditioned by the structure of existing objects in the place and, therefore, actions existing interdependently of these objects.

In this sense, “each action is given according to its time; the various actions are given together”. In fact, it is “the simultaneity of diverse temporalities over a piece of the Earth’s crust ... that constitutes the proper domain of geography”. In Santos’ words: “it is asked whether geographical study is not much more than this other way of seeing time as simultaneity” (1996:127). In this same book, he recalls that, in the words of Sartre, “the facts are not isolated appearances, they are produced together in the higher unity of a whole” (1996:129). That is, as “events are not given in isolation, but in systemic ensembles” (1996:119), they are profoundly imbricated in the globality of space-time, in its universality.

Another meaning of the locations that can be seen from the work of the geographer is combined with the statement of the principle of spatial selectivity. To discuss a “political economy of the territory”, in his book *O Brasil* (Santos and Silveira 2001:302), Santos says that “neoliberalism leads to a greater selectivity in the geographical distribution of providers of goods and services, driven by the empire of competitiveness to seek, under penalty of its own weakening, the most favourable locations ... thus punishing the poorest, most isolated, most dispersed, and most distant populations of the major centres and centres of production”.

In the book *The Space of the Citizen*, the author attributes this process in which “the location of fixtures is subordinated to the law of profit, much more than to social efficiency” (Santos 1987:115), to the “poor organization of the territory by the government”. This fact also contributes to “the overvaluation of certain areas, to the best success of speculation, to most of the anarchy of the locations and of the flows, to

the cumulative impoverishment of the populations” (Santos 1987:115). He also adds that the very “location of people in the territory is, in most cases, the product of a combination between market forces and government decisions”, independent, therefore, of the will of individuals (1987:112).

This would be the prevailing logic of the location that differentially inserts places in the productive process according to the conditions of each place for specific achievements. Such logic established the hierarchy of the places where the attributes of the best place correspond to the ends expected in the context of design activities (research), control, coordination, and forecasting. In the current dynamics of globalization, the autonomy of places regarding these activities becomes essential (Santos 1989:7-8).

There is a permanently unstable relation, to which Santos refers, “where globalization and location, globalization and fragmentation are terms of a frequently recurring dialectic”. Because if “each place is, in its way, the world” (1996:252), being “at the same time, the object of a global reason and a local reason, coexisting dialectically” (1996:273), “to understand this new reality of the place, it is not enough to adopt a localist treatment, since the world is everywhere” (1996:252).

On the other hand, if “our relation with the world is now local-global”, and “the local dimension is rediscovered”, the question of place is restored to a central position. For Santos (1996:251-252), such a fact requires that we revisit the place and find its new meanings. In this effort, the immediate everyday, locally lived, is the link of the local order or banal space to the shifting space formed of points, of places articulated in networks, of the global order, “that separate the centre of action and the seat of action” (1996:272-273).

Now, if places possess differential values, and “the value of the individual depends, in large part, on the place where they are” (Santos 1987), here is a good statement to rethink, in light of the proposition of Santos, “the bases of the reconstruction of a geographic space that is really the space of humanity, the space of everyone” (1980:219). A space in which the centrality must be in humans, in the restoration of the dignity of the human being and in their liberation, “as a philosophical given and as an inspiration for actions” (Santos 2000a:147).

Not least, Santos argues, it takes “courage in study and in action” to achieve this task of spirit. To discern the invisible beyond of form and appearance, which ends up being fundamental in the search for an explanation of space and society; to try “to distinguish that which makes of space not the dwelling of humanity, but the prison” (Santos 1980:216). “To arrive at this result, only the understanding of the geographical thing, both in its profound value and as the ultimate purpose for which it is intended, can be of any assistance. And so it cannot be done without exceeding the empirical in order to reach the philosophical” (1980:219).

In pursuing Santos’ call “for a liberated geography” (1980:214-215, 219), we must ask ourselves to what extent the social interest actually presides over the construction of our knowledge, so as not to incur the mistake of “an epistemological alienation”. Are we collaborating to denounce the mystifications of an “ideological knowledge” that ends up condoning a problem that is not only one of knowledge, but also a moral problem? Are we in the service of a project by which the agents of the knowledge of human space are working toward the numbness of humanity and for its slavery?

What are the fundamentals and purposes of Santos’ geography in guiding the formulation of new modes of territorial intervention through planning? Indeed, such groundings concern a comprehensive and substantive theoretical vision, contrary to the partial universality of the social system of privileges of a few privileged people in the exercise of its force of domination or economic power (1980:214). Santos’ geography encourages permanent vigilance in the understanding of the states of social crisis (1980:93), for the adjustment of new principles and paths of action that could lead to a more equitable socio-spatial redistribution (1987:115).

For that, one would need to think more in terms of context than of causes and effects, and thus, not conceiving a geography of pieces, “to recognize the value of each thing inside the totality” (Santos 1980:214-215). The geographer considers that “as what happens in a place influences all others, as the totality of places interact, the best, once again, is to act on what acts on all places, that is, society itself considered as a whole” (1980:111).

And here, so as not to misrepresent his totalizing focus in the face of so complex a reality (involving all forms of the relation of society to its milieu), the question of social transformation, in the context of the Brazilian spatial formation and of the constitutional political duty, is equated, structurally and in different scales of time, as much by the action of the state as by the gradual emergence of the strength of the citizens (Santos 1987).

Arriving at the enunciation of his aspiration for “a new federation” of places (Santos 2000b), Santos proposes the idea of a “truly redistributive politics aimed at ensuring that people are not discriminated against on the basis of the place where they live” and of an “authentic instrumentation of the territory to which everyone is assigned, as an indisputable right, all those social benefits that are indispensable to a decent life” (1987:113). A politics which will only attain its full scope with the centripetal force of citizenship, “capable of being present in all places where it is exercised” and of “facilitating the eruption of the will to understand the situations and expansions of consciousness” (Santos and Silveira 2001:305-306).

In this sense, knowledge itself is considered an essential public good to be sought, together with happiness, which would also be a given to be considered constantly in the events created by politics, “because in a world devoid of the will and vocation for happiness, the progress of knowledge has no objective” (Santos 1980:214).

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).

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