

SYMPOSIUM

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

Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke¹

Used Territory:

Ontology and Praxis in the Thought of Milton Santos

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“Used territory” can be understood as a category that, in a way, not only expresses the advances in the epistemological trajectory of Milton Santos but at the same time summarizes his view of praxis. Such a trajectory was marked by a constant effort to review and overcome the categories and concepts that have long constituted a geographical vocabulary, as well as developing a sophisticated theoretical system. From this perspective, the theoretical path of Santos can be understood through different successive and complementary moments (Grimm 2011).

The category “used territory” was proposed by Santos in the article “The Return of the Territory” (1994), at a moment marked, among other things, by intense debates about globalization. While many in the different fields of knowledge proclaimed the

“end of the nation state” or the “dissolution of borders”, the reflections elaborated by the Brazilian intellectual turned more strongly to *territory* and its active role in the process of historical totalization.

The centrality of categories such as the milieu, region, and landscape in the theoretical path of Santos’ work was evident during the 1950s and 1960s, as one can see in *Zona do cacau: Introdução ao estudo geográfico* (1955). Added to this were the urban analyses from a classic group of concepts (urban functions, place and situation, urban network and hierarchy), and his doctoral thesis “Le centre de la ville de Salvador: Étude de géographie urbaine” (1958)—carried out under the guidance of Jean Tricart at the University of Strasbourg, France—a most significant work.

Santos’ work from the second half of the 1960s could be analysed as part of a transition in the *démarche* of geography, during which it undertook an increasingly critical analysis of its own theoretical framework of classical training, based largely on the Vidalian circle (Berdoulay 1981). It is possible to note this transition in the book *Le métier du géographe en pays sous-développé*, published in France in 1971. At the same time, while Santos lectured at various French institutions, he completed numerous studies and researches on urbanization in developing countries that have fostered the development of the theory of the “circuits of the urban economy”. This theory was presented in the book *Les Villes du Tiers Monde* (1971) and, more systematically, in the book *The Shared Space: The Two Circuits of The Urban Economy in Underdeveloped Countries* (1979). In recent years there has been an effort to re-read this theory in the context of the present day (Montenegro 2011; Silveira 2007).

Through the 1970s, Santos’ work was marked by two major themes of research: the continuity of reflections and researches on the “specificity of the urbanization of the Third World” and the initiation of more in-depth reflections on the “epistemology of geography and the ontology of geographic space”. This was a period in which the geographer lived and lectured in universities in a number of countries, including Canada (University of Toronto), Venezuela (Universidad Central de Venezuela), Tanzania (University of Dar-es-Salam) and the United States (Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Columbia University). Of his studies in New York (1976-1977), it is

worth emphasizing Santos' dialogues with radical geography and his significant participation in the journal *Antipode* (Santos 1977).

In this context, in Santos' theoretical production the categories of the milieu, region, and landscape lose their centrality, while the categories of "geographic space" and "territory" emerge into prominence. This was a movement of the history of geography itself, in which such categories came to be emphasized by different authors, driven on by debates in critical scholars (Slater 2004).

In Santos' writings from the end of the 1970s (marked by his return to Brazil in 1977), geographic space is seen as *an object of the discipline* and as *a social instance*, as well as from the perspective of the economy, politics, and culture. The publication of the book *Pour une géographie nouvelle* (1985) was undoubtedly a milestone in the history of the discipline. Debates turned toward a detailed consideration of geography and its effective role in the construction of more just societies.

These works added further discussions on the nation state, modes of production, socioeconomic formations, and the elaboration of the category of "socio-spatial formations" (Santos 1977). For the author, socio-spatial formations, understood as a totality, allows the analysis of what is singular to each country and, from the perspective of method, could allow geographers to avoid decontextualized comparisons.

As for the category of territory, over the 1980s it came to be understood by Santos as a "field of forces", in which the dialectical pairs, such as old and new, external and internal, the state and the market, showed their constant movement (Santos 1990). Such movement could also be seen in the successive territorial divisions of labour and the concepts of "spatial circuits of production and circles of cooperation" proposed by Santos (1996a).

With respect to the ontological reflections on geographic space, Santos (1990) advanced the notion of fixtures and flows, understood in constant interaction, for the proposition of systems of engineering and systems of interdependent movement (Santos 1996a). In the early years of the 1990s, Santos achieved a new epistemological breakthrough by proposing the ontological definition of geographic space as a "indivisible and contradictory whole of systems of objects and systems of actions".

This geographic space, according to the thinker, must be understood as a *hybrid*, in which materialities and immaterialities are studied and analysed inseparably, a proposition that confronts and avoids the dualisms so engrained in the discipline. According to Santos (1996b:233-234):

... following the divergent epistemologies of geographic space, we would be at a dead end, through dualistic views of the phenomenon: material-immaterial; physical-human; social-natural ... space is a mixture, a hybrid, formed, as we have said, from the indivisible union of systems of objects and systems of actions. The systems of objects, spatio-materiality, make up the territorial configurations, where the action of subjects, rational or otherwise, has been installed to create a space.

Added to this situation is an *intentionality* between actions and objects, since “the action is all the more effective as the objects are more adequate. However, the intentionality of the action is combined with the intentionality of objects, and both are, today, dependent on the respective cargoes of science and of technique present in the territory” (Santos 1996b:76).

It is noteworthy that the publication of the book *A natureza do espaço: Técnica e tempo: Razão e emoção* (1996) represents a new milestone in Milton Santos’ theoretical trajectory. It is a work that presents, systematically and in detail, a new theoretical *corpus* elaborated and revised by the intellectual over decades.

Throughout the 1990s, Santos once again proposed the idea of “use” to understand the dynamics of territories, as he noted in the article “O retorno do território” (1994). In his words: “territories are forms, but the *used territories* are objects and actions, synonyms of human space, lived space” (Santos 1994:16). It became fundamental—in the face of the material and immaterial characteristics of the territory—to observe the different possibilities of its use according to the various social actors, namely institutions, companies, social collectives, and individuals.

This proposal was developed in the *Manifesto* in question, in which the authors propose the understanding of the used territory as *synonym* of geographic space, which

is a “dynamic entity of society”. Here the used territory, understood as a “result both of the historical process and the material and social base of the new human actions” (Santos et al. 2000:2), has an active role in the process of historical totalization, that is, it cannot be understood as a stage, nor as an inert in the social dynamic.

The operationalization of the category can be verified, among other works, in Santos’ analysis of the contemporaneity of the Brazilian territory in the book *O Brasil: Território e sociedade no início do século XXI* (Santos and Silveira 2001). In their introduction, the authors affirm:

To choose a methodological path means taking into account various scales of the manifestation of reality in order to find the fundamental explanatory variables. These appear as the principal characters of the plot to be established, especially taking into account that the geographic space is defined as the indivisible union of systems of objects and systems of actions, and its hybrid forms, the techniques (Santos 1996), that indicate to us how the territory is used: how, where, for whom, why, what for. (Santos and Silveira 2001:11)

The search for an understanding of the uses of the totality of actors that comprise society is certainly also rooted in Santos’ visions of the used territory as synonymous with “banal space”: “the space of everyone, the entire space” (Santos et al. 2000:3). A space that houses all people, without discrimination, and all the institutions and companies, regardless of their relative strength.

Importantly, recognizing the dynamics of the “used territory” allows the discipline to overcome relentless descriptions devoid of critical analyses, as well as the focuses on diffusion (or specialization) of phenomena that are not considered as relations between the geographic space and the studied phenomenon itself. Milton Santos's great contribution lies in the fact that he allows us to draw the territorial configuration into relation, seen in different historical moments, the possible uses (hegemonic and hegemonized), as well as the effectively transformative actions of the process of historical totalization.

Finally, the category of used territory, as proposed by Santos, allows us to think, at the same time, of the effective contribution of geography both in the construction of a critical social theory and as the elaboration of proposals for totalizing interventions.

The contemporaneity and explanatory strength of this category is evident. It is important to emphasize the category seen as part of a complex theoretical system, elaborated by the geographer over long decades of reflection and research. This theory is marked by a powerful analytical and critical capacity. It is a proposal that is coherent, radical, and that has enormous transformative potential.

Endnote

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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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