

SYMPOSIUM

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

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A Critique of Fragmented Geographical Training

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The fragmentation of geographical knowledge, reproduced in the training of geographers, is an obstacle that must be overcome for geography to assume an active role in transforming society. For Milton Santos, this overcoming involves a precise and original theory about how geographic space exercises an active role in the social process.

In the *Manifesto* (Santos et al. 2000), the preoccupation with the fragmentation of geography is a problem that is continuously discussed and criticized. Fragmentation appears now in the form of a geography that is occupied with the study of locations, now as the fairly common practice of considering only one aspect of society or its territory, a partial approach to its object of study. Such fragmentations are reproduced in the teaching of geography and in the training of geographers.

A Geography with a Totalizing Focus

In order for us to understand Santos’ proposal for overcoming this fragmentation, we seek to highlight some aspects of his conception of geography and geographic space. In his approach, geographic space is a social instance that has an active role. He seeks out an ontology of the geographic space and an epistemology that creates a totalized geographic vision, one capable of furnishing a current and critical interpretation of the social processes that characterize our time.

To comprehend the movement of the transformation of society, one must consider that “the space reproduces the social totality, to the extent that these transformations are determined by social, economic, and political necessities. Thus, the space is itself reproduced inside the totality, when it evolves depending on the mode of production and its successive moments. But the space also influences the evolution of other structures, thereby becoming a fundamental component of the social totality and its movements” (Santos 1978:91). Space is defined as an instance of society, “the same way as the economic instance and the cultural-ideological instance. This means that, as an instance, it contains and is contained by the other instances, just as each one of the others contains it and is contained by it” (Santos 1985:1).

Space is a structure of society with the same importance as others, because no dialectical relation can exclude the action of its components. In this way, the existence of social structures whose movements are subordinated exclusively to economic determinations is negated: “The spatial structure is not passive but active, although its autonomy is relative, as is the case with the other social structures” (Santos 1978:148); “Space is made up of an inseparable, solidary, and also contradictory set of systems of objects and systems of actions, not considered in isolation, but as the sole framework on which history takes place” (Santos 1996:51). The geographic space cannot be considered as synonymous with the territory, but as *used territory*, that is, “as the result of the historical process as the material and social basis of new human actions” (Santos et al. 2000:2).

It is through the category of “used territory”, the concept that makes it necessary to analyse systematically the constitution of the territory, that a non-fragmented geography can be constructed as knowledge or as work.

Used Territory Versus the Limitations of the Segmented Approach

In teaching geography, we rarely have a totalizing concept of the geographic space. Frequently we encounter a segmented approach that ends up making an essentially geographic concept of social space difficult. To demonstrate the difficulties of a fragmented geography, we might consider some of the principles characteristic of understanding the uses of the territory in the present historical period: the unity of

techniques, the convergence of moments, the single motor of value-added at the global level, and the knowability of the planet (Santos 2001).

The Unity of Techniques

The present technical system is marked by the arrival of information techniques, by way of cybernetics, informatics, electronics, and so on. One of its characteristics is to permit communication between various existing techniques, something that only became possible in the present period. On the other hand, the technical system ends up having a determinant role in the use of time, “permitting, in every place, the convergence of moments, assuring the simultaneity of actions and, as a consequence, accelerating the historical process” (Santos 2001). This is the first time a set of techniques involve the planet as a whole. “Information techniques reach the totality of each country, directly or indirectly. Each place has access to the happening of others” (Santos 2001). The present technical system is invasive and hegemonic techniques are endowed with a new characteristic, that is, the capacity to hegemonize non-hegemonic techniques.

The Convergence of Moments

Today there exists a confluence of moments in response to that which, from the perspective of physics, is called real time and, from the perspective of history, will be called the interdependence and solidarity of the happening. “The result of scientific and technical progress, the search for which was accelerated by the Second World War, the planetary operation of the great global companies will revolutionize the world of finance, allowing the respective market that functions in various places over the whole day” (Santos 2001). These are major global actors of this real time who today command history, for they are those who fully make use of the velocity, of the instantaneity enabled by the present technical system. They are the owners of velocity and authors of the ideological discourse that sustains globalization.

The Single Motor

There is an extraction of value-added on a global scale. “There were, with imperialism, various motors, each with its own strength and reach: the French motor, the English

motor, the Portuguese motor, the Belgian, the Spanish, and so on, which were all motors of capitalism, but which pushed machines and men [*sic*] according to different rhythms, different combinations. Today there would be a single motor, that is, precisely, the aforementioned value-added” (Santos 2001).

The Knowability of the Planet

Due to advances in science and technology, in the present historical period, it becomes possible for human beings to know the planet extensively and profoundly. The use of satellites allows us to photograph the planet at regular intervals, enabling a more complete and detailed vision of Earth. In the repetitive movement of its orbits we can depict successive moments that, although not shown in historical processes, allow us to capture portions of this evolution.

Added to these listed characteristics (which passes as understanding in today’s world), we still have to highlight the role of sociospatial formation and the presence of a new state that must play to a new set of rules.

The State and Sociospatial Formation

For Neil Smith (1988:17), the geographical space is on the agenda, and the idea of a “‘geographical pivot of history’ today assumes a deeper and more modern significance than Mackinder could have imagined”. But geography itself has long ascribed little importance to the role of space in relation to society (Santos 2005:21). Apart from the obvious importance of this relation for geography, these concerns have been gradually incorporated into critical social theory (Soja 1993). In the 1970s, Santos reworked the category of Economic and Social Formation (ESF) (Santos 2005), showing its importance for the study of societies and for Marxist methodology. He shows how the ESF is the particular manifestation, in each nation-state, of the mode of production. The mode of production would be “society in general”, while the ESF allows us to define the specificity of each formation. “The interest of studies on the ESF is in the possibility that such studies offer of allowing us knowledge of a society in its totality and in its pieces, but always as a specific knowledge, perceived in a given moment of its evolution” (Santos 2005:25). These are the specific characteristics of the territory of

each ESF that influence and condition the particular manifestations of the mode of production. “Mode of production, social formation, space—these three categories are interdependent. All of the processes that, together, form the mode of production (actual production, circulation, distribution, consumption) are historical and spatially determined in a movement of the whole, that is, through a social formation” (Santos 2005:27). It is the inseparability of the realities and the notions of society and space inherent in the category of the social formation that allow us to affirm that, “in fact, it is the sociospatial formations that are being spoken about” (Santos 2005:35).

Through understanding sociospatial formations, we can interpret the role of the state in the face of present capitalism. “The category of the Economic and Social Formation is thus extremely useful to the study of a national reality because it does not apply to *the society* considered in a general sense, but precisely to *a society*, whose specificity and particularity must be stressed so that the concrete study of its realities afterwards authorize an equally concrete action” (Santos 1978:198). It is through the state that the mediation between the national reality and global society is given. In this way, the state assumes, among other functions, the role of mediator between the inside and the outside of the sociospatial formations.

Returning to the notions that we had cast as relevant to the understanding of the present historical period (technical unity, the convergence of moments, the single motor of value-added at the global level, and the knowability of the planet), we see that the advent of a global society transformed space into a total space. Given the political-economic conditions of the technological period, the traditional notion of the state weakens (Santos 1978:179). The state finds a portion of its power erased but at the same time it becomes an indispensable instrument.

The Production and Teaching of a New Geography

After these notes on Santos’ concept of geography, we can begin to ask ourselves to what extent a fragmented approach would be able to provide a vision capable of explaining society and the geographical space of today. That is, the processes responsible for the territorial configuration of a city today, which pass through the articulated speculation of an often globalized financial capital, which partake in a new

dynamic between the rural and the urban where the rural is often the most modern, which are partly the result of global processes mediated by the nation-state, and which undergo a multiplicity of other processes and multiscale mediations—how could a sectoral approach, a geography of transportation, say, or an urban geography, give coherent explanations for what occurs in the city of today?

The same goes for the agricultural context, which has a territorial configuration that allows the arrival of the new practically without resistance. Seeds produced from genetic engineering, equipment monitored by satellite, urban and highly qualified workforces, flows of information and commodities integrated into a world market. How might agrarian geography, if it focuses its attention only on the rural context, be able to explain the set of social processes that configure the agricultural territories today?

Yet the training of geographers even today is in large part divided into fragments, often hostage to sectoral approaches or to the domain of technical tools capable of capturing only fractions of reality; the better part of the geography that is produced and that is taught continues to be a collage of fragments of geographical space.

The possibility of interventions beyond those functioning on behalf of large companies can only be given from a totalizing geographical vision, one that takes the category of used territory as its point of departure. This option presupposes a systematic analysis of the constitution of the territory that must underpin a vision of social dynamics nearer to that which effectively exists. “We could thus arrive at a repudiation of ‘epistemological indolence’ in the production of geographic knowledge” (Santos et al. 2000).

We would thus leave the bonds of fragmented space and fragmented geography. Santos left us with a proposal that gives a path to follow for those who wish to break free of the shackles of tradition in this discipline.

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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