

SYMPOSIUM

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

Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke¹

The Geographic Space: A Fragmented Space?

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One of the great problems that Geography has faced arises from dealing with its object of study (geographic space) in isolated parts: political, economic, social, anthropological and touristic. This “fragmentation” makes us reflect upon the discipline, which “people have always wanted to construct as a description of the Earth, of its inhabitants, and of the relationship between the latter themselves and the resulting works” (Santos 1996a: 18), as a science with an apparent object of study that is vague and imprecise.

In its modern history, Geography has passed along a pathway leading from its institutionalization (in the late 19th century) to the different paradigms that characterize it today.² Two important philosophical trends have been present in the way its object of study has been understood: we refer to positivism and historicism, as well as their variants. The former enabled us to enter into the “scientific” world, while permitting us to state theoretically the relation between humans and their milieux; and the latter the

comprehension of the internal properties of humans and their meanings in the varied relationships that they maintain with their milieux (Zusman 2002).

Thus, the fragmentation of Geography's object of study is closely related to the imprecision with which this object has been taken on. Geographic space goes from being considered as a receptacle of people's actions (the subject giving form to the object), to being seen as something in which phenomena, facts, and things are distributed. Space is seen according to its usefulness to delimit, describe, or measure with the highest precision the distribution of religions, society, politics, tourism (space considered as a border, according to Santos). In addition, space has also been understood as a reflection (a mirror) of society: any change or modification in the structures of the society is immediately reflected in the space.³ An approach that goes beyond this previous idea is to think of space as being relational, "as being contained *in* objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects" (Harvey 1973: 13, 1977: 6).

This ambiguity in the conceptualization of geographic space is linked to the existing varied definitions of Geography. The fact that this discipline studies the location of phenomena is among the many statements we come across, in the sense that what can be located can be studied by Geography; but Geography is also the science dealing with the distribution and variation of the phenomena on the Earth's surface, in other words, in a country, a region, a place. In this context, Milton Santos is right when he states that "in its fragmented state, Geography does not offer an explanation of the world and therefore becomes increasingly dependent on adjectives to explain its purpose" (Santos et al. 2000:6-7).

For Santos (1996a), what is fundamental for a science is not discussion about what this science is in itself; rather, it is crucial that the science find its object of study, this parcel of reality that is of its interest, which in the case of Geography is geographic space.

By focusing on the object, we would be legitimating “a geographic knowledge based upon a particular theoretical body about the question of space” (Zusman 2002:211).

The category of *totality* is essential to Santos’ (1996a) thought, since he considers it as a fundamental element in order to know and analyze reality. He agrees that all the things present in the universe form a unity, but the parts are not sufficient to explain this unity; on the contrary, it is the totality that explains the parts. This means that the whole can only be known by means of the knowledge of the parts, but that these can only be known by means of the knowledge of the whole. However, in order to be able to arrive at this understanding it is necessary to recognize the joint movement of both (the whole and the parts) throughout the totalization process.⁴

If every historical moment (world) is seen as a totality, there is a set of real possibilities available to actors living in a specific moment, and whose realization occurs by means of events.⁵ Possibilities are historically present as both potentiality and as act, being the material basis and the life that animates it (social, normative, and cultural organization) and is able to reject or accept events. This means that possibilities are not universally realized. “The totality-world is formed by variables that at no moment take place in a complete form and are never everywhere. This is the principle of the differentiation of the parts within the whole and the differentiation of the places in the whole of the space” (Santos 1996b:22).

Consequently, it is a mistake to refer to geographic space as separate from the theory with which it is interpreted. The conceptualization of the world begins with the philosophical interpretations that we have about it. From Santos’ point of view, the concept of geographic space refers to a historically built space, undivided, since it is supported by an interpretation of reality as a totality. Thus, if geographic space is “fragmented” we take the risk of not noticing that all the elements that define it act jointly and that such “separations” can only be done for analytical purposes. In this way, the transformation of

the whole is also produced by an ordered distribution in the space of the impacts of the whole by means of its variables.

Along these lines, Milton Santos (1996a: 51) proposed to define space as an “indissoluble, solidary and contradictory set of systems of objects and systems of actions that cannot be considered in isolation, but as the unique frame in which history unfolds”. Objects are analyzed according to their technical conditions while actions are analyzed according to their degrees of intentionality and rationality. In brief, object and action should be treated as a unitary form (one should not be understood without the other). Geographic space is the material base plus the life that moves it: the moving society.⁶

From this point of view, geographic space becomes a synonym for the used territory: “the space of the past, the one built in the moment right before, determines that of the present in its immediate realization. At the same time, the space of the past, when determining the moment right afterward, participates in the possibilities that will give existence to the one that will come” (Trinca Figuera 2002:118); therefore, it is the material aspect that enables us to perceive how society has used and uses its territory, yet it also expresses that this use has historically been differentiated. This is why in order to be able to comprehend geographic space, we have to deal with its study from its formation. The issue has to be “finding the categories of analysis that allow us to build their systematic knowledge, in other words, the possibility to propose an analysis and a synthesis of that reality with the same constituent elements” (Santos 1984:700).

Thus, society would not only be the origin of the actions, but the used territory would participate with them (as geographic space). This situation would make it difficult to think about the transformation of space, regardless of historical time, just as it would be difficult to imagine a society acting without space or outside of it. Empirically, what must be done is a periodization of time simultaneous with a differentiation of space; in other words, the space of the historical processes must be analyzed, which is to say, to watch the course of the society in time and space. This forces us to make a greater mental effort to

think simultaneously objects (materiality), actions (society), and their mutual conditionings, that is, their relationships (Rojas López and Gómez Acosta 2010). That is to say, the space as existence and the society as the being. “The being metamorphosed into existence by means of the processes imposed by self determinations, which make every form appear as a form-content, a separated individual capable of influencing the social change. It is a permanent movement, and thanks to this infinite process the society and the space evolve contradictorily” (Santos 1984: 701).

The fragmentation of geography, and, as a corollary, the fragmentation of its object of study (geographic space), is part of its history, which has appeared at all stages of education (primary, secondary and higher), as well as in studies of the reality in which “space” is the central subject. For many years, other disciplines besides geography have turned their eyes to the issue of space (economics, sociology, ecology), which has led Santos to state, more than once, that “geography is a widow of space”. Precisely to overcome this “widowhood”, his concern was, as demonstrated by his work, to contribute to the building of a system of concepts giving inner and outer coherence to the object of geographical study: geographic space. The theory of space that he built thus demonstrates it.

Endnotes

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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).

[2] From the second half of the 20th century, the schools of thought that have marked geography have focused on the social science context, having as a main object the processes that determine the space differentiation (Pillet Capdepón 2004).

[3] Santos (1996a) points out that this approach means the subordination of space to society, which makes us think that society can work without its geographic basis.

[4] The totalization contains the past, present and future (Santos 1996a): “It enables us to comprehend the movement in which a totality making itself, which is the period, is transformed into a made totalized, which is the space” (Silveira 2008:57).

[5] The idea of event is essential for Santos’ thought. When considering the event as a significant unit of time, its length is not governed by the clock or calendar “but by its social meaning, by its sense and capability to change the connection of history ... In this sense, the historical period (the world) is a non carried out absolute while places are carried out relative or concrete existences of a beam of possibilities” (Silveira 2008:57).

[6] Here, it is present the idea of space as a hybrid, which Santos (1999) develops in the third chapter of his book *A Natureza do Espaço*, “O espaço geográfico um híbrido”. In essence, he maintains that the notion of form-content allows us to bind the process and the result, the function and the form, the past and the future, the object and the subject, the natural and the social.

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