

SYMPOSIUM

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

Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke¹

**Method, Technique, and Totality in the Revolutionary Work of Milton
Santos**

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Milton Santos and the Rupture with Traditional Geography

The objective of this essay is to demonstrate, through the work of Milton Santos, how the philosophical concept of “totality” can be made to work in the New Geography.

With an enormous amount of intellectual work, Santos elaborates an unprecedented system of geographical thought. His work has also contributed to the training of researchers, and to the production of masters and doctors in Brazil and abroad. His theories enabled us to recognize that, even now, we enter a new period of humanity called the “Popular Period of History”, as also pointed out by Maria Adélia de Souza (2012), one of the authors who has continued to develop the work of Santos in Brazil.

Santos’ proposal favoured the theoretical-methodological development of Brazilian geography. His work was sustained by a great revolutionary feeling, creating a profound epistemological rupture between Brazilian and French geography, although the author, like most of his generation, was also influenced by European thought.

His writings stem from the work of a geographer-scientist, from an author who constructed a veritable “system of geographical thought” (Olivier 1998:652). When preparing a work of universal character, Santos recreated a new geographical method in

the tropics. His unprecedented proposal was to produce a science that is not reactionary, that no longer sustains itself merely on the epistemologies of the rich North to study the poor South of the planet:

The official or traditional geography would be, to use the fashionable term, a reactionary science. A science that does not take into account the change in value of the facts that it deals with and that is incapable of taking an interest in the society that generates these facts. And so, it is always in arrears. Thus, it is incapable of interpreting social dynamism, and, thinking of society in outdated moulds, it is as if it is disinterested in social problems. (Santos 1978:3)

To produce a work of great breadth, Santos demonstrated enormous intellectual spirit throughout his life as a thinker and social scientist, as well as the courage to confront polemical questions in scientific and academic life. Among these questions is the confrontation between the reductionist empiricism of classical geographers and the new theoretical and abstract approach suggested by Santos and other critical geographers of his time.

In addition to their great scientific and academic qualities, Santos' writings also contemplate a commitment to social transformation. He showed great political and ethical commitment in turning his thought into a tool for unravelling the nature of socio-spatial inequalities. Through social criticism, he sought to mobilize society to face those inequalities. As stated by authors like Pourtier (1986:234), Santos puts his vast knowledge and talents as a polemicist to the service of a cause that has, at its centre, a geography not only founded on solid epistemological bases, but also still recognized as a bearer of equality and liberty.

In this way, Milton Santos raised geographical knowledge to the combative position it has assumed at other moments in history, as Yves Lacoste (2012) has already demonstrated. The sense of Santos' geography depends on its efforts to show how the hegemonies of the present day have produced inequalities and injustices.

It is in this dimension, of enabling one to cope with spatial inequalities, that the work of Milton Santos resurrects the philosophical notion of the totality. Thus,

geography becomes a more current science than other social sciences, for his method provides insight into how the organization of geographical space also interferes in the dynamics and social problems of the present and the future.

Specialization and Fragmented Knowledge

In the formation of geography as a modern science, there was enormous specialization in the production of knowledge. Its specialization, resulting from the social division of labour at a global scale, created fragmentation in the production of knowledge and its different areas (scientific or technological), hampering a shared vision of the social totality.

One particular case of the specialization of geography are what are called “geotechnologies”. In the absence of a method, they become merely techniques of the representation of landscapes, or a more sophisticated version of a photography that disregards context and lacks analysis, sense, or content when faced with the dynamics of the totality of the world. As a consequence, when isolated from a method, these techniques of the representation of geographic space do little to further the theoretical development of geographical science.

Specialization can cause a geographical knowledge to be produced in fragmented, and thus a-historical, form, thereby hindering the comprehension of the social totality. This condition occurs when geography cares only about producing specific and fragmented knowledge for the study of soil, beings, rocks, weather, cities, transport, and so on, or about producing isolated knowledge that is oftentimes unconcerned with the analytical reconstitution of the totality, of the relations of interdependence or complementarity between the constituent elements of geographical space.

To avoid this trap, Santos proposes to use the concepts of “system” and “totality”. They allow us to recognize how social processes result from (but also dialectically influence) geographical structures and forms, in performing the functions of a total society. By this epistemological path, Santos’ method brings us once again to the unity of geography.

A Totalizing Vision

Inspired by the work of Sartre, Santos shows how totality results from a world in the process of totalization. Incomplete modernizations, products of these totalizations, are visible in the landscapes of the countryside and the city. This situation results in the selective implantation of different technical systems, revealing how the uses of the territory of a country express dynamics of the totality and produce socio-spatial inequalities:

The totality is always in movement, in an incessant process of totalization, Sartre tells us. Thus, every totality is incomplete, because it is always seeking to totalize itself. Is this not the same as we see in the city, in the countryside, or in any other geographical division? Such an evolution reflects the permanent movement with which geographical analysis is concerned: the already perfect totalization, represented by the landscape and by the territorial configuration and the totalization that is occurring, which is signified by what we call space.

(Santos 2002:119)

In electing the technique as the central element of his theoretical system, Santos gives coherence to the analysis of the unity of the world in its totality. Being products of human ingenuity, techniques incorporate the territory by way of modernizations (totalizations), revealing how different historical periods influence the organization of geographical space in a given time, independent of the scales of analysis (from the local to the global).

The uses of territory by hegemonic powers and the selectivity of the implantation of the different families of techniques that promote the specialization of places, along with the national or international hegemonic powers acting on a given territory, deepen the social and territorial division of labour leading to territorial fragmentation, while also amplifying socio-spatial inequalities. For this reason, the selective modernization of a territory should not be seen in isolation; one should not run the risk of the false objectivity that occurs when events are taken by themselves, without

a systemic vision or correlation with other movements in the world, and thereby distanced from their real meaning.

The mapping of these bases or technical systems also permits an empirical view of the totality. This analysis is increasingly necessary, because, in addition to the techniques that today are becoming hybrids with the social, the technological advance itself:

is imposed as practically inevitable. Much of this inevitability is due to the fact that its diffusion is controlled by a value-added that operates at the level of the world and that operates everywhere, directly or indirectly, by reason of the formidable force of the corresponding imaginary ... that facilitates its integration everywhere. (Santos 2002:181)

In searching for the unity of the world through the technique, Santos mobilises the concept of totality. At last, the idea of the technical period—a lesser unity of history within the totality of time—also possesses its geographical nature, related to the structuring of a given family of techniques, unequally distributed and forming the territory of a country or of a region of the world. Thus was born the idea of a geographical medium with a content consisting of science, technology and information, whose constituent geographical objects are likewise hybrid. This process—in the words of the author—is “irreversible”:

Practically inevitable, contemporary technologies are also becoming irreversible. But, in certain terms ... their irreversibility comes from their feasibility. Even if it were possible to abandon some techniques as modes of doing, there remain those that have been imposed as a mode of being, incorporated into the nature of the territory, as an artificial landscape. In this sense they are irreversible, to the extent that, in the first place, they are products of history, and, in the second place, they are producers of history, already participating directly in this process. (Santos 2002:181)

Let us now illustrate some of the challenges that the new generations of geographers who utilize the work of Santos will confront.

The Challenges for the New Generations of Geographers

The present and future generations of geographers who utilize Santos' proposal will have to confront various theoretical questions. The first of these is how to assume that the geographical space—this inseparable ensemble of objects and actions—is the sole object of and what gives unity to contemporary geography.

To mention a few examples, within this framework, what is the concept of landscape in the present day? And of the region, given the geographical connections that break with the idea of continuity (Souza 1991)? And of limits and borders in a world that, in times of contemporary acceleration and of value-added as the single motor of history (Santos 2002:204) is integrated but also increasingly fragmented?

There is not enough space here to analyse each of these problems. But, in all certainty, it can be said that in the work of Santos lies the method of understanding this complexity of the contemporary world. The force of his theoretical system earns it a place alongside some of the best analytical schemes offered by geographers, among other social scientists, where it can deal with either the simplest or the most complex geographical realities. Thus, through Santos' method we examine the idea of totality from the point of view of the landscape, considering how landscapes are structured through processes that are often global in scope, but which assume particular forms in each national territory where they settle.

Santos also defined the geographical space as an ensemble of fixtures and fluxes (2002:61), or even as a technosphere or psychosphere (2002:257). In elaborating these concepts, the author allows the reconstruction—on the plane of theoretical and abstract thinking—of other geographical concepts like landscape, region, territorial configuration, and socio-spatial formation, highlighting the need for knowledge of the uses of the very territory of the countries from the point of view of a renewed geography.

The strength of Santos' theoretical system keeps his work alive. The challenge going forward is to understand it better, to discuss it more deeply, to question it, if

necessary, and to improve it. Yet, its importance to the renewal and recognition of Brazilian and world geography is already indisputable.

Santos made it possible for geography to rescue its unity and, through the concepts of technique and totality, to become one of the most important disciplines with which to be familiar in the world of the early 21st century. But it also contributed, principally, to the knowledge of the world and to the transformation of it, with a view to improving the conditions of life for all of the poor subjects of the planet.

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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