

SYMPOSIUM

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

Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke¹

Reflections on Planning in the Trajectory of Milton Santos

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Throughout the 1990s, in the context of debates on globalization and the advance of neoliberal policies on a global scale, the geographer Milton Santos was emphatic about the problems existing due to the lack of a *national* project in Brazil. As at other moments in his epistemological trajectory, Santos discussed the role of planning, involving, among other aspects, the outlining of practical solutions aimed at confronting social and territorial inequalities. This essay will deal with three moments of this debate.

The first took place between the mid-1950s and 1960. During this period the geographer lived in Salvador (Bahia), where he had an effective role as a planner. The second, which began at the end of the 1970s, corresponds to a period in which, devoting himself in large part to academic life, he drew up sharp critiques of the sectoral planning that was then being conducted primarily in Latin American and African countries. Finally, a third moment comprises the discussions developed over the course of the 1990s, when, confronted with the predominance of the debate around the “end of the nation-state” and “dissolution of borders”, the author emphasized the necessity of a *national* project for Brazil.

In the first period, it is fundamental to emphasize Santos' role as president of the Economic Planning Commission in the State of Bahia between the years of 1962 and 1964, during the federal government of João Goulart (1961-1964). Before that, the geographer was responsible for the creation of the Geomorphology and Regional Studies Laboratory in 1959, linked to the Federal University of Bahia. From the Laboratory research was carried out for planning purposes on the processes of regionalization in Bahia. This Laboratory was the first created in the country with that specific purpose and, since its foundation, Santos had been in dialogue with his counterparts in Applied Geography in France; more specifically, he corresponded with scholars at the University of Strasbourg, where he held his doctorate.

At the head of the Commission, alongside the other activities that kept him busy (professor, columnist with the newspaper *A Tarde*, and director of the Bahia Official Press), Santos published the article "Socio-Economic Panorama of Bahia" (1964). The article presents a detailed picture of the Bahian territory that, despite having been long occupied, showed itself nevertheless as though it were an "undeveloped area" of the country. Aimed especially toward reflections on planning, Santos (1964) emphasized the problems of an agriculture dependent on external markets, the existence of an industry considered "insufficient and fragile", a transportation system aimed just at the connection between centres of production and consumption, and the hypertrophy of the apparatus of commerce and distribution that, together with other factors, had led the State of Bahia into a critical situation of development and income distribution.

Santos' activities at the planning agency were focused mainly on confronting the social and regional inequalities of Bahia. On some occasions, he commented that among the different proposals put forward by the Commission, the introduction of taxes on high incomes were the most criticized by other public and social spheres. His convictions and his activities in the public sphere certainly played an important role at the time of his arrest by the military regime in December 1964 (the military governments were in power in Brazil from 1964 to 1985).

A second moment began from the mid-1970s, when the geographer produced sharp criticism of the planning that was then taking place in Brazil and other countries in the Americas, as well as in some countries in Africa.

It is worth noting that from December 1964 until June 1977, Santos was exiled from Brazil. Between 1965 and the middle of 1971, he lived and lectured in various French cities and universities. Since then, he lived in the United States (MIT), 1971-1972; Canada (University of Toronto), 1972-1973; Venezuela (Central University of Venezuela), 1974; Tanzania (University of Dar es Salaam), 1974 and 1976; and again in Venezuela and the US (Columbia University), between 1976 and the middle of 1977. In all these countries, he lectured and worked as a researcher or visiting professor. At Columbia he was Professor of Geography and Urban Planning.

Throughout this period outside Brazil, the geographer deepened his readings in and conversations with political economy, Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism, among other currents of philosophy. During these years he would develop research in various continents (Europe, North America, South America, and Africa). In this context, the geographer came to have a new view of planning.

For Santos, the planning then being undertaken by public authorities promoted the installation and/or expansion of capitalism in underdeveloped countries, without reimbursement to local populations. In this process of strengthening capitalism, geographical forms played an important role. Here, I highlight two articles to illustrate this idea: “Planning Underdevelopment” and “The Totality of the Devil: How Geographical Forms Diffuse Capital and Change Social Structures”.²

The central argument of the article “Planning Underdevelopment” (originally published in English in 1977) is that planning has become an “indispensable instrument for the maintenance and worsening of the backwardness of poor countries as well as the establishment or exacerbation of social disparities” (1977:86, 1979:5).

In an even more inclement tone, the geographer criticised the role that economics and regional science played in the growth of misery in countries on the periphery: a “division of labour then took place between the two disciplines: the apology of capitalism devolved upon economics, and the task of spreading capital into various national spaces devolved upon regional science” (Santos 1977:88, 1979:11).

Santos also proposes in this article a periodisation of the history of planning. For him, the first phase occurred during the periods of colonialism and imperialism, with the expansion of a type of production that housed the growing necessities of the centre of the system. The second phase was marked by the technological revolution and the development of monopolies with transnational reach; it began in the 1940s and reached colonized countries just as they reached their moments of emancipation. Lastly, the third, in the author's words, "contrary to the other two, spreads practically without any time lags throughout the Third World" (1977:91, 1979:19). This third phase, practised in the late 1970s, was marked by a poverty that was masked, never eliminated—a "planned poverty".

This theme was also discussed in the article "The Totality of the Devil" (originally published in French in 1978). Here, the opening question is whether geographical objects could play a transformative role in society at a time when, according to the author, "the present historical conditions facilitate the expansion mechanism of capital in space through the use of forms" (1979:153). The forms would become a "Trojan horse" when installed in distinct socio-economic formations, from which arise: [i] the implantation of new forms, which leads to the generation of new functions specific to them; [ii] the substitution of existent functions from the point of view of capital; and [iii] the realization of planning projects that appear to be isolated but are aimed at the same objective—the acceleration of capitalist modernization and "the frustration, if necessary, of national development projects" (Santos 1979:154-155).

Based on an analysis of the examples of actions in the rural and urban worlds in different countries—such as the impact of the Green Revolution in parts of Mexico and the "modernization" projects of the historic urban centers of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and of Maracaibo and Caracas (Venezuela)—Santos criticised a type of planning in execution that did not start from the totality of its own socio-economic formation. In his words: the "socio-economic formation is really a totality. Nevertheless, when its evolution is governed directly from outside, without the participation of the people involved, the prevailing structure is not the nation, but rather the global structure of the capitalist system" (Santos 1979:165). The article

concludes with a statement that Santos did not intend to convey anti-planning sentiments, but, on the contrary, his intention was that planning as he knew it would be substituted with another that would consider society as a whole. Certainly, these critiques were informed by Santos' experience of living in such a diversity of countries between 1965 and 1977. His return to Brazil, in June 1977, would also leave a mark on this debate.

Over the course of the first years of his return to Brazil, the same professional instability abroad repeated itself on home soil, with Santos arriving first in Salvador, then a few months in São Paulo, and finally in Rio de Janeiro. He was divided between these latter two cities from 1978 to 1983. In these years he taught as a visiting professor in the the University of São Paulo's Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism and at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. From 1983 he held the title of Professor of Human Geography at São Paulo, where he lectured until his death in June 2001.

His return to Brazil was striking for the geographer. Before him was a country with a more distinct territorial configuration than the one he had left. Between 1964 and 1977, Brazilian territory went through effective changes in regard to the phenomena of urbanization, metropolization, and modernization of the countryside, as well as its transportation and communication network. At the same time, structural problems and inequalities remained. So, too, did the context of political dictatorship. Such changes led him to a long and protracted reflection on the country.

So, the third phase begins with his interrogation of planning and the Brazilian territory. The reflection on the absence of a *national* project gains force, above all from a critical and coherent analysis of places, of Brazil, and of the world. This analysis is based on the constant mediation between a complex theoretical system, elaborated and revised over decades, and tireless empirical research (Grimm 2011). It was no longer a debate about planning itself, but a project for the nation in times of globalization.

The *Manifesto* is a publication that elucidates this new moment, by emphasizing the necessity of delineating practical solutions that emerge from an

interpretive scheme capable of covering concrete reality in its entirety. This scheme is the basis of a new discourse focused on action.

With the same purpose, it is worth mentioning the book *Toward Another Globalization* (2000). In it, the geographer points to the coexistence of three manifestations of globalization: as fable, as perversity, and as the possibility of another globalization. For Santos, the same aspects that produce this perverse globalization—technical unicity, the convergence of moments, and the single motor—contain the variables that allow the construction of another globalization by non-hegemonic actors.

According to Santos (2000), we would live a “transition on the march”, in which there would be a precedence of man against the tyranny of money and information that, among other aspects, structure perverse globalization. This transition would also be marked by the centrality of the periphery. In this sense, in a reflection on Brazil, Santos pointed out that the debate around a “national project” required new definitions, a renewed vocabulary. However, such a debate was being obstructed by the projects of large companies. In his words:

Perhaps that is why the projects of the great companies, imposed by the tyranny of finance and trumpeted by the media, end up guiding the evolution of the countries in one way or another. This is carried out, in agreement or otherwise, with the public bodies, which are frequently gentle and subservient. Consequently, the design of a geopolitics specific to each nation and that takes its characteristics and interests into account is left aside. (Santos 2000:155)

The geopolitics proper to each nation must form a “national project”. This analysis corresponds to the third moment of the geographer’s reflections on planning in times of globalization.

I have discussed three moments here surrounding the debates on planning in the trajectory of Santos. In the first moment I have underscored his role as a planner, while living in Bahia. The second moment was marked by the elaboration of critiques of a mode of planning that deepened inequalities between nations in the centre and

those on the periphery of the capitalist system. And the third, with a broader view, was marked by the problems existing due to the absence of a national project. Here it is worth mentioning an important link between the three moments: an ideal of the future as a “space of resolution” for deeply entrenched problems in societies.

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] Both were published in journals outside Brazil and later in Portuguese in the book *Spatial Economy: Critiques and Alternatives* (1979).

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