SYMPOSIUM

Commentaries on "The Active Role of Geography: A Manifesto"
Organised by Lucas Melgaço and Tim Clarke[1]

Globalization: The Territory as Resource and as Shelter

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Introduction

Like other thinkers whose work attains international recognition, Milton Santos remains, rightly, one of the great geographers of the 20th century. His contribution to a critical social theory of the geographical space carries with it a prospective vision: the geographical space is considered an instance of society.

Thus, the *Manifesto* (Santos et al. 2000) maintains that the content of geography independent from the theoretical-methodological approach adopted by the researcher must present a coherent ensemble of propositions that considers the dynamics and the integration of all the elements in play (Santos 1996a:22):

> The challenge facing geography in this time of great change is the reconstitution of the explanatory corpus, that is, the task of obtaining, through realities and metaphors, the concepts that are at once constitutive and operational, that is, which represent our time and allow us to analyse it properly.

For Santos (2005:33), the understanding of what the world is passes through the understanding of the geographical space:

> Space reproduces the social totality to the extent that these transformations are determined by social, economic, and political necessities. Thus, space is itself reproduced within the totality, when it evolves as a function of the mode of production and of its successive moments.

According to Santos' theoretical proposal, the geographical space is to be understood as "an inseparable ensemble, solidary and contradictory, of systems of objects and actions, not considered in isolation, but as a single framework in which history takes place" (1996b:51). This epistemological route associates time, space, and the world taken as historical realities, while the technique enters within it "like a hyphen, historically and epistemologically" (Santos 2008:39). Technical systems succeed every new historical period. Before globalization, there were localities and regions, subordinated, roughly, to the interests of the nations, considering the need for the production of goods and services consumed by the same society and protected by rules established from country to country.

With the advent of globalization, the ultimate stage of capitalist internationalization, the technical systems become worldwide. In the post-Second World War period, a new geography of the places is drawn in which we see technical unicity for the first time in history, which is to say that practically all of the techniques can be encountered in all places, although at different levels of complexity. Thus, we encounter the same engineering systems–airports, highways, railways, ports, hydroelectric and thermoelectric stations, and telecommunications–across the landscape of different national territories.

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Technical unicity results from a single system, universally integrated, with high functional interdependence and connected thanks to new information technologies. These technologies make possible the convergence of moments, that is, they allow information to reach various points of the planet instantaneously and simultaneously.

Thanks to information technologies, through cybernetics, information, and electronics, the productive process may be fragmented on an international scale and can be controlled at a distance at every stage. Though the productive units are fragmented, the command, coordination, and control from a distance enable the collection and processing of all sorts of information, and the orders of the great corporations–of the hegemonic agents–reach the places in real time.

Finally, the unicity of the motor–the globalized value-added, driven by the competitiveness of the hegemonic companies and of the financial system–assimilates new portions of national territories to the interests of the global market.

The Architecture of Globalization

To consolidate this architecture of globalization guided by technical unicity, the convergence of moments, and the unicity of the motor (Santos 2000), the national territories underwent metamorphoses. Changes in the geographical medium with the developments of science and technology and the enormous advances of information technology have created functional spaces for the interests of a reduced number of hegemonic actors. In this sense, hegemonic actors seek above all to extract the best advantages for obtaining rising profits.

The architecture of globalization praises speed, allowing for a more frenetic movement. New systems of engineering are created in order to guarantee the fluidity of the territory. Circulation is the essence of the contemporary acceleration and an essential factor in capitalist accumulation. Thanks to the systemic functioning of the systems of engineering, the architecture of globalization conforms to what Santos (2008) designates as the technical-scientific-informational milieu, which tends to be present, in varying degrees, all across the planet.

Concomitantly, there are supranational Anglo-Saxon networks of power which produce a political-ideological discourse that predicts a single path for the group of Third World countries. It is from this perspective that the neoliberal ideal is absorbed by sections of the political, economic, and intellectual elites who appear enthusiastic about the new possibilities of globalization. A set of rules has opened the national markets to

the actions of large foreign conglomerates and to the international financial system, causing national frontiers to become increasingly open to the interests of external agents, particularly economic and financial ones. The neoliberal model, though, has not fulfilled its promise to reduce social inequalities; on the contrary, it has exponentially increased poverty, misery, and institutional instability.

Since the late 1990s, many Latin American nations began to reject governments with neoliberal projects, choosing leaders committed to social demands and to the preservation of public property. In Europe, national governments have in recent years been more permeated by neoliberal ideas. The squandering of public property, the expansion of the power of financial markets, the reduction of social spending, and the destruction of jobs are some of the consequences faced by the great majority of the populations of nations that submit to the dictates of neoliberalism.

In this sense, geography must be attentive in order to analyse the total social reality from the perspective of its territorial dynamics. This proposal is a point of departure for the discipline, made possible through a system of concepts that allows one to understand, inextricably, objects and actions.

The Territory as Resource and as Shelter

Seen as a totality, the used territory is a privileged field of analysis, insofar as it reveals to us, on the one hand, the global structure of society, and, on the other, the very complexity of its use.

In Santos' (1999a:19) work, the territory is not a category of analysis (the used territory, which allows us to understand changes and processes), but the framework of all our lives, in their global, national, intermediary, and local dimensions. The used territory would resemble the notion of banal space suggested by the French economist François Perroux (1967), who defines it as the space of all people, of all companies, and of all institutions. This would explain the presence of organizations with different degrees of complexity, the enormous range of capital and techniques of different ages, which results from the past and present divisions of labour. It is therefore the territory that constitutes the hyphen between the past and the immediate future. According to

Santos (1999a:19): "It has to be seen as a field of forces, as the site in which the dialectics and contradictions between the vertical and the horizontal, between the state and the market, between the economic and the social uses of resources, play out".

For the hegemonic agents of the economy, the territory is seen as a resource. Through the exercise of politics and their economic power, they incorporate modern systems of objects and actions, providing regions that specialize in exogenous activities that respond to the interests of the hegemonic agents of the global market themselves.

The mobilization of political, financial, economic, legal, and media resources in the different instances of the power of adhesion of the local elites to the neoliberal projects enable territorial metamorphoses. Thanks to their power, large organizations draw points and patches of modernization on the national territories, making them national spaces of the international economy (Santos 1996a:196). There is a constant association between private and public resources for the establishment of networks, to ensure the smooth flow imposed by a small number of economic and financial agents.

The logic that drives the adaptation of subspaces of the territory is linked to the formation of global networks that are subordinated to the logic of competitiveness. These networks impose upon places the products, technologies, and organization of these agents, as well as a deliberate action to undermine any competition that could threaten their power. Their relations with places are deliberately functional: they use territory without commitment, abandoning it when it no longer serves their interests. As Ricardo Castillo (2005:299) has shown, this process creates a permanent tension between the state and the market:

> The state is responsible for the planning of the territory and has commitments to the whole of society, for which it must design a future, while large corporations are not committed to places or national territories and exploit them according to their commercial strategies.

Parts of society feel constantly threatened, as control of places is usurped more and more by large corporations.

For the vast majority of the population, the territory "is the foundation of labour, the place of residence, of material and spiritual exchanges, and of the exercise of life" (Santos 1999b:10). The hegemonized agents have it as a shelter, the condition of their very existence. On the one hand, they constantly seek to adapt to places, creating and recreating strategies that guarantee their survival in the places; on the other hand, they seek greater social protection by way of the state. When the state reduces its role in society by adopting neoliberal policies, the destruction of jobs and of workers' rights is the result. The increasing privatization of collective goods and services increases the expenses of the population. The abandonment of mankind to fend for itself is one of the most perverse aspects of the neoliberal projects currently underway.

In the large Brazilian cities, there is a countless number of hegemonized agents who ensure their survival by creating work activities that are undemanding in terms of their incorporation of technology, capital, and organization. In general, they develop their activities in degraded areas of the city, offering products and services that attract those consumers who do not have permanent access to the goods and services of the hegemonic economy. A multitude of small, under-capitalized shops and services settle in the urban insterstices: clothing stores, gift shops and restaurants, stationary stores, barber shops, hair and nail salons, tyre and auto-repair shops, butchers, street markets, and so on. In turn, street vendors leverage areas of the greatest flow of people to develop their activities. In bus stations, subway and train terminals, at intersections of large avenues and busy streets, a myriad of workers offer the most diverse kinds of products to passers-by and motorists. There is also a range of micro- and small companies that guarantee work to thousands of people excluded from formal employment, that is, with a formal contract and guaranteed labour rights. The scope of their activities is restricted to the regional market or even to the local space. However, they face a permanent conflict with the government, which tries to prevent the operation of those activities that are less demanding of capital and seek to discipline the performance of their activities in public spaces.

In his *Toward An Other Globalization*, Santos (2000) argues that we urgently need to think of another form of globalization, which takes the human being as the

centre of political actions. The analysis of the use of the territory is essential to allowing us to intervene in the construction of this future, the utopian principle that has always motivated great achievements.

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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