

Ceremonial Inadequacy: In Search of a New Enlightenment

João Caraça

CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION and LISBON TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY,
PORTUGAL

Boaventura de Sousa Santos's article is of a distinctive, stimulating nature: while setting the stage for detailing the list of the implausibilities of modern social sciences, especially of mainstream economics, it moves into delineating the outline of a more 'natural' and sustainable system of creating and verifying truth. By doing so, the author really points towards the creation of new values retrieved from a forgotten past.

But let me now comment on the first part of the paper, its achievements and difficulties. By proposing as an argumentative tool the tension between two pillars, regulation and emancipation, Santos is able to span a space where the characteristics and levels of the concepts he introduces, such as the distances between knowing and ignorance, colonialism and solidarity, order and chaos, are

aptly understood. The diagnosis of the epistemological state of mainstream economics is robust, and the notion of 'epistemicide' (used by Santos in his article on p. 266) as a way of describing the outcome of modernity is admirable.

The difficulty of the analysis, however, resides in treating the situation of knowledge without explicit reference to the overarching presence of power. In my view, this has a blurring effect. The entanglement of knowledge with power constitutes the foundation from which criteria for truth are derived in any society. Knowledge cannot be dissociated from power. The deployment of power always involves the constitution of a domain of knowledge from which its own legitimation and cultural identity can be derived; concurrently, as Michel Foucault pointed out, the rules that govern the operation of this body of knowledge involve a set of power relations. Therefore, we can say that knowledge and power mirror each other, to the extent that the conditions for the enactment of both spring from their mutual coexistence. In all epochs and communities each configuration of power, or knowledge, has set its indelible mark on the other.

This is why we can ascertain that the Renaissance was premodern, i.e. not yet fully modern. It had some dimensions that were later to be part of the unfolding of modernity but, in essence, its character was different. The liberation of the energies of free enterprise, the scientific revolution, the emergence of national churches, the institution of bourgeois states, are all mutually reinforcing, and essential for the affirmation of European peoples in the globe.

A new worldview emerged, not in connection with any direct religious belief, but with a marked spatial character. The central question in this geometric worldview is the search for grand symmetries that correspond to invariance principles, which, in turn, originate in the absolute, eternal laws of nature. Nature is seen as obeying to Law. Time is a parameter. The Universe originated as space. Mankind (and its representatives, the European peoples) were in command of the world.

But free enterprise was not solely a principle but a form of organization, of social relations, of action. Economic power, in its modern incarnation of industrialization, would certainly promote its own body of knowledge, economics. In economics the issue of capital is pivotal, as one can easily guess. Santos points out deftly the problems and limitations of mainstream economics; but it is not clear if he believes that some of the difficulties are related to a change in the nature of capital — the emergence of a new type of capital, as proposed by Manuel Castells, 'informational capital' — not yet understood by theory, or to a phasing out of the energies of modernity.

Nevertheless, it is in this conjunction that the paper has a greater merit. Its second part contains a generous programme for overcoming the present state of epistemological turbulence. Clearly, a new narrative is needed. The pendulum has swung too close to the pillar of regulation and order to induce sustainability. This situation is blinding us. We need to re-legitimize the primacy of emancipation and solidarity.

Here, Santos bravely proposes an epistemology of absent knowledges and an

epistemology of absent agents. I say 'bravely' because the present situation in the field of knowledge is unsettled and viscous. This is mainly because disciplines such as the scientific, or philosophy, ethics and aesthetics, are no longer thought of as being arranged as branches of a tree, as Descartes, Bacon, Diderot and D'Alembert thought, or even arranged in a pyramid with mathematics at the top, as positivists claimed. These models are now exhausted. This is why seven years ago we proposed (Caraça and Carrilho, 1994) a configuration of the fields of knowledge as an archipelago, suggesting a communicative-reticular situation which does not postulate any common origin or accept any 'natural' or functional hierarchy. For us, the loss of importance of arboreal or pyramidal conceptions is the most decisive effect of the emergence of the intensive communicational, immaterial, aspects of contemporary society.

We can no longer accept the verdict of criteria for truth without understanding their associated strategies. The metaphor of the archipelago is useful and heuristically operative because it allows us to think about the articulation of criteria and strategies that guide any cognitive thematization of the main classic areas under consideration: nature, state, society, and culture. We thus see that the structures of 'modern' power can only be envisaged as a constellation, or network, of pulsating and interconnected centres.

In this metaphor, true knowledge is therefore what is inside the 'boundary' of the archipelago; and ignorance is the 'sea that surrounds it. The 'sea' can be conquered by constructing new 'islands', or by launching bridges to newly built offshore platforms or to other islands.

One of the problems in this scheme is the awareness of 'knowledge workers' with respect to this situation. Sometimes scientists, philosophers, social scientists and so on are still too dependent on the paradigm in which they were trained to understand the meaning of present-day unease; because if it seems easy to distinguish knowledge from ignorance, it is tremendously difficult to discredit pseudo-knowledge. Pseudo-knowledge can be thought of as a group of sharks that hunt both along the shores and inside the canals of the archipelago. Sharks survive because they have a niche: the discomfort of the human soul. They proliferate because they pretend they can deliver certainty in areas and situations of distress. They sell the illusion of order and feed on uncertainty. And in our contemporary world, in the Internet, they multiply as they never did before: they now have access to virtual replication.

Again, they can only be contained in the context of a new narrative. Here, too, Santos points his finger cleverly to solidarity, to conceiving the other as a producer of knowledge. According to what modern biology teaches us, each major step in the history of life in the universe — and eight such steps have been identified so far, from replicating molecules to primate societies (Maynard Smith and Szathmáry, 2000) - has been the outcome of cooperation. It results from a cooperative effort between different species that henceforth behave and reproduce like a new one. This is the same as stating that hierarchical behaviour only brings 'more of the same', whereas cooperation is a mechanism for generating

complex behaviour, eventually leading to emerging properties and sustainable action.

The time is ripe for developing an attitude of curious perspective, of operating simultaneously at different scales. We humans were born on the Earth. Let us not turn this blue planet into a senseless graveyard.

References

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■ João Caraça is Director of the Science Department of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. He also teaches science policy at Lisbon Technical University. *Address*: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Av. Berna 45-A, 1067-001 Lisboa, Portugal. [Email: jcaraca@gulbenkian.pt]