

Epistemology and Critique

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The opening passage about Thorstein Veblen in Boaventura de Sousa Santos's article is breathtakingly brilliant. It is not so much the idea of going back to Veblen for a discussion about the relation between economics and the other social sciences, or about the epistemology of the social sciences in general, that strikes one as original. Rather, the force lies in the sudden move - after the author already appeared to have his reader prepared for a critique of economics from a historicalinstitutionalist perspective - against Veblen whose important insights did not prevent him from advocating a 'delirious racial anthropology' as an alternative. The strike hits. Is it not indeed the case that too many scholars in the social sciences spend their time elaborating sophisticated critiques, while their own alternatives remain weaker and are often as much, if not more, subject to valid objections as the approaches they criticize — if they are spelled out in any detail at all?

Boaventura de Sousa Santos himself does aim at developing alternatives while at the same trying to avoid Veblen's fate — with success, I dare say, since it is difficult to envisage - even a hundred years from now - that somebody could call his constructive ideas 'delirious'. In great sympathy with his project of an epistemology of seeing and the rewarding richness of its presentation here, it seems worth pointing to a basic tension in it, a tension which I think needs to be resolved to pursue the project further.

At a closer look, there are two views of knowledge in Boaventura de Sousa

Santos's programme; let me call them the strong view and the weak view. On the one hand, his conceptualization proceeds through two epistemological breaks. The first break leads from common sense to science as we know it, a science that develops knowledge-as-regulation and that supports colonization and order. The second break, yet to be accomplished, will then lead out of mainstream social science to the new common sense, and that is to knowledge-as-emancipation, a knowledge that enhances solidarity. This is the strong view. On the other hand, however, there is also a softer, weaker version of the programme. The second break leads here to a variety of perspectives, to a 'plurality of knowledges', to a new situation, thus, in which knowledge appears in a multiplicity of forms. If knowledge is plural, however, can we then still assume that it is unequivocally related to what seems to be a political objective, knowledge 'as emancipation'? And can knowledge as such be assumed to promote a particular goal in social life, solidarity? Among that variety is there no longer any knowledge form that supports regulation, and none the insights of which may prove divisive?

Despite — or because of — those questions, which indeed need to be both asked and answered, I myself have closer affinities to this second view — which, after all, I take to be Boaventura de Sousa Santos's 'real' view. So, my comment basically just hopes to confirm this interpretation. The argument here, as so often, proceeds more smoothly by showing the blind spots in the other view, and after that it may at best indicate a direction in which to go, rather than showing what will be there to be seen.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos's strong view draws a sharp line between regulation and emancipation and their respective knowledge forms. Thus, it follows many critical philosophies of social science, from Karl Marx to the early Jürgen Habermas. Those critical philosophies insist rightly — against objectivism and positivism, including the claims of what Santos calls 'mainstream social science' — on the indissoluble connection between social knowledge, on the one hand, and the social world that it is meant to be about, on the other. However, many, if not even most, of these philosophies abandon their own questioning immediately after having developed it, namely by postulating to have already found the answer to it. Instead of one form of valid knowledge, there are then two: one that dominates because it supports domination, and another one that struggles to come into being because it undermines domination. This simple solution fundamentally neglects — or even denies — the ambivalence of modernity. If modernity, whether it actually exists or is an emancipatory and always unfinished project, is about freedom and autonomy, that is, self-determination, then it is also about self-regulation. There is no true knowledge of emancipation that would not in some sense also have to be a knowledge of regulation, namely of self-regulation. The history of modernity certainly was a history of barbarisms. But if there is any way to read it fruitfully for the present, it needs to be read as a history of civilization failing. Otherwise, we will never see, let alone understand, the attempts made.

While we should be critical, let us also be fair to our ancestors. As a current resident of Florence, the remnants of this city's past do not give me the impression

that Renaissance confidence was a 'scientific' confidence in terms of a conviction of mastering the world from a superior perspective on it. Rather, they convey the sense that, if humans try hard, they can deal with the strokes of destiny, all the while maintaining their humanness. And even economics, in its current form a legitimate target of criticism, started out in the name of some — arguably ill-conceived, but nevertheless sincere — emancipation, and even in the name of solidarity, since it posited a universality of its Enlightenment that would be for the benefit of all. While I agree that there has been a historical process of the 'cannibalization of social emancipation', we would need to know much more — in the form of high-resolution, small-scale analyses — about how precisely this came about. An interpretation of the 'first epistemological break' certainly goes wrong if it totally denies that ambition in the face of an otherwise appropriate critique of the rising asymmetry between 'regulation' and 'emancipation'.

The lack of ambivalence with regard to the first break is repeated in the programme of the second break. At least in the strong reading of his proposal, Santos succumbs to the time-honoured inclination of rather markedly outlining a not-yet-existing alternative that solves all problems, an alternative in which knowledge and solidarity become one. But a quick historical observation suggests that he may be running into a trap that he himself set. Is such a conception not precisely reviving the Enlightenment dream of a self-regulating society, a dream about which one can justifiably say that at least in some of its versions it has been converted from being emancipatory to being regulatory, and now in the sense of regulation by some imposed on others, and not as self-regulation? Why should we assume that something similar could not again be the case if we follow that same route again? In Santos's own, fruitful terms, the problem here is that one should not move from the absolute reign of experience over expectation, or from total indifference both to experience and expectation, towards a similarly unconstrained reign of expectation over experience. That is a recipe for disillusionment, at best, and was historically a recipe for disaster. The challenge of knowledge rather is to find the situationwise-appropriate relation of expectation to experience.

Santos rightly underlines that there is conflict and struggle in the social world, and there is indeed no need to remain silent about this feature only because Carl Schmitt has emphasized it. However, even if we could assume that friend and foe could be clearly identified, there is a struggle not merely between regulators and emancipators. If this were the case, then the struggle would be over once that fight was won. Taking Schmitt (and others, such as Hannah Arendt or Claude Lefort) seriously means to accept that, under conditions of modernity, there will always be contestation, always struggle between different perspectives. And then there cannot be knowledge that is unequivocally associated with emancipation and solidarity. Rather, even among those who support those goals, there will be variety of perspectives and, thus, a 'constellation of knowledges' will emerge that does not settle a dispute, but provides it with resources for reasoning. Against indifference, one would not just posit solidarity with friends. Rather, concern for others would show precisely in both solidarity and dispute, and both at the same

time. This is what I see in the second, the weak programme in Boaventura de Sousa Santos's article, and it is the one I prefer.

In his strong programme, he continues the tradition of critique in pointing to something that is not, but could be, and elevates this to a higher position, seen as immediately reachable, if not actually reached, as soon as the obstacles are removed. His weak programme instead suggests a different understanding of critique, pointing also to something that is not, but that is always struggling to come into existence, thus is always present but in the form of failing. An epistemology of seeing would not merely show the way to knowledge, it would also need to make visible the obstacles on that way. Since many of those obstacles will not disappear under any circumstances, the search for knowledge means the search for the different ways to overcome them.

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