

**S Y M P O S I U M**  
**D e b a t i n g   K n o w l e d g e :**  
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## Between Emancipation and Regulation: The Pillars of Modernity

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Representation is a strategic question. Santos addresses representation in science by way of the lessons of painting (perspective), cartography (scale), photography (resolution) and other modes. As in previous work (such as his treatment of baroque) Santos follows a painter's point of view, combining crafts and art. A painterly perspective on representation and blindness in science and economics: this is interesting indeed. The observations on seeing and blindness, presence and absence remind me of those who have sought to supplement sociology of knowledge with sociology of ignorance.

Seeing blindness has pitfalls of its own. 'Whatever we say today about the blindness of others will probably be seen in the future as evidence of our own blindness': no doubt. It is difficult to criticize representation without committing the same faults that one is criticizing. Which also applies to me in commenting on this paper.

The findings Santos arrives at concerning the shortcomings of neoclassical economics are not as noteworthy as the way he arrives at them. His treatment suffers from problems of scale and perspective and at times comes across as too coarse-grained. For instance, what is 'mainstream economics'? Neoclassical economics, rational choice, new institutional economics, institutional analysis? As to 'modern science', what about new science such as quantum physics and chaos theory? That is, this critique of small-scale modelling in science itself uses small-scale models of economics and science to the extent that several insights are too general to be penetrating. This critique of representation comes with two other arguments – a discussion of regulation and emancipation, and a plea for a new common sense, although there is no necessary connection between them.

Regulation and emancipation are presented as the 'twin pillars of modernity', as capabilities and forms of knowledge. This is a sequel to Santos's *Toward a New Common Sense* (1995). This too opened with the idea that modernity is 'based on two pillars, the pillar of regulation and the pillar of emancipation'.

So here we enter modernity by passing between two pillars. Let us pause right away. What kind of space do we enter by passing between two pillars? A temple – and variations such as a courthouse, church, library – a demarcated, sanctified space. The nearest reference to two pillars in the literature is the Temple of Solomon with its twin pillars Jachin and Boaz. This metaphor has been used over and over again, from the Qabala to Freemasonry and alchemy to Faust ('zwei Seelen'). In other words, this is a classical, premodern metaphor for modernity. Accordingly, modernity is marked off as an imaginary space, a building, and set apart from detail and intricacy, from the rumour of agents, voices, dreams and projects, in a word, a small-scale model abstracted from history. This means taking a normative view of modernity, as against, for instance, an institutional view (the nation state, capitalism, etc.) or a historical view. Other normative angles are also absent (Parsons's universalism, Habermas's Enlightenment, etc.). Which episodes, movements, transformations would exemplify this? History is only cursorily present in this argument (e.g. capitalism, colonialism). Without 'examples' the argument remains ungrounded, untestable, hovering outside time and space. This is a plea not for empiricism but for effective communication (the reader thinks this is about A but the author thinks of B). The representation in terms of duality is fundamentally static. From Heraclitus to Hegel, along with other folks, the common epistemological device has been dialectics, so where is dialectics in this argument – i.e. regulation prompting emancipation, emancipation turning into regulation, and so forth? Then, what is now presented as a problem ('the regulation that does not emancipate does not even regulate', etc.) is not a problem at all, but rather a solution.

A depiction in which not merely two principles are privileged, but only two remain is not a felicitous representation of modernity. This is small-scale sociology at its most extreme. It gives us very little to work with. The treatment is schematic, not occasionally so but as a matter of style and method. All the problems discussed in the critique of small-scale representation recur in this argument on regulation and emancipation – vagueness ('neglecting details and contrast'), false contemporaneity, exclusion of other knowledges. Thus, a probing critique of small-scale economics (i.e. modelling devoid of detail) comes with an exercise in small-scale sociology and the very epistemological blinders that are so patiently laid bare in relation to economics are, in the same breath, applied with abandon in sociology.

That regulation consumes emancipation is a familiar argument. When the dust of rebellion or revolution settles, another order comes into being and ideals slip out of the window. According to the right, the violence of revolution only brought unnecessary bloodshed; according to the left, it is the myth of Sisyphus revisited (Camus, Foucault, etc.). Both views are deeply conservative and pessimistic. My own view (discussed in several publications) is that power (domination, oppression, rule, hegemony, etc.) and emancipation (empowerment, participation, social transformation towards justice, etc.) are deeply interdependent and mutually implicated. The exercise of power evokes resistance, resistance grows into empowerment, empowerment becomes emancipation, and

emancipation changes the rules of power. This is the *definition* of emancipation: unlike 'resistance', 'protest', 'participation', 'empowerment', emancipation changes the rules of the game.

Thus, constellations of power (e.g. imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism) evoke and shape emancipation while emancipation movements influence and redirect the exercise of power. A new regulation comes about to forestall upheaval or revolution, to close loopholes, rebuild legitimacy, reclaim hegemony. For example, in nineteenth-century Europe national capitalism engendered the organized working class, and to forestall the growing force of trade unions and labour parties, the welfare state was born. That is, a more inclusive, more just mode of regulation developed. The objectives of emancipatory movements were translated into a new form of regulation – not fully, not all the objectives, but significantly enough to change the character of power and widen the standards of legitimate authority (universal suffrage, welfare state, Fordism). This too came with a downside (labour aristocracy, working-class embourgeoisement, the chauvinism of prosperity, etc.). Yet, major emancipatory objectives were met in the form of a different mode of regulation. This also implies that equating modernity and capitalism is not helpful, for the question is what kind of capitalism?

In other words, that emancipation yields regulation is not its betrayal but its fulfilment. Emancipation is not a fairy tale or a utopian shortcut. It is a historical process whose logic is that each form of emancipation by definition constitutes a new form of regulation, which over time turns out to be a new form of oppression, which in turn evokes resistance, so the cycle begins anew, and so forth. Now we have entered the epoch of global capitalism in which struggles are local (Chiapas, Ogoniland, etc.), regional (Nice) and global (in Seattle, Washington DC, Prague, Davos, Porto Alegre, etc.). We have entered another space and another cycle and the drama of regulation (World Bank, IMF, WTO) and emancipation (labour standards, NGOs, global civil society, etc.) unfolds anew. What is at stake now is world-scale regulation (a new financial architecture, environmental regulation, etc.).

In Santos's argument, regulation cannibalizes emancipation while ultimately, as part of a new common sense, emancipatory knowledge is to take the reins from regulatory knowledge. This yields the third argument, the plea for a new common sense. The problem is that in one domain, regulation and emancipation, Santos displays extreme pessimism, while in another, a new common sense, he displays extreme optimism. There is no emotional continuity between these perspectives, lest we assume that extreme disaffection in one sphere is the *raison d'être* for extreme optimism in another. In this sphere, there is but a string of normative clauses to guide us: solidarity, prudence, a decent life. Sounds good, but if matters have been so dreadful all along, how on earth would we get there? Would not prudence suggest (a) a finer reading of the relationship between regulation and emancipation, and (b) of the relationship between common sense and science, so that (c) a new common sense would not have to drop out of the sky, Made in Utopia? 'Whether it is possible to know by creating solidarity' is an interesting question. Can a critique be both penetrating and compassionate? Indeed, would

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not the test of a new common sense be that it informs a new regulation that is based on more inclusive values?

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## 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 historical-institutionalist 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 where 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

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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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## Ceremonial Inadequacy: In Search of a New Enlightenment

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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 at the end of

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his article on p. xxx) 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.

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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.

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