

SYMPOSIUM

Debating Knowledge:
Responses to SantosEmancipation and Regulation:
Twin Pillars of Modernity?*Jan Nederveen Pieterse*

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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 the 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 Goethe ('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 (Parson'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 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

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

Reference

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (1995) *Toward a New Common Sense*. London and New York: Routledge.

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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