

INTRODUCTION

Opening Up the Canon of Knowledge and Recognition of Difference

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The main argument of this book is that there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Probably more than ever, global capitalism appears as a civilizational paradigm encompassing all domains of social life. The exclusion, oppression, and discrimination it produces have not only economic, social, and political dimensions but also cultural and epistemological ones. Accordingly, to confront this paradigm in all its dimensions is the challenge facing a new critical theory and new emancipatory practices. Contrary to their predecessors, this theory and these practices must start from the premise that the epistemological diversity of the world is immense, as immense as its cultural diversity and that the recognition of such diversity must be at the core of the global resistance against capitalism and of the formulation of alternative forms of sociability (Santos, 2006b).¹

Over the last decades, there has been a growing recognition of the cultural diversity of the world, with current controversies focusing on the terms of such recognition. But the same cannot be said of the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world, that is, of the diversity of knowledge systems underlying the practices of different social groups across the globe. However, from an anti-capitalist perspective such recognition is crucial. The epistemological privilege granted to modern science from the seventeenth century onwards, which made possible the technological revolutions that consolidated Western supremacy, was also instrumental in suppressing other, non-scientific forms of knowledges and, at the same time, the subaltern social groups whose social practices were informed by such knowledges. In the case of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and of the African slaves, this suppression of knowledge, a form of epistemicide (Santos, 1998), was the other side of genocide. There is, thus, an epistemological foundation to the capitalist and imperial order that the global North has been imposing on the global South. This book aims at elucidating some of the destructive consequences of this

epistemology and at proposing an alternative epistemology that, far from refusing science, places the latter in the context of the diversity of knowledges existing in contemporary societies. Starting from the assumption that cultural diversity and epistemological diversity are reciprocally embedded, this book is intent to show that the reinvention of social emancipation is premised upon replacing the “monoculture of scientific knowledge” by an “ecology of knowledges” (Santos, 2003b; 2004a). The ecology of knowledges is an invitation to the promotion of non-relativistic dialogues among knowledges, granting “equality of opportunities” to the different kinds of knowledge engaged in ever broader epistemological disputes aimed both at maximizing their respective contributions to build a more democratic and just society and at decolonizing knowledge and power.

THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURES AND THE DIVERSITY OF KNOWLEDGES

Many non-Western (indigenous, rural, etc.) populations of the world conceive of the community and the relationship with nature, knowledge, historical experience, memory, time, and space as configuring ways of life that cannot be reduced to Eurocentric conceptions and cultures. For instance, the definition of the identity of peoples in the non-Western world and of their collective rights tends to be strictly bound to a notion of “territoriality” associated with responsibilities in relation to a territory, which is defined as a collective of spaces, human groups (including both the living and their ancestors), rivers, forests, animals, and plants. Differences between worldviews become explicit and turn into sites of struggle when the integrity of these collectives is threatened by alternative notions of relationships to territory and knowledges—such as those that are based on the right to property—or when the distinction between the respect for culture and the imperative of development is used to justify the exploitation of “natural resources” by outside forces. The struggle of the U’wa in Colombia against a petroleum multinational (this volume), or of the peasants and rural communities in India against the appropriation by multinational companies of the biological resources of the territories they inhabit and in defense of a balanced environment and a way of life that respects and preserves this environment (this volume), provide examples of how confrontations between different worldviews can take the form of cultural, legal, and political conflicts on national and international levels.

The adoption of allegedly universally valid, Eurocentric legal and political models, such as the neoliberal economic order, representative democracy, individualism, or the equation between state and law often rests, as the different case studies in this book show, on forms of domination based on class, ethnic, territorial, racial, or sexual differences and on the denial of

collective identities and rights considered incompatible with Eurocentric definitions of the modern social order. Yet, even within Eurocentric normative frameworks, there is still scope for the right to difference to be affirmed, through conceptions of normality, nature, and morality that are alternative to the dominant ones.

Conceptions of knowledge, of what it means to know, of what counts as knowledge, and how that knowledge is produced are as diverse as the cosmologies and normative frameworks alluded to above. All social practices involve knowledge. The production of knowledge is, in itself, a social practice and what distinguishes it from other social practices is its self-reflexivity, which productively reshapes the context of practices in motive and engine of actions. Self-reflexivity, viewed as the discovery of hetero-referentiality, is the first step towards the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world. The latter, in turn, is inseparable from the diversity of cosmologies that divide and organize the world in ways that differ from Western cosmology and its offshoot, modern science. Both the proposals for radicalizing democracy—which point towards post-capitalist horizons—and the proposals for decolonizing knowledge and power—which point towards post-colonial horizons—will be feasible only if the dominant epistemology is subject to a critique allowing for the emergence of epistemological options that give credibility to the forms of knowledge that underlie those proposals.

These different expressions of diversity are often subsumed under the term “multiculturalism,” a term that, like many others that have emerged from the critical discourses in/of modernity, has become a contested word with a variety of meanings and uses.

Multiculturalism: a contested concept

Especially after the 1980s, the humanities and the social sciences converged on the transdisciplinary area of cultural studies, considering culture as a phenomenon associated with repertoires of meaning or signification shared by members of a society, and also with differentiation and hierarchy within national societies, local contexts, and transnational spaces. Culture therefore became a central strategic concept in the definition of identities and alterity in the contemporary world, a resource for the affirmation of difference and the demand for its recognition, as well as a field of struggle and contradiction (McClintock, 1995; Werbner and Ranger, 1996; Spivak, 1999; Mosquera, Pardo, and Hoffman, 2002). As a consequence, the concept of multiculturalism became equally controversial and riddled with tensions. It stands, either simultaneously or alternatively, both for a *description* and a *project* (Stam, 1997). As a description, it may refer to: 1) the existence of a multiplicity of cultures in the world; 2) the coexistence of diverse cultures within the same