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Responding to Cognitive Injustice: Towards a 'Southern' Decolonial Epistemology

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2014).

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Is global social justice possible in the absence of global cognitive justice? Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and prominent intellectual activist with the World Social Forum, wants to convince us that the answer is 'no'.

What is 'cognitive justice'? Why is it so central to the achievement of anti-imperial, decolonizing social justice? *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* seeks to answer these questions via a critical deconstruction of the 'Western epistemological paradigm' ('Northern epistemologies') and a radical reconstruction of what an emancipatory political epistemology ('epistemologies of the South') might consist in.

Santos argues that Western political imaginaries present themselves as grasping the world in its totality, assuming no limits to what is known, or how, by the forms of knowledge prized by European modernity: science, law, economics, history and philosophy. Western thinking might be said to be unable to perceive the world it has itself made.¹ The consequences of this inability to perceive, what Santos calls 'blindness', are multiple and complex. Central is 'cognitive injustice', where inequity exists between different ways of knowing and different kinds of knowledge.² In its most egregious form, cognitive injustice involves 'epistemicide': the murder or death of knowledge, especially associated with the death or destruction of the social groups that possessed it.³

The book opens with a dual text presented on facing pages: the 'Manifesto for Good Living/Buen Vivir' for those in the anti-imperial global South, and the 'Manifesto for Intellectual-Activists' for those 'rearguard' theorists of the global North who are 'most likely to read [the book] but least likely to need it'.⁴ Santos's 'Introduction' motivates the project by arguing that Western-centric contemporary political and critical theory is incapable of theorising

1 Charles Mills's claim in Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

2 Santos (2014), p. 237.

3 Santos (2014), p. 92.

4 Santos (2014), p. 3.

contemporary political struggle because it fails to acknowledge the importance of epistemological claims, frameworks and practices, and the testimony of subordinated groups that argue otherwise. An emancipatory alternative paradigm is needed.

The rest of the book divides into two parts. The first deconstructs the complex internal diversity of Western modernity, which Santos understands as a condition for its robust critique. *'Nuestra America'* considers an alternative American twentieth century grounded in resistance rather than the rising social regulation framed by Northern epistemologies as constitutive of progress towards emancipation, one which reveals an alternative decolonial subjectivity. *'Another Angelus Novus'* uses Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' to explore the primacy of 'roots versus options' thinking and the West's construction of coloniality through the 'caging' of the past and the exaggeration of a gleaming future at the expense of the present. In *'Is There a Non-Occidental West?'* Santos explores how old arguments originating in what are now marginalised spaces of Western theory might be put to work in efforts to succeed Occidentalism.

The second part continues the deconstruction while offering a positive reconstructive account of an emancipatory epistemology. *'Beyond Abyssal Thinking'* uses colonial cartographic symbols to understand how modern science and modern law construct a catastrophic dividing line that 'eliminates whatever is on the other side'.⁵ To be on 'this side of the line' is to be visible, metropolitan, and human; to be on 'the other side of the line' is to be invisible, colonial, and subhuman. In *'Toward an Epistemology of Blindness'*, Santos contrasts modern science and law with archaeology and photography to map the ways modern Western thinking constitutes an 'epistemology of blindness' that fails to accurately represent its limits or its consequences.⁶ Instead we need an 'epistemology of seeing' whose 'point of ignorance is colonialism and whose point of knowing is solidarity'.⁷ Santos explains these absences in *'A Critique of Lazy Reason'*, prescribing a 'subaltern cosmopolitan reason'⁸ based on a sociology of absences and a sociology of emergences. The first tracks those agents and forms of knowledge that are 'produced as non-existent'⁹ by Western abyssal thinking; the latter is concerned with those 'plural and concrete possibilities'¹⁰ that might emerge from due care being paid to each other in the present.

The last two chapters identify 'procedures' of the epistemologies of the

5 Santos (2014), p. 120.

6 Santos (2014), p. 137.

7 Santos (2014), p. 156.

8 Santos (2014), p. 164.

9 Santos (2014), p. 172.

10 Santos (2014), p. 182.

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South: 'Ecologies of Knowledges' and 'Intercultural Translation'. Santos leads us through an analysis of philosophies of science that construe science as a capitalist, patriarchal and colonial construction, as well as reflections on what makes African philosophy, philosophy. He argues for a plural, polyphonic conception of multiple knowledges grounded in a 'prudent orientation'¹¹ that acknowledges the limitations and situatedness of each. From such a standpoint, we can identify intercultural 'contact zones'¹² that permit learning from and with the anti-imperial South through intercultural translation, but only after we have achieved sufficient distance from the knowledges of the imperial North and imperial South. These procedures aim at creating cognitive justice¹³ and so, for Santos, facilitate the transition to global social justice.

This is a rich and detailed text which demands careful engagement and openness to its prescriptions of being willing to stand in critical distance from dominant paradigms, paying attention to what and who are missing. Its double focus, first, on the epistemological dimension of global social justice, second, on those systematically 'produced absences' involving those who live on 'the other side of the line' aligns it with recent developments in critical social epistemology, political philosophy, and ignorance studies.¹⁴

Given the titular focus on the epistemologies of the South, one might approach this book expecting greater engagement with subaltern thinkers than it in fact provides. Santos's strategy of revealing subaltern modernities that can be appropriated for emancipatory purposes results in an unexpected preponderance of engagement with Western thinkers, metaphors, and methods. Thus we might ask: what is being made visible to whom? Our expectation that subaltern voices are made visible might need to be recognised as coming from 'this side of the line'; Santos's choices may imply, however, that he is showing those on the 'other side of the line' the cracks in the masters house and how to combine the masters tools with their own to provide novel ways to tear it down.

¹¹ Santos (2014), p. 206.

¹² Santos (2014), p. 218.

¹³ Santos (2014), p. 234.

¹⁴ See, for example, Mills (1997); Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998); Charles Mills, 'White Ignorance', in Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (ed.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 11-38; Kristie Dotson, 'Conceptualising Epistemic Oppression', *Social Epistemology* 28/2 (2014), 115-138; Kristie Dotson, 'Inheriting Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Epistemology', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38/13 (2015), 2322-2328; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013); Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007); Rebecca Mason, 'Two Kinds of Unknowing', *Hypatia* 26/2 (2011), 294-307; Gaile Pohlhaus, 'Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Wilful Ignorance' *Hypatia* 27/4 (2012), 715-735; Stacey Clifford Simplician, *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007); Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (California: Stanford University Press, 2008); Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey, *Routledge International Handbook on Ignorance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

A second volume, *Epistemologies of the South: Reinventing Social Emancipation*, is forthcoming. Scholars interested in the social, political and juridical dimensions of these epistemological issues would do well to seek it out.

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