

## Book Reviews

*Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide.* By Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2014. Pp. xii + 240. \$156.00 (cloth); \$33.95 (paper).

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*Epistemologies of the South* is an ambitious book on an important topic. With a forthcoming second volume, to be subtitled *Reinventing Social Emancipation*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos brings together ideas from 20 years of voluminous writing and political engagement, including the valuable collection *Another Knowledge Is Possible* (Verso, 2007).

Santos, a sociological and legal theorist, works at universities in Portugal and the United States. He has been closely associated with the alter-globalization movement, especially the World Social Forum, which figures significantly in *Epistemologies of the South* as an example of a new politics of knowledge.

The book begins with four introductions. The first is a short preface summarizing the ideas and the second is “Manifesto for Good Living/*Buen Vivir*,” representing “the imagined voices of social movements with which I have been working over the years” (p. ix). These are interleaved with “Minifesto for Intellectual-Activists,” suggesting how intellectuals can be “rearguard theorists” for social movements, followed by a 26-page introduction talking about the difficulties of Western critical theory. The book settles into its stride with part 1, concentrating on centrifugal modernities and subaltern Wests. Santos sketches an account of global capitalism and “societal fascism”—he sees the societies of the global North combining formal democracy with growing authoritarianism and violence toward the excluded—and explores cultural invention and anticolonial tradition in the Americas. Riffing on a famous passage from Walter Benjamin, he offers a broad critique of Western modernity, notably that it creates an “abyssal line” between the included and the excluded, especially the colonized. Chapter 3 asks whether there is a non-Occidentalist West, examines four male writers from the last 2,000 years, and concludes that there is.

Part 2, “Towards Epistemologies of the South,” develops the abyssal divide between the global metropole, governed by a polarity of regulation versus emancipation, and the colonized world of appropriation and vio-

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lence. "Epistemology of Blindness" shows how mainstream knowledges exclude most social experiences, the prime example being economics. "A Critique of Lazy Reason" sets forth Santos's critique of the exclusionary forms of rationality on which Western knowledge systems are built and argues for social analysis of the exclusions. Perhaps the most interesting argument is for "Ecologies of Knowledges," pursuing cognitive justice by linking coexisting multiple knowledges—though Santos hastens to add that this does not mean relativism. The final chapter, "Intercultural Translation," offers a theory of this linking, emphasizing that translation is not just cognitive but is a social, indeed political, practice. The book ends with a rather muted conclusion, reemphasising the link between cognitive and social justice on a world scale.

Even this inadequate summary shows we are in the presence of grand theory. Santos deals in splendid abstractions—"the project of Western modernity," "abyssal thought," "Baroque subjectivity"—fitting them into a scheme of global historical change. Panoramic gestures abound. Some achieve bathos: capitalist modernity, we learn, has "declared war on mirth" (p. 61). Some are sharp, like his comments on the "loss of critical nouns" and the "parallel lives of the Left" (pp. 33, 40).

The declamatory style is driven by Santos's urgency, his sense that we need to grapple with big issues on a world scale and we need to do it now. Imitating C. Wright Mills, I will put Santos's central argument in a sentence: imperial and postimperial Northern power imposed on the world a flawed and exclusionary system of thought, and we urgently need social knowledges from subjugated groups and the postcolonial world to achieve justice.

Many now agree with that idea. Santos's thought is part of the growing intellectual movement that rejects the Eurocentrism of the existing social sciences and explores critiques and alternatives that come from colonized cultures and peripheral regions. (For others see Syed Farid Alatas, *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentrism* [Sage, 2006], Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* [Polity, 2007], Wiebke Keim, *Vermessene Disziplin: Zum konterhegemonialen Potential afrikanischer und lateinamerikanischer Soziologien* [Verlag, 2008], Julian Go, "For a Postcolonial Sociology," *Theory and Society* 42 [2013]: 25–55.)

Santos's version is politically engaged, imaginative, and intellectually ambitious. It also has features that limit its effectiveness. In a book called *Epistemologies of the South*, there is a strange absence of epistemologies from the South. Page 1 cites Aquinas and Kant; page 159 cites Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Descartes; pages 182–84 grapple with the *noch nicht* in Bloch; on other pages we meet Hegel, Marx, Dewey, Ortega, Bachelard, and

their friends. The book is overwhelmingly about Northern theory. Santos knows of the existence of thinkers from the South, but he doesn't engage with any of them in depth, and few get more than a passing mention. He doesn't explore the difficulties in the knowledge project he endorses—difficulties that *are* explored in vigorous debates on indigenous knowledge, Islamic science, HIV/AIDS, education systems, academic dependence, and extraversion around the periphery.

Santos knows of the existence of feminism, but practically all the people he talks about are men, and his themes are those of the men's Left, hardly mentioning gender relations, sexuality, or embodiment except in his comatized lists of excluded groups. The text plays an all-too-familiar masculinized knowledge game, replete with prestigious authorities, abstracted technical language, grand systems, and confrontations.

This language and style are a political problem. From an author who's proposing an "insurgent subaltern cosmopolitanism" as an urgent task, it's disconcerting to get a book that's unreadable by almost everyone who might build that cosmopolitanism. This criticism isn't to argue against abstract theory—I commit some too—but sociologists do have a responsibility to democratize knowledge in their own work. This book has interesting ideas, passion, political relevance; it is also obscure, abstracted, and uneven. Perhaps it was written too fast; let's hope the second volume is slower.

*Social Movements in the World-System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation.* By Jackie Smith and Dawn Wiest. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012. Pp. xvi+234. \$39.95 (paper).

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The title of this short volume (about 180 pages of text) is somewhat misleading. The topic of *Social Movements in the World-System* is not so much social movements as transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs), about which Jackie Smith and Dawn Wiest have painstakingly compiled a detailed database covering, biennially, the period from 1953 to 2003. The information source for these international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) is the usual suspect, the *Yearbook of International Organizations*; the organizations selected are all those that, in the authors' judgment, "are explicitly involved in work to change the dominant political and social order" (p. 46). What this means, essentially, is opposition to global capitalism (the book is drenched in the pool of assumptions of world-systems theory). Opposition therefore centers on three principal