

**EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE SOUTH: JUSTICE AGAINST EPISTEMICIDE,  
BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS (BOULDER: PARADIGM, 2014)**

As injustice and discrimination persist across the globe and the socioeconomic gaps of access and privilege continue to widen the binary divide — or what Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes as an abyssal line — between the valued and un(under)valued, the recognized and un(under)recognized, the visible and invisible, and the groups and individuals that occupy these sides of the line, Santos outlines the epistemological basis for a decolonial ascendance beyond the line in order to achieve a good life or *buen vivir* for all.<sup>1</sup> Santos' richly theoretical contribution and call to action through a postcolonial or decolonial approach and legal pluralistic bend are unmistakable, and outline a journey of how, and why, we should critically engage and amplify alternate ways of knowing and knowledges sourced from the “un” and “under” valued side of an abyssal line — a rebalancing that transforms hegemonic tools through counterhegemonic uses and salvages knowledges threatened by dilution, loss, and disappearance.

Drawing on discussions generated within meetings of the World Social Forum and a “movement of movements,” Santos maps a way forward, a manner by which a better present may be constructed in order to enable the possibility of a better future. He presents a theory and outlines a method by which a shift must occur: a departure from the search for ways to address today's persisting problems of injustice and inequality from a focus on the dominant epistemologies generated within European critical traditions, the West, and the global North that accommodate the centrality of people or persons, linear time, and neoliberal economics, and instead shift the focus to amplifying the wealth of knowledges available within traditionally subaltern, non-dominant, and largely disregarded epistemologies of the global South that currently face destruction or, what Santos terms, “epistemicide.” As Santos reiterates throughout this book as his underpinning rationale, “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.”<sup>2</sup> Through this, Santos proposes a narrowing of injustice and difference — not a removal of difference, but an acknowledgment, a respect, and equality of difference and valorization of diversity. But, simultaneously and pragmatically, rather than a path forward that turns its back on Eurocentric understandings, conceptions, and hegemonic constructs, Santos proposes a counterhegemonic use and understanding of existing hegemonic tools within our present reality (and an expansion of the present) in order to contract and be able to imagine and build a better future.<sup>3</sup> Santos equally critiques movements generated by the Eurocentric Left and other left-leaning efforts, in addition to their Right and Center counterparts, for their part in a perennial reproduction of colonialism. On this note, Santos also warns of the susceptibility faced by every movement to an eventual loss of decolonial character and to transformation and amalgamation into part of the hegemonic process once resisted.

Acknowledging the cognitive dissonance inevitably embodied by communicating through book form and in a colonial language, Santos begins his book with a humble intellectual responsibility that problematizes and situates his own role in what he undertakes to discuss

<sup>1</sup> See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2014) [Santos, *Epistemologies*].

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *ibid* at 42, 133, 207, 237.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* at 171, 239.

in the pages that follow. This self-awareness is maintained throughout and gestures at the ways in which to approach another possible knowledge counterhegemonically within the framework of hegemonic frameworks. He identifies this book as a reluctant ally to those struggling for a good life or *buen vivir*, and predicts that his book “will be read by those who least need it,” that “[t]hose who ... might benefit from it will not be able to read it,” and that “[i]f they could, they would probably have no interest in doing so, and if they did, they would most probably not understand it.”<sup>4</sup>

Readers who are familiar with Santos’ work will recognize many of the key concepts, theories, and proposals that he has worked with and espoused before, but here, he expands on the foundation of his past work and his prior discussions of subaltern cosmopolitan movements and reason, and the cognitive injustices that plague other ways of knowing — but now these are crystallized within Santos’ notion and discussion of “epistemicide.” This notion of epistemicide, the destruction of alternative ways of knowing that exist outside of the dominant epistemological norms, colours the overarching theme of the book. Santos calls for an acknowledgment of other ways of knowing, an end to their destruction, and an end to the waste of these knowledges and linked social experiences.

Familiarity with Santos’ other works provides a base upon which to situate this instalment, but the book may also be read without having read his past work. Santos facilitates further exploration of the concepts he describes by embedding references throughout the book to his precise past books, articles, and chapters where some of these concepts or discussions originated. The same is true of his future book, *Epistemologies of the South: Reinventing Social Emancipation*, the eventual appearance of which Santos foreshadows often throughout the book.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the present book, even though it may certainly be read independently, is part of a larger project of past and eventual works. In that regard, the book does an effective job of building on a strong foundation, setting a rich epistemological stage for the next book, and creating a sense of investment within the reader that calls them to dutifully stay aware and track down the forthcoming book upon its eventual publication. If one were to wish to read a complete trilogy of this project, Santos indicates that one would begin with his 1995 book *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition*.<sup>6</sup> In that work, Santos outlines his prediction that this paradigmatic transition would appear on an epistemological plane — one which he explores in the present book — as well as on a socio-political-juridical level,<sup>7</sup> which he promises to explore in his forthcoming book. In that sense, even though Santos insists on the inseparability of theory and practice, in the present book, he nonetheless isolates the theory upon which the forthcoming book will elaborate the practice.

While Santos’ argument against the separation of theory and practice is seemingly contradicted by his own division between the theory presented in this book and the practice presented in the forthcoming book, Santos acknowledges this apparent contradiction partially

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* at 3.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *ibid* at 2, 25, 87, 89, 175, 214, 226, 236, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition* (New York: Routledge, 1995) [Santos, *Common Sense*]. See Santos, *Epistemologies*, *ibid* at 236.

<sup>7</sup> Santos, *Common Sense*, *ibid* at ix, 54–55, 107–109.

through his assertion that an amplification of theory is currently needed within a wealth of methodological work. But this cognitive dissonance created by Santos' division of the indivisible theory and practice that he argues for, and his self-reflective desire to situate his discussion, are perhaps best exemplified and rendered comprehensible by the manifesto and minifesto structured section that Santos places in between the Preface and the Introduction. The manifesto and minifesto appear together on opposing sides of the page in a discordant counterpoint and translation-reminiscent structure that is maintained throughout the section. The imagined manifesto combines and presents the voices and grassroots struggles — the practice — of social movements for a good life or *buen vivir* that Santos has been involved in and has been influenced by. The imagined minifesto is written from the perspective of Santos, as a response — or a theory — to the manifesto, as a challenge to the traditions of the form, and is intended to acknowledge the limitations that such a book is plagued with. The division of the indivisible practice and theory relationship is illustrated by these two simultaneous texts, and what Santos describes as the “impossibility of radicalism” that characterizes the present of the global North.<sup>8</sup> It is up to the reader whether it is best to switch back and forth between the manifesto and minifesto, to read one in its entirety followed by the other, or to switch strategies halfway through. This decision and exercise prepares the reader for what Santos purports to tackle, and builds understanding as to the choices he makes for dividing what he argues is indivisible.

While his decision to divide the indivisible is perfectly comprehensible at this point, it will remain to be seen how Santos will reassemble the theory and practice divide created into a comprehensive whole. But Santos' well-established attention to detail and ability to delicately weave together diverse pluralities into a harmonious but assorted whole, breeds confidence in the eventual outcome.

In addition to a complete and linear read of the book, similar to his past books,<sup>9</sup> it can alternatively be effectively accessed in chunks in the way one might use different portions of a reference book at different times and for different purposes. Santos acknowledges this by situating this book as “a gym of ideas” and “a thought-action experiment,”<sup>10</sup> the creation of which is as much for his own self-reflexive preparation to become what he terms a “rearguard intellectual,” or “competent rebel,” as it is to provide the reader with the tools needed to imagine a better future.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Santos, *Epistemologies*, *supra* note 1 at 3, 5. The impossibility of radicalism may be basically described as the mutual disconnect between radical ideas or theories and radical practices (*ibid* at 3).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation*, 2nd ed (London: Butterworths LexisNexis, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Santos, *Epistemologies*, *supra* note 1 at 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Santos describes a rearguard intellectual (in opposition to a vanguard intellectual) as an intellectual whose

theoretical work ... follows and shares the practices of the social movements very closely, raising questions, establishing synchronic and diachronic comparisons, symbolically enlarging such practices by means of articulations, translations ... dismantling normative injunctions, facilitating interaction with those who walk more slowly, and bringing in complexity when actions seem rushed and unreflective and simplicity when action seems self-paralyzed by reflection (*ibid* at 44). Rearguard theory, as described by Santos, should be “based on the experiences of large, marginalized minorities and majorities that struggle against unjustly imposed marginality and inferiority, with the purpose of strengthening their resistance” (*ibid* at ix).

Turning to the mechanics of this book, it is characterized by a rich intertextual weaving of not only philosophical literary references, but also analogies and inspiration drawn unconventionally from such diverse sites as archaeology and translation studies. He divides the book into two parts. The first is characterized by an exploration of the subaltern ways of knowing that coexist with the dominant, yet are rendered invisible and threatened with destruction. Santos also analyses the critiques of dominant epistemologies to show that they too have been contributors to processes of destruction and invisibility.

Chapter 1 (*Nuestra America*) draws on José Martí's essay of the same name<sup>12</sup> in order to trace the historical development, the many lived experiences of rebellion, resistance, struggle, and the situated knowledges of *Nuestra America* that have existed at the margins of Latin America. Where *mestizaje* and hybridity have long existed in this context, Santos explores the counterhegemonic, subversive, and emancipatory potential of a new *mestizaje* (a "decolonial *mestizaje*"),<sup>13</sup> through unification and transformation, leading to the development of a progressive transnational political culture, rearguard theorizing and theorists, and the manifestation of counterhegemonic globalization.

In Chapter 2 (Another *Angelus Novus*), Santos uses Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus*<sup>14</sup> to argue for the use of destabilizing subjectivities in a deconstruction, reappropriation, and neutralization of the past and the scars of past events, in order to reinvision within them their empowering elements as a source for a reconstructed past and identity.

In Chapter 3 (Is There a Non-Occidentalist West?) Santos explores the appropriation of alternative theories and disciplines with reference to two different past philosophical traditions — learned ignorance and the wager — developed by Nicholas of Cusa and Blaise Pascal respectively, that aimed to address an uncertain or different future, but were rendered invisible due to the dominant view of the time that favoured thinking that complemented a certain and clear future. Due to their marginalized status within the West or global North, Santos identifies the alternative thinking these traditions offer in reconstructing a "non-Occidentalist West" and the prospects this carries for a non-capitalist, post-neoliberal future.<sup>15</sup>

The exercise of deconstruction carried out in the first part of the book is then answered by reconstruction in the second part where Santos reveals his proposal for what the title of the book promises — the epistemologies of the South. Here we are also presented with strategies for ending the destruction of knowledges, and for instead amplifying them, in order to arrive at global cognitive justice characterized by an equality of differences.

In Chapter 4 (Beyond Abyssal Thinking), Santos assesses the abyssal line and the exclusion and destruction of alternative realities, while describing the destabilization of this

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<sup>12</sup> José Martí, "Nuestra América," *El Partido Liberal* (30 January 1891).

<sup>13</sup> Santos, *Epistemologies*, *supra* note 1 at 65.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in Hannah Arendt, ed, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 253 at 257.

<sup>15</sup> Santos, *Epistemologies*, *supra* note 1 at 114.

line through the countermovement he terms “subaltern cosmopolitanism.”<sup>16</sup> In moving beyond the abyssal line, and in order to avoid recreating abyssal thinking, “an alternative thinking of alternatives” is required for global cognitive justice.<sup>17</sup> To move beyond abyssal thinking and colonial ordering requires the shift of an epistemological viewpoint and learning from one side of the line to the other, and a respect for both equality as well as difference.

In Chapter 5 (Toward an Epistemology of Blindness), Chapter 6 (A Critique of Lazy Reason), and Chapter 7 (Ecologies of Knowledges), Santos turns his focus to the “epistemological foundations of subaltern, insurgent cosmopolitanism” described in Chapter 4.<sup>18</sup> Santos discusses how the invisibility of alternatives occurs where alternatives may be non-existent due to disallowed emergence, while other alternatives are non-existent due to a lack of recognition resulting from their failure to conform to dominant notions of scale, perspective, time, and so on. Where hegemonic knowledge and practice disable the alternative plural systems of knowledge practices that could shift the subject knowledge to the other side of the line, Santos cites various strategies for creating an equation valuation of alternative knowledges, counteracting their invisibility, ending their waste and destruction through lazy reason, and calls for and describes an ecology of knowledges.

Where the ecology of knowledges is one of the two key processes that lie at the heart of Santos’ epistemologies of the South, intercultural translation is the other. In Chapter 8 (Intercultural Translation), Santos arrives at the most concrete portion of the book where he narrows in on intercultural translation. Here, language barriers and translation are used to demonstrate how barriers in understandings and realities may be transcended and hybridized within a “third space” that Santos refers to as the translational contact zone “in which different cultural life worlds meet, mediate, negotiate, and clash”<sup>19</sup> and where “the ideal of equality is the ideal of equal differences.”<sup>20</sup> Santos draws on Chapter 1 in referring back to the processes of *mestizaje* and a retaking of past struggles as an emancipatory process. He explains that the “third space” created by hybridization can also become emancipatory through successful intercultural translation. Finally, intercultural translation appears as the crucial operationalizing tool needed to reverse the invisibility of subaltern knowledges and practices, which Santos promises to explore in his subsequent book.

Sara Gwendolyn Ross\*  
 PhD Candidate and Instructor  
 Osgoode Hall Law School

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* at 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* at 133.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* at 135.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* at 218.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* at 219.

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