

Book Review

- *The end of the cognitive empire*, by Boaventura de Souza Santos. Duke University Press, 2018

Santos is one of the most original thinkers on theories of knowledge and has been involved in the making of various scientific revolutions in Latin America: the postmodern, the postcolonial and the emotional-aesthetic. He was one of the first scholars who brought postmodern thinking into jurisprudence by criticizing some of the features of the conception of law and developing new concepts that modified the way law could be understood such as scale, margins, difference, plural legal orders, transnational law, multiculturalism, and constructivism. He introduced and developed postcolonial and de-colonial insights into the social sciences and legal theory. His epistemology is clearly detached from subjectivism and his postcolonial ‘ecologies of knowledge’ are a political epistemology developed on the basis of materialist and postmodern critiques. A third paradigmatic shift started with his interest in the role played by emotions and suffering in social life and in the history of colonialism.

In *The end of the cognitive empire*, Santos develops an interesting reflection for a period in which some morally repugnant forms of social inequality and social discrimination are becoming politically acceptable. For him, modern ideologies are co-opted by neoliberalism, and even when there is resistance, it is less credible. We need to revolutionize theory. This is undoubtedly an important call for reargued intellectuals that contribute to strengthening the social struggles against domination and oppression to which they are committed. Dominant epistemologies of the North are characterized by the priority of scientific knowledge, the importance of objectivity, the equating of objectivity with political neutrality, the importance of the universalizability of theory, a strong distinction between subject and object of inquiry, and a strict separation between theory and practice. Legitimate knowledge is scientific, rational, unbiased, and produced in isolation from the influence of emotion and political agendas. The Introduction is very interesting: “the anti-imperial South, the South of the epistemologies of the South, is not the reversed image of the North” (p. 7). The South does not aim to replace them or act as a victim of the North, but the South rebels itself in order to erase the power hierarchies inhabiting them. They raise new questions and seek out new answers, new

problems for new solutions. Epistemologies of the South view legitimate knowledge as a way of understanding the world that is useful to political struggle. These knowledges are “born in struggle” (p. 7) and they allow oppressed groups “to represent the world as their own and in their own terms” (p. 7). These ways of knowing might be rituals, emotions, visual art, stories, dance, etc. Three modes of modern domination (capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy) are in force and act in tandem. For Santos there is only one fight, but he does not directly engage with the work of any feminist epistemology or include citations, except by Silvia Federici.

The book has three parts. The first explains some fundamental concepts of the Epistemologies of the South as the abyssal lines,¹ the distinction between abyssal and no abyssal exclusions, the sociologies of absences and emergences, and the ecologies of knowledge, intercultural translation, and the artisanship of practices. It analyses “struggle”, its sense and specific epistemological potential or content. He lets the reader think about those who believe in self-proclaimed universal concepts of reason, rationality, human nature and mind, and “all that does not fit such a concept of irrationality, superstition, primitivism, mysticism, prelogical thinking, and emotivism. In a word, anticognitivism.” (p. 38). The author quotes Quijano and Dussel who mention that modern epistemological arrogance is the other side of the arrogance of modern colonial conquest. The second part considers the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual reconstructions called for by the epistemologies of the South. He analyses the sensory and emotional dimensions of post abyssal research. “Since colonialism is a co-creation, however asymmetrical, decolonizing entails decolonizing both the knowledge of the colonized and the knowledge of the colonizer” (p. 107). How is it possible to produce credible and reliable knowledge by means of methods that have little to do with the ones privileged by modern sciences? He proposes a methodological decolonization process that requires a shift from “knowing-about” to “knowing-with.” He calls for the breakdown of the barrier between scientists and laypeople in order to allow for greater epistemic exchange and equality.

The third part includes some problems concerned with the postabyssal pedagogies called forth by the epistemologies of the South, how they are converted into a kind of new common sense for wider subaltern, counterhegemonic publics engaged in progressive transformative practices (as intercultural translation, popular education, decolonizing the – polyphonic – university and how to link it to a popular education through ecologies of knowledge and an artisanship of practices). The author’s extensive discussion of Gandhi in Chapter ten is interesting, because of the strangeness he provokes (defamiliarization) and the proximity that never stops surprising (refamiliarization). There are some difficult paragraphs to understand for non-academics, activists or even academics without previous postcolonial

knowledge and an interdisciplinary training with unexplained references to expressions that represents a challenge to fully comprehend the text.

Sandra Bustamante, University of Belgrano, Argentina
sandra.bustamante@comunidadub.edu.ar

Notes

- 1 Modern Social sciences, including critical theories, have never acknowledged the existence of the abyssal line (p.19).