



Liberation or a Creative Balance?: A Case for Epistemologies of the South (ES)

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is about a paradigmatic shift: from the until now dominant western-centric modernity to a plurality of non-western-centric modernities. Such a paradigmatic shift will call for new political, economic, cultural, social, and epistemic tools. In this paper I concentrate on the epistemic tools. I argue that the western-centric modernity is based on the epistemologies of the North and that the paradigmatic shift will call for new epistemologies which I designate as the epistemologies of the South (ES). This does not mean that the epistemologies of the North (EN) should be totally discarded. It means that some of its features are of great value to the extent that they are integrated in broader epistemic landscapes. For instance, western-centric modern science is a valid form of knowledge but it is not the only valid form of knowledge, as claimed by the epistemologies of the North.

Keywords: *liberation, neoliberalism, epistemology, Eurocentric modernity*

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I

Critics have been arguing that instead of alternatives, we need to find alternative thinking modes of approaching the alternatives. Eurocentric modes of cultural and political epistemology have restricted the visibility of the immense means of diverse expressions of social experience. Eurocentric epistemologies have been appropriating the knowledge production from other “civilizations and cultures,” their “food, customs, and traditions,” and presenting them as their own (Goody 2006; Aamir, 2022, 180). This is a “massive waste of social experience” which has become one of the increasingly pervasive phenomena of our times (Santos and Meneses, 2019). Knowledge production from the South has mostly been born out of struggle (Santos, 2014, 2018). Epistemologies of the South offer a range of sociology of absences. Modern epistemologies may benefit from a retrieval of a diverse range of social struggles and innovations that are anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, and anti-patriarchal. Some of these struggles and innovations are local, some are global, some are culturally Eurocentric, while some are expressed in non-colonial languages.

In some ways, epistemologies of the South have been harbingers of new practices, while there are those which could not develop more than the project phases even. If some of these sociological epistemologies have been ephemeral, some have blossomed into sustainable experiences; but there are some things that are common to all such epistemological ventures. All of them have been motivated to improve the present living conditions of the exploited and the dispossessed populations who are facing discrimination. Another common feature in the epistemologies of the South is the reimagining of better futures by invoking the experiences and knowledge banks of the distant pasts and the enrichment of the “lexicon of resistance” (Santos, 2023a). The coronavirus pandemic provided a unique set of opportunities to get this transitional ball of alternate epistemology rolling. In the work, (Santos, 2023a) the critic regards coronavirus pandemic as a historic event, comparable to the historic events like the Spanish flu at the end of the First World War, the 1929 depression, and the Second World War, as the next nail in the coffin of compromised histories of the world. All these events have occasioned an opportunity (though we seem not to have availed it) to take into account alternative patterns of understanding. Such voices are usually heard after dramatic events. After this time of corona, they were particularly intense and came from all corners of the world.

However, I argue that humanity seems to be in such a historical period of existence that the recurrent pandemics may become the new normal because of today’s “high intensity neoliberal globalization” where the spread of the viruses may reach “an unprecedented level.” In my view there are three different post-pandemic scenarios. Each scenario sheds retrospective light on the way they may be assessed. The three scenarios are:

1. Everything as before and worse: abyssal capitalism and the securitarian state of exception
2. Capitalist skin, socialist mask: the new neo-Keynesianism¹
3. Barbarism or civilization: alternatives to capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. (Santos, 2023a, pp. 129-148)

In retrospect, we may conclude that the first scenario has prevailed. This does not prevent us from considering the third scenario, which in my view, represents a historic (and perhaps the last) opportunity to confront the imminent ecological catastrophe and to guarantee the permanence of the human species on earth. The likes of the third scenario are created out of these historic opportunities such as what the corona pandemic occasioned. Most of the epistemic resources that make up this scenario are offered by the epistemologies of the South, ES, and, on this basis, the question of barbarism versus civilization will be posed for the second time since the beginning of the sixteenth century.

II

Unpacking this point of barbarism and civilization, a rhetorical question can be: Is it possible to see the current western civilization as a form of barbarism? Eurocentric modernity, not only, attributed everything to barbarism that preceded it, but also, anything radically different that might have followed it. The paradigmatic proclamation of Eurocentric scientific rationality was the way they considered the entire peoples of Africa and the New World as barbaric throughout their historical colonialism, while the German peoples were given the appellation of barbarism when they brought the Western Roman Empire to an end in 476 CE, with the so-called “barbarian invasions” (Ermatinger, 2004; Ward-Perkins, 2005). Therefore, Eurocentric civilization has tended to consider the other people as barbaric, when their ways and social constructs differ from their own. Eurocentric modernity has been resting on this barbarism/civilization dialectic for quite some centuries. The narrative of ‘progress’ has been resting on this dialectic. Adding to this, is the fact that progress is always measured from the yardsticks of the perspective of a dominant civilization. Therefore, it is imperative to look at the alternatives; to begin with, the alternative of epistemologies of the South.

Viewing capitalist civilization as a form of barbarism has been the leitmotiv of critical thinking, starting perhaps, from Rosa Luxemburg (1919) and Walter Benjamin (1969) to István Mészáros (2001) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (2013). For the ES, barbarism derives from the fatal dysfunctionality of three Western-centric modern polarizations: humanity/nature; individual/community; immanent/transcendent. These are the deepest mechanisms through which modern capitalist, colonialist, and heteropatriarchal domination operates. They are the deep cause of a thick opacity blocking the perception of the relationship between damaged life and the real factors damaging life. Those social groups targeted to live damaged lives are systematically prevented from acting upon the factors that damage their

lives (since the rule of law must be respected). They are brutally repressed if they do question these modes of repression. They are branded to be on the other side of the abyssal line, because, in their cases, the rule of law sides with the rule of lawlessness.

Therefore, while focusing on knowledges born in struggle, the ES try as far as possible to insulate the struggles of the oppressed (especially of those under colonial sociability) from knowledge packages brought into the struggles for a better living by social groups or organizations, declaring themselves to be on their side and willing to help. Their main entry ticket is the financial and technological resources they bring with them. In order to access them, it is mandatory to follow the terms of reference imposed by such organizations. Very often these terms clash with the interests and contexts of the struggles, as the people in struggle see them. The main characteristic of the contradictory relationship between the liberal rule of law and the abyssal line is analyzed in great detail in Santos, 2023b.

As a result, the Western-centric “solidarity” or “cooperation” with social groups is rejected by the ES, because the Eurocentric modernity casts them onto the other side of abyssal line with their paradigms of ‘colonial sociability.’ This solidarity or cooperation is manifest in the cruel dual tactics of outright violent repression (promoting civil wars, the so-called war on terror,² lawfare, regime change, embargos and sanctions) combined with “benevolent” development or humanitarian aid. In either case, the oppressed are considered objects of knowledge, not subjects of knowledge. The ES represent the epistemic break with this state of affairs that has perpetuated capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy in the modern world. Knowledges born in struggle, and the empowering ecologies of knowledges that characterize them, gain their strength in the struggle by defending ways of life, existential philosophies, conceptions of human/living beings, and society/nature relationships, that are at odds with the capitalist, colonialist, and heteropatriarchal normativity. The most intrinsic characteristic of knowledges born in struggle is that they never separate what they fight against, from what they fight for. Moreover, it is what they fight for, that guides how and what they fight against (Santos and Meneses, 2019). In so doing, they combine negation with liberation, negativity with positivity, and critique with alternative. This is the utmost empowering potential of the epistemologies of the South. It, therefore, is a paradigmatic transition, a sociology of emergences. The ES must thus be viewed as constitutive components of a paradigmatic transition. However, it should be borne in mind that the ES would be transitory, since they exist as long as the epistemologies of the North claim the exclusive criterion for the validity of knowledge production.

III

In terms of knowledge production, since the seventeenth century in Western modernity, an immense philosophical debate surrounds the relations (contrasts, convergences) between Descartes and his contemporary Spinoza.

Spinoza's philosophy represented the most radical and counter-hegemonic alternative to Descartes' system (Roth, 1923a; 1923b). In his view, Descartes' God represents a theological veto on philosophy and amounts to resignation in the face of the impossibility of obtaining true knowledge. For Spinoza, the limits of knowledge according to Descartes are nothing more than the limits of his own method (Santos, 2023b, pp, 626-629). A different method is therefore required. Descartes' method relies on the dualism between mind and body, between thoughts and things, and between humans and nature. Yet, if God is the creator of the universe, He is one with His creation. God is not transcendental because He is the totality of its creation, of which we are a part. If we cannot grasp His will, we can understand the nature of all things in existence from the laws that God implanted in them. Mind and body, as well as humanity and nature, are one: nature is a unity.

Cartesian discreet, unconnected, impenetrable things, parts or objects are false abstractions. Things, as much as ideas, only exist in association with other things or ideas. The human body is as much part of nature as the human mind; extension, and thought being two different attributes of the same totality. Differences are superficial and non-essential because everything exists in relation to everything else. Differences are *natura naturata* (modified nature), corresponding to Descartes' *res extensa*, a mere manifestation of the underlying *natura naturans* (unmodified nature), the totality of existence, the source and the unfolding of life, an all-upgrading, all-pervasive nature, the infinite vital energy that animates the world and life itself and on which human beings, in all their finitude, ultimately depend. Hence, Spinoza's famous definition of God, for so many centuries deemed infamous: *Deus sive natura* – God, that is, nature. God is not personalizable (as if he were a human raised to the power of infinity), nor is he transcendent. God is of this world: "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" (Spinoza, 2002, I, 15: 224). For Spinoza, it is only in this sense that it can rightly be said that God is infinite and omnipresent. Differentiating between the here and the there, within and without, is a human limitation. God is the immanence of the world, His infinite attributes being the reason for the limitations of humans—not the other way around. For Spinoza, the humanization of humans is not achieved through denaturalization, but rather through deepening naturalization.

Spinoza's conception of nature as *natura naturans* was totally incomprehensible or, if comprehensible, unacceptable in the light of the extensive needs of nascent capitalism and the colonial expansion associated with it. Instead, capitalism and colonialism were the modern drivers of Cartesian nature, a natural resource unconditionally available to humans. The same conception of nature was extended to those human beings considered inferior or subhuman due to their supposed close proximity to nature (or even for being part of nature): black people, indigenous people, women; in short, racialized or sexualized bodies. Their availability was not limited to their labor (as in the case of exploitation, in Marxist

terms) but encompassed their whole being, as the objects of appropriation and violence. The concept of *terra nullius* used to define the territories inhabited by indigenous people, was based on the assumption that they were part of nature. In the Cartesian world, the denaturalization of the few (raised above nature through the mind) was made possible by the re-naturalization of the many. For Spinoza, on the contrary, in order for capitalism and colonialism to thrive, God had to be expelled from nature, as a transcendent cause of the universe but not an imminent one.

This is not the place to dwell on the topic of Spinozism in great detail. Spinozism never died, but survived on the margins of Western thought. His “rehabilitation” began in the late nineteenth century and he would be soon considered one of the representatives of what Jonathan Israel would call radical Enlightenment (2002, pp. 159-328). In more recent times, Spinoza would underpin Arne Naess’ concept of deep ecology (1973). However, my take on this narrative is a different one. I want to draw attention to the ways in which Spinoza’s and the indigenous peoples’ philosophies, notwithstanding the immense differences separating them, converge today in a three-centuries delayed conversation. Spinozist and Andean indigenous philosophies are two apparently incommensurable thought experiences. Spinoza represents the most radical version of Western rationalism, while indigenous philosophy is its polar opposite, not because it is irrational but because it calls for a different type of rationality. Yet I would venture an approximation between the two through intercultural translation, not as a dilettante intellectual exercise, but rather to strengthen current struggles to prevent the imminent ecological collapse. It may help to broaden and deepen alliances across regions and cultures that will be needed to overcome such crises. *Natura naturans*, *pachamama*, Mother Earth, the forest, there is a vast amount of literature on the Spinozan concept of *natura naturans* (Roth, 1923a, 1923b; Harley, 1995; Pick, 1998; Leinkauf, 2011; Niemoczynski, 2013; Descola, 2013; Corrington, 2015; Buijs, 2016; Balibar, 2020).

In fact, the concept of *natura naturans* has a lengthy history in Western philosophy which began long before Spinoza and dates back to at least the thirteenth century. The distinction between created nature and nature as the creator is, for instance, are present in the works of Bonaventure and Tomas Aquinas, and can be traced to the influence of the Arab philosophers, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), in their commentaries on Aristotle (Weijers, 1978). In general, the distinction is between the creative principle or creator (be it God or universal nature) and the creation or creatures. The novelty of Spinoza’s conception lies in the fact that *natura naturans*, God, or the divine cause, belongs to the same immanent world as its effect, namely creation or *natura naturata*. Herein lies the accusation of pantheism that haunted Spinoza in later centuries. However, the principle of immanence is precisely the point where the Spinozan conception of *natura naturans* meets the indigenous peoples’ conception of nature.

IV

Citing some examples of indigenous peoples' conception of nature as epistemologies of the South, it may be seen that certain indigenous cultures view nature as Pachamama, or Mother Earth, and claim that nature does not belong to us. This radical belongingness contradicts any idea of dualism between humans and nature. The divine entity, no matter how it is conceived, is a this-world entity, and, may manifest itself in a river, a mountain, or a given territory. The divine is the spiritual dimension of the material, and both belong to the same immanent world. According to Davi Kopenawa, the Yanomani shaman:

In our very old language, what the white people call "nature" is urihi, the forest-land, but also its image, which can only be seen by the shamans and which we call Urihinari, the spirit of the forest. . . . For us, the xapiri are the true owners of "nature," not human beings. . . . The white people, they find "nature" beautiful without knowing why. On the contrary, we know that what they call "nature" is the forest as well as all the xapiri who live in it. (Kopenawa /Albert, 2013, pp. 389-390).

Kopenawa's reasoning can be traced in the public interventions of great number of indigenous leaders and indigenous intellectuals who are becoming more and more vocal in expressing and contrasting their own views with "what white people call nature" (Krenak, 2019; Bautista, 2014).

Therefore, in Eurocentric modernity, we experience the incessant inventions of technologies and machines, with the basic premise to save time and money. However, this premise has had, paradoxically, the opposite impact. Neither have they slowed down life's pace by increasing the free time, nor working time has decreased. Quite contrary to Eurocentric modernity's claim of saving time, a scarcity of time is experienced, increasingly. Modern societies move to managing lack of time rather than managing the time fruitfully. Frantic rhythms of working are consuming modern societies. Though the South is also caught up by this Eurocentric giant leap forward of progress, it has yet not impacted everyone in an equal way. There are many social groups which are still sidelined by the 'frenzy of velocity', and have not been able to join the fast paced Eurocentric standards of progress. On the contrary, they still prefer to look away from the outward signs of development, for the simple reason that they have tasted the capitalist and colonialist devastations. Thus, they still recognize the importance of cyclical time and lived time, rather than the chronological time, bound by the gauge of wealth of nations.

Western modernity, as it may be seen, is a relatively recent phenomenon that evolved organically in one part of Europe only. For the rest of the world, it entailed an abrupt interruption of other possible—past or future—modernities, and, which did not take into account their modes of existence. Epistemologies of

the South, however, still propose a complex relationship to time, work, past, and future, for the simple reason, that they have been, and, in some places, still are, under the yoke of occupation, colonialism, violence of invasion, and plunder (Benerjee, 2006; Ogle, 2015). They have, therefore, learnt to move forward through a synthesis of ideas. As a result ES have started to become cognizant of their dominant and dominated past. The dominant past existed, maybe imaginatively, before the inference of Western modernity, with “contributions from other cultures: swaraj, swadeshi, ubuntu, sumak kawsay, kin” (Santos: 2023b, p. 618), to name only a few. This dominated past also left its legacy on them. Eurocentric contributions, such as modern law, human rights, democracy, and the modern state, also left an indelible mark on these societies. Therefore, if they resisted the modern domination, they learnt from it also, because the epistemologies of the South are shaped in struggle, and are shaped by struggle. Therefore, we find ground-breaking books like that of René Ramirez Gallego, which draws on the indigenous experience of time to propose a revolutionary conception of the wealth of nations and good living, based not on money or commodities, but rather on living time (2022). Such literature is an effective means of battling the commodity fetishism that has been holding sway since the Eurocentric industrializing, and turned, even human existence, into a commodity.

Human life has always been and will always be a result of long sedimentations of social and political options (Santos, 2007), and therefore, is a synthesis of historical maneuvers it may have experienced. Though nothing is completely irreversible, the epistemologies of the South have invariably overcome the stumbling blocks, and consequently, discovered the diverse conceptions of time, other ways of living, and life experiences. And, if a people welcome diversity, they are also willing to value it. This realm of South are likely to make the comparisons of historical slavery with the modern-day slave like labor; the historic industrial revolution to today's Artificial Intelligence revolution; appropriation of their free time by the entertainment industry, tourism, or mass consumption (Santos, 2023a). They are increasingly becoming aware of their residual unconditional free time being consumed by medical and psychiatric treatments, or, yet another form of industrially equipped body building regimes. Therefore, the challenges that lie ahead may be viewed by some to be sites of resistance on account of them being augmented by the Eurocentric modernity. However, others may see them as an opportunity for revolutionizing the epistemologies of the South. In terms of social struggles, the tragedy of the past century was to counterpoise Eurocentric modernity of democracy and revolution, while the present century offers options of synthesis of ideas, modes, and, epistemic ingenuity.

Epistemologies of the South have always been synthesizing the historical happenings and historical data, and have learnt to move through a blend of conflicting ideals. They are learning to optimize their energies because they have to tackle the herculean tasks that may be phrased as “democratizing revolution and revolutionizing democracy” (Santos and Araújo, 2023), to name just one aspect. I

concede that it is no easy task, but, in my opinion, this is one way of stopping the advance of the far-right and fascist forces. If the fascist leanings are provided a free reign over the democratic arena, their overriding brands of promoting economic freedom are likely to override all the other dimensions of freedom, not to mention equality and fraternity. Such will be a misery of freedom—a freedom for a select few, while a vast majority of people are likely to remain miserably destitute. Therefore, there have to be an ongoing balanced making of epistemologies of the South, emerging from a blend of the best of Eurocentric modernity and indigenous knowledge production for an equitable mode of life for all. This is, what is, the actual liberation of any indigenous community, the South, or the epistemologies of the South.

V

In the final analysis, it may be said, that when suffering and liberation meet, the impetus for liberation emerges: 1) when collective suffering—damaged collective life—is considered unjust; 2) when the causes that produce it are not fate, bad luck, or negligence, but the unequal power structures that submit vast populations to societal fascism; 3) when power, however unequal it may be, reveals fractures, weak points, and contradictions that make it vulnerable; 4) when the objective and subjective conditions exist for converting reflections on these previous points into imperatives for resistance and struggle, knowing that one or the other may involve individual and collective sacrifices and suffering. The relationship between suffering and liberation is dialectical. Unjust collective suffering lies at the root of liberation, but since the latter is established through resistance struggles, it may result in new suffering, both individual and collective. The suffering that emerges from social struggles is not merely suffering-from—it is also suffering-for, in that it involves sacrifice and risk in the fight for a society that reduces unjust suffering. As long as the struggle is considered just, it is a just suffering. Maintaining an awareness of a just suffering, despite defeats, adversities, betrayals, repression and regression, requires organized political-cultural work and an ongoing pedagogy of liberation. Neoliberalism uses its control over the financial, political, and media systems to eliminate any of the four abovementioned conditions in order to reverse the political and ethical meaning of suffering. What dissidents call unjust collective suffering imposed on the masses, is viewed by neoliberal ideology as a natural fact of the lifeworld and, as such, it is insurmountable. This massive ideological investment is currently fueling the global reactionary wave we are experiencing. The antidote of this massive ideological investment is a regular, long-lasting, and impactful series of epistemologies of the South. These epistemologies have the inherent quality of being polychronous. True liberation of the mind and soul of human existence lies neither in a complete denial of Eurocentric modernity, nor in indigenous epistemologies alone, but in a creative balance of epistemologies of the South, cognizant of the needs of the coming times.

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¹ **Keynesianism** is an economic theory developed by John Maynard Keynes, particularly through his book *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936). Keynesianism argues that government intervention in the economy is sometimes necessary to maintain full employment and economic stability. During periods of recession or low demand, governments can stimulate economic activity.

² Some critics have even termed it as 'global war of terror.' See, Global war on terror (?) or colonial imperialism: An eco-postcolonial historiographic study for peace and justice of Kashmir, provided in the references.