



## Encountering Other Cultural Universes on the Brink of Chaos

**Boaventura de Sousa Santos**

*University of Coimbra*

[bsantos@ces.uc.pt](mailto:bsantos@ces.uc.pt)

It is hard to imagine that we share the journey with someone coming in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, I think that this strange sharing is perhaps what best characterizes our time. Coming from very different trajectories and histories, from the accumulation of multi-secular defeats or victories, different cultural universes (philosophical, aesthetic, political, ontological, epistemological, ethical) seem today more exposed than ever to the presence of and competition with rival universes in conditions that do not allow unilateral movements, be they of assimilation or of conquest. The inequalities of power among them exist and are historically sedimented, but they are increasingly relative and unequally distributed among the different areas of collective life or the different regions of the world. The opposite trajectories converge in a field of maximum uncertainty that produces restlessness and instability. The sharing of uncertainty is bound to result in the uncertainty of sharing. The Eurocentric Western cultural universe comes from a long trajectory of historical victories that seems to have come to an end. Europe spent five centuries dominating and teaching the non-European world and finds itself today increasingly in the condition of no longer being able to dominate nor having anything to teach (Santos 2020: 31–53).

The drama of the cultural universe that considers itself historically victorious is that it does not want to learn from the cultural universes it has become accustomed to defeat and to teach. In turn, the non-Western cultural universes, be they Eastern (Chinese or Indian), Islamic, African,



Articles in vol. 21(2) and later of this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

and indigenous or first nation people of the Americas and Oceania, come from trajectories of historical defeats by the Western universe; defeats which, however, varied greatly in time and extent. They have gone through different processes of destruction, disfiguration, acculturation (or better, deculturation), but they have survived and today they take on a new confidence, self-esteem, and forward-looking stance from which stems the perception that the defeat is over. What kind of sharing can be expected from these trajectories progressing in opposite direction? Are they meeting and converging in some way or are they missing the possibility of the encounter and heading for confrontations of unknown contours?

It is a time when mismatches and conflicts are as potentially destructive as encounters and convergences are potentially and mutually enriching. The deep uncertainty this creates stems from four epochal conditions: interregnum, interruption, transmigration, reflexivity. Evoking Antonio Gramsci (1971), the *interregnum* is a temporal metaphor that points to an ambiguous temporality in which the new society is not yet fully born and the old one has not yet definitively died. It is a time of monsters. The unstable oscillation between strengthening the new and rescuing the old is proper of the interregnum. The *interruption* is a spatial metaphor that suggests the insertion of a rupture or break in the established order that provokes a suspension, be it political, legal, or philosophical. Such suspension can be more or less vast and more or less lasting. It is a time of crossroads. *Transmigration* is a metaphor of an outward looking movement that evokes the transitoriness of social relations, of contrasts, of identities, and of the constant disturbance of linear movements. It is a time of transculturation, to use a concept developed by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz ([1940] 1973). Finally, *deep reflexivity* is a metaphor of an inward looking movement that involves revisiting and revising history. It is a time of roots turning into options and of options turning into roots.

Interregnum, interruption, transmigration, and deep reflexivity make possible new types of conflicts as much as new types of encounters, generating unmapped and surprising contingencies and hybridizations. Two main features account for the specificity of contemporary *Zeitgeist*. The first one is the apocalyptic character of possible conflicts (unprecedented social inequality, nuclear war, imminent ecological catastrophe) and the exhilarating nature of possible encounters and convergences (World Social Forum, intercultural conversations, religious ecumenisms). The same social and cultural transformations of the last decades that have caused vast conflicts, mismatches and resistances have also generated conditions and opportunities for encounters and convergences of a new type. The second feature lies in the cultural and political investment in a specific questioning of the past that consists in revisiting and reevaluating the intellectual heritage before the modern period, more specifically, before modern colonialism and the hierarchies and conflicts among cultural universes it generated. Starting with the European colonial expansion in the fifteenth century, modern colonialism is viewed as a crucial historical process causing deep wounds upon the defeated and subjugated cultures and populations that last until today. Understandably, revisiting and reevaluating the premodern or early modern pasts occurs mostly in the cultural universes that were defeated or humiliated by Eurocentric modernity, but it is equally visible inside the Eurocentric cultural universe. However, in very different ways, colonialism

transformed European cultural traditions as much as it transformed the cultural universes it subjugated or sought to subjugate. As underlined by the outstanding Tunisian scholar Albert Memmi:

Colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts men, both colonizers and colonized. To live, the colonized needs to do away with colonization. To become a man, he must do away with the colonized being that he has become. If the European must annihilate the colonizer within himself, the colonized must rise above his colonized being. [...] For the colonized just as for the colonizer, there is no way out other than a complete end to colonization. The refusal of the colonized cannot be anything but absolute, that is, not only revolt, but a revolution. (Memmi 1965: 195, 194)

Without losing sight of the existence of oppressors and oppressed, perpetrators and victims; identifying, confronting, and healing the colonial wound in all its vastness and depth involves some kind of reciprocal movements. Without the latter, the possibility of sharing and encounter among cultural universes transiting in opposite directions in the same space-time will be missed.

In order to propitiate sharing and encounter we must start from the idea that the global social injustice caused by modern colonialism, together with modern capitalism and modern patriarchy, was grounded in a cultural, ontological, and epistemological universe that exerted itself in systematically and arrogantly ignoring other cultures, ways of being and ways of knowing, ontologies and epistemologies. This led to a massive loss and waste of social experiences, of destruction of knowledge (epistemicide), and justified the subjugation and elimination of the populations that lived by such cultures, knowledges, and social experiences. Global social injustice was therefore the other side of global cognitive justice. I designate this systematic ignorance by the Western-centric cultural universe as ignorant ignorance to convey the idea that in most cases such ignorance was not aware of itself. It was simply assumed that there was nothing worth knowing beyond what the Eurocentric universe knew, pretended to know or allowed to be known. In light of this, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.

In order to move in the direction of cognitive justice we should not engage in any kind of project for a global, complete, universal or unified knowledge. I rather propose an epistemic turn which I call the epistemologies of the South (Santos 2014, 2018). It consists in identifying and validating knowledges born in struggle against the three main modes of Eurocentric modern domination: capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Such knowledges may be both modern science and other ways of knowing, such as vernacular, popular, insurgent knowledges or ancient wisdom. That is, for the epistemologies of the South modern science is a valid knowledge but not the only one. Only by questioning the epistemic roots of Eurocentric domination will it be possible to propitiate the sharing and the encountering that our *Zeitgeist* is urgently calling for as the sole alternative to utter and reciprocal annihilation.

**About the Author:** **Boaventura de Sousa Santos** is Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Coimbra (Portugal), Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Director Emeritus of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra. He has published widely in Portuguese, Spanish, English, Italian, French, German, Chinese, Danish, Romanian, Arabic and Polish. His current research interests include epistemology, sociology of law, post-colonial theory, democracy, interculturality, globalization, social movements and human rights.

**Disclosure Statement:** Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledgments section of the article's text. Otherwise, authors have indicated that they have no conflict of interests upon submission of the article to the journal.

### References

- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Memmi, Albert. 1965. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. New York: Orion Press.
- Ortiz, Fernando. 1973. *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azucar*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. London: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2018. *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2020. "A New Vision of Europe: Learning from the Global South." Pp. 31-53 in *Demodiversity: Toward Post-Abyssal Democracies* Santos, edited by Boaventura de Sousa and José Manuel Mendes. New York: Routledge.