Public Sphere and Epistemologies of the South

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Abstract

The 'public sphere' is one of the key concepts of the social theory produced in the global North. But does the global South need this concept? Its theoretical and cultural presuppositions are entirely European. They are not necessarily universally valid, even when they purport to be general theories. If the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for, other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies – the epistemologies of the South that adequately account for the realities of the global South. This paper is a meta-theoretical critique of the concept of the public sphere from the standpoint of the need for this epistemological diversity. It emphasises the need for intercultural translation, understood as a procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the diverse experiences of the world. Such a procedure does not endow any set of experiences with the statute either of exclusive totality or homogenous part. In the African context, this work of translation involves two moments. First, a deconstructive challenge which consists in identifying the Eurocentric remains inherited from colonialism. Secondly, a reconstructive challenge which consists in revitalising the historical and cultural possibilities of the African legacy, interrupted by colonialism and neocolonialism. In this twofold movement of social experiences relations of mutual intelligibility emerge which must not result in the cannibalisation of some by others.

Résumé

L'espace public est l'un des principaux concepts de la théorie sociale produite dans le Nord. Mais est-ce que le Sud a besoin de ce concept ? Ses présuppositions théoriques et culturelles qui sont entièrement européennes ne sont pas toujours valables universellement, même si elles prétendent être

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des théories générales. La diversité épistémologique dans le monde est une évidence. Par conséquent, d'autres théories doivent se baser sur d'autres épistémologies. Tel doit être le cas des épistémologies du Sud qui doivent adéquatement refléter les réalités du Sud. Cet article est donc une critique métathéorique du concept d'espace public vu sous l'angle de la nécessité d'une diversité épistémologique. Il met en relief la nécessité de la traduction interculturelle qui doit être comprise comme étant la procédure qui permet l'intelligibilité mutuelle des différentes expériences du monde. Une telle procédure n'investit un statut de totalité exclusive ou d'homogénéité à aucun ensemble d'expérience. Ce travail de traduction en Afrique implique deux moments. Premièrement, le défi de la déconstruction qui consiste à identifier les vestiges eurocentriques qui émanent du colonialisme. Deuxièmement, le défi de la reconstruction qui consiste à revitaliser les possibilités historiques et culturelles de l'héritage africain qui a été bouleversé par le colonialisme et le néocolonialisme. C'est à travers ce mouvement à deux temps des expériences sociales qu'une relation d'intelligibilité mutuelle va naître. Une relation qui ne devra pas résulter sur la cannibalisation de l'un par l'autre.

Introduction

The concept of public sphere is one of the key (and most widely debated) concepts of the most elaborate and monumental social theory produced in the second half of the twentieth century in the global North, the social theory of the world-renowned German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. It is not my purpose to engage here in a detailed analysis of the concept.[1] I rather intend to lay out the ground upon which the following question may be answered: Does the global South need the concept of public sphere?

Why this question? The concept of public sphere reflects, in a stylised way, the political practices of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It expresses the emergence of the bourgeois citizen as a political actor through practices and institutions (coffeehouses, salons, newspapers, clubs, etc.) that mediate between the private sphere of civil society (family and the economy) and state political authority. Accordingly, its theoretical and cultural presuppositions are entirely European: it is based on the individual bourgeois and life experience; it assumes the separation between the state and civil society; it sees the bourgeois citizen and his public sphere as external to the structure of power; it takes for granted its informal and equal inclusiveness (which, as Habermas himself later recognised, concealed flagrant exclusions, such as women, workers and non-proprietors in general); its dynamic component is the reasonable discussion and a culturally shared discourse (reasonable arguments and counter-arguments, recognised as such by the participants) through which a consensus is reached on matters of common concern; political action consists of political discussion, not political action and transformation. These presuppositions are today highly problematical, even in the global North.

What about the global South? Do other presuppositions present in the global South require other concepts? How much political reality is left out or made invisible by the concept of public sphere? On the other hand, is it not true that some of these presuppositions are also present in some other Eurocentric concepts with wide usage in the global South, such as democracy and human rights? Can the limitations of Eurocentric origin be superseded by theoretical and political reconstruction? At what cost? Assuming that the public sphere has become a hegemonic concept, is it possible to use it in a counter-hegemonic way?

There are, therefore, good reasons to ask: does the global South need the concept of public sphere? This question implies three other questions. If we answer in the affirmative, is the problem of the eventual inadequacy of the concept vis-à-vis the realities prevailing in the global South to be solved by adjectivising or qualifying the concept? If the answer is negative, which epistemological procedures should be undertaken to allow for the development of other concepts that might be both more adequate to the realities of the global South and helpful in designing post-imperialistic, truly decolonised relationships between the global North and the global South? More generally, which are the main issues concerning the relationship between theory and practice in our time?

These questions suggest that the social theories produced in the global North are not necessarily universally valid, even when they purport to be general theories. Moreover, they suggest that a hermeneutics of suspicion is recommended *vis-à-vis* such theories, if the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for. At this point, to account for such diversity involves the recognition that the theories produced in the global North are best equipped to account for the social, political and cultural realities of the global North and that in order adequately to account for the realities of the global South other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies – the epistemologies of the South.[2]

The West, or global North, claims the right to the dominant view of the world.[3] But, on the other hand, the global South is entitled to have its own view of the world (and of the global North). It should come as no surprise that between these two views the differences are so vast that they seem to refer to different worlds. Herein lies the distance this article argues for *vis-à-vis* Eurocentric or West-centric social theories, including critical social theories. Such distance opens up the epistemological and theoretical ground upon which new analytical possibilities may develop as more attuned to the political needs of radical social transformation, that is to say, to a social transformation that puts an end to the unequal divide between the global North and the global South.

Keeping a Distance vis-à-vis Western Eurocentric Theoretical Tradition

Keeping distance does not mean dumping all this rich tradition into the dustbin of history, let alone ignoring the historical possibilities for social emancipation of Western modernity. It means assuming our time as a time displaying an unprecedented, transitional feature which we may formulate in the following way: we have modern problems for which there are no modern solutions. The modern problems of equality, liberty and fraternity are still with us. However, the modern solutions proposed by liberalism as well as Marxism no longer work, even if pushed to its possible maximum consciousness (to use Lucien Goldmann's phrase),[4] as is the case of Habermas' magisterial intellectual reconstruction of Western modernity.[5] The limits of such a reconstruction are inscribed in the dominant version of modernity from which Habermas takes off, and which is, actually, a second modernity developed from the first one, the Iberian modernity of the Coimbra scholars in the sixteenth century[6] What characterises the second modernity and renders it predominant is the abyssal line it traces between metropolitan societies (Europe) and colonial societies.[7] This abyssal line traverses Habermas's thinking in its entirety and is therefore also relevant for the concept of public sphere. His extraordinary lucidity allows him to see it but not to overcome it. His theory of communicative action, as a new model of discursive rationality, is well known.[8] According to Habermas, this theory constitutes a *telos* of development for all humanity and that with it, it is possible to refuse both relativism and eclecticism. However, once asked if his theory, particularly his critical theory of advanced capitalism, could be useful to the progressive forces of the Third World, and if such forces could be useful to the struggles of democratic socialism in developed countries, Habermas (1984) begged not to answer: 'I am inclined to reply "no" in both cases. I am aware that mine is a limited and Eurocentric vision. I would rather not answer'.[9] Such response implies that Habermas' communicative rationality, in spite of its resounding universality, actually excludes four fifths of the world population. This exclusion is declared in the name of inclusion/exclusion criteria whose legitimacy resides in their supposed universality. In this way, exclusion may be declared simultaneously with extreme honesty ('I am aware that mine is a limited and Eurocentric vision') and extreme blindness vis-à-vis its non-sustainability (or, to be fair, the blindness is not total, considering Habermas' strategic way out ('I would rather not answer'). Thus, Habermas' universalism turns out to be a benevolent but imperialist universalism, for it fully controls decisions concerning its own limitations, imposing on itself, with no other limits, what it includes and excludes.[10]

Beyond the dominant ones, other versions of modernity were marginalised for questioning the triumphalist certainties of the Christian faith and modern science and law, which both produced the abyssal line and rendered it invisible. I have in mind, for instance, Nicholas of Cusa and Pascal, who (together with other, equally forgotten thinkers) keep alive still today the possibility of a non-occidentalist West.[11] Keeping distance vis-à-vis the dominant versions of Western modernity thus entails getting closer to subaltern, silenced, marginalised versions of modernity and rationality, both Western and non-Western.

Keeping distance means, therefore, placing oneself simultaneously inside and outside what one critiques, and thus making possible what I call the doubly transgressive sociology of absences and emergences. This 'transgressive sociology' is actually an epistemological demarche consisting in opposing the dominant epistemologies of the global North with an epistemology of the South in the sense specified below. In the following sections, I mention two good reasons to keep a distance from Eurocentric critical theory: the loss of critical nouns and the phantasmal relationship between theory and action.

The Loss of Critical Nouns

There was a time when critical theory 'owned' an ample set of nouns to distinguish itself from conventional, bourgeois theories. Among them, socialism, communism, dependency, class struggle, alienation, participation, popular front, and so on and so forth. For the last 30 years, the Eurocentric tradition has been identified by the adjectives with which it qualifies the proper nouns of conventional theories. Thus, for instance, if conventional theory speaks of development, critical theory refers to alternative, democratic or sustainable development; if conventional theory speaks of democracy, critical theory propounds radical, participative or deliberative democracy; the same is true of cosmopolitism, which is then qualified as subaltern, of opposition or insurgent, or rooted; the same regarding human rights, which turn out to be radical, collective, intercultural. These changes, however, must be taken with caution.

Hegemonic (substantive) concepts are not, on the pragmatic level, the unalienable property of conventional or liberal thinking. One of the dimensions of the present context is precisely the ability of social movements to use hegemonic tools in a counter-hegemonic way and with counter-hegemonic ends in view.[12] The truth is that nouns continue to establish the intellectual and political horizon, defining not only what is sayable, credible, legitimate or realistic, but also, by implication, what is unsayable, incredible or unrealistic. That is to say, by resorting to adjectives, theory assumes it can

creatively take advantage of nouns, while agreeing, at the same time, to limit its debates and proposals to what is possible within a horizon of possibilities which is originally not its own. Critical theory, therefore, takes on a derivative character which allows it to engage in debate but not to discuss the terms of the debate, let alone explain why it opts for one kind of debate and not another. The efficacy of the counter-hegemonic use of hegemonic concepts or tools is defined by the consciousness of the limits of such use.

Such limits are now more visible as social struggles aim to resemanticise old concepts, while, at the same time, introducing new concepts without precedent in Eurocentric theory, if for nothing else, because they express themselves in languages other than the colonial ones in which it was first constructed. Being particularly evident in Latin America through the recent protagonism of the indigenous peoples' struggles, this also occurs in other continents. It does not seem to me, therefore, that the 'problem' of bringing the concept of the public sphere to bear on the political concerns of non-Eurocentric conceptions of social emancipation might be solved by a new set of adjectives, be they subaltern, plebeian, oppositional, or counter-insurgent public sphere.

The Phantasmal Relation between Theory and Practice

A second reason to keep a distance vis-à-vis Eurocentric critical tradition concerns the huge discrepancy between what the theory anticipates and the transformative practices going on in the world. For the last 30 years the most progressive struggles featured social groups (indigenous, peasant, women, afro-descendents, miners, unemployed) whose role in history was not foreseen by Eurocentric critical theory. They often organised themselves in ways other than according to the party or unions, as allowed by the theory (social movements, grassroots communities, pickets, self-government, popular economic organisations). They do not dwell in urban, industrial centres but rather in far away Andean heights, in Amazonic planes, by the River Narmada in India, or in the African hinterland or urban suburbs. They often speak their struggles in their national languages rather than in any of the colonial languages in which critical theory was written. When their claims and aspirations are translated into colonial languages, the usual terms of socialism, human rights, democracy and development give way to dignity, respect, territory, self-government, good life, mother earth.

This discrepancy between theory and practice was highly visible in the World Social Forum (WSF) which took place for the first time in Porto Alegre in 2001. The WSF has shown that the gap between the practices of the left and the classical theories was wider than ever. The WSF is not an isolated phenomenon, as proven by the political experiences of Latin America,

where the WSF emerged. Just think of the Zapatist movement in Chiapas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional/EZLN); the Argentine *piqueteros* and the movement of the landless in Brazil (MST); the indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador; the Frente Amplio in Uruguay; the many victories of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela; the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay and José Mujica in Uruguay; the continental struggle against ALCA;[13] the project of alternative regional integration championed by Hugo Chávez (ALBA).[14] All these are political practices that cannot but be acknowledged as emancipatory, although they have not been foreseen by the great theoretical tradition of the Eurocentric left and may actually contradict it. As an international event and meeting point of so many practices of resistance and alternative projects, the World Social Forum has given a new dimension to this mutual blindness (of theory vis-à-vis practice, and of practice vis-à-vis theory), while creating the conditions for a broader and deeper reflection on this problem.

The blindness of theory entails the invisibility of the practice, and hence its sub-theorisation, while the blindness of practice entails the irrelevancy of the theory. The blindness of the theory may be observed in the way in which the conventional left parties, and their intellectuals, refused at first to pay attention to the WSF, or minimised its relevance. The blindness of the practice, in turn, manifests itself in the contempt of the great majority of the WSF activists for the rich theoretical tradition of the Eurocentric left and their utter scorn regarding its renovation. This mutual mismatch brings about, in practice, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary, or pseudo-revolutionary, spontaneity and an innocuous, self-censored action; as well as, in theory, an equally extreme oscillation between a post factum, reconstructive concern and an arrogant indifference about what is not included in such reconstruction.

Under these conditions, the relation between theory and practice assumes strange characteristics. On the one hand, theory is no longer at the service of the future practices it potentially contains, and serves, rather, to legitimise (or not) the past practices that have emerged in spite of itself. Theory stops being orientation to become ratification of the successes obtained by omission or confirmation of foreseen failures. On the other hand, practice justifies itself by resorting to a theoretical potpourri focused on the topical needs of the moment, made up of heterogeneous concepts and languages which, from the point of view of theory, are no more than opportunist rationalisations or rhetorical exercises. In a nutshell, the phantasmal relation between theory and practice can be formulated in this way: from the point of view of theory, theoretical bricolage never qualifies as theory; from the point of view of practice, a posteriori theorisation is mere parasitism.

The causes of this phantasmal relation between theory and practice are multiple, but the most important one is that, while Eurocentric critical theory was constructed in several European countries (Germany, England, France, Russia, and Italy) in order to influence the progressive struggles in that part of the world, in recent times, the most innovative and transformative struggles have been occurring in the South in the context of very distinct socio-politico-cultural realities. It goes without saying that the phantasmal distance between theory and practice is not merely the result of context differences. It is a far more epistemological, if not ontological distance. Way beyond context, the movements in different continents construct their struggles on the basis of ancestral, popular and spiritual knowledge that has always been alien to Eurocentric critical theory. Moreover, their ontological conceptions of being and living are quite distinct from Western individualism. Human beings are communities of beings rather than individuals; in their communities, the ancestors are present, as well as animals and mother earth. We are confronted with non-Western world visions which call for intercultural translation before they can be understood and appreciated.

In his brilliant survey of the progressive history of the Latin American continent and, especially, the various subversive and emancipatory 'conceptions of the world' that have dominated Bolivia for the past few years, Alvaro García Linera eloquently explains how the 'modernist and teleological narrative' of history at a certain point became a theoretical blindness and an epistemological blockage vis-à-vis the new emancipatory movements. Here is García Linera:

> This modernist and teleological narrative of history, largely adopted from manuals of economics and philosophy, will create a cognitive blockage and an epistemological impossibility concerning two realities that will be the starting point of another emancipatory project which in time will overcome Marxist ideology itself. I mean the nation's ethnic and peasant themes (2009:482).

The loss of critical nouns, together with the phantasmal relation between Eurocentric critical theory and the transformative struggles in the world, not only recommends some distance vis-à-vis previous critical thinking; more than that, they demand thinking the unthinkable, that is to say, adopting surprise as a constitutive act of the theoretical work. Now, since, by definition, avant-garde theories are not taken by surprise, I believe that what we need in the present context of social and political change is not avant-garde, but rather rearguard theories. I mean theoretical work that goes hand in hand with the transformative work of the social movements, putting it in question, establishing synchronic and diachronic comparisons, and symbolically enlarging its dimension by means of articulations, translations,

and alliances with other movements. It calls for artisanal rather than architectural work, work of committed witnessing rather than clairvoyant leadership, accessing what is new for some and very old for other people.

In light of the preceding discussion, I propose a debate on whether the concept of public sphere is part of the solution or part of the problem when we face the phantasmal relation between theory and practice, that is, whether the concept creates more transparency between theory and practice or whether, on the contrary, it reinforces the phantasmal relation. I dare to think that the latter is the case. If so, the task ahead consists in laying out the epistemological ground for the emergence of new theoretical possibilities.

The Construction of an Epistemology of the South

By epistemology of the South I mean the retrieval of new processes of production and valorisation of valid knowledges, whether scientific or non-scientific, and of new relations among different types of knowledge on the basis of the practices of the classes and social groups that have suffered, in a systematic way, the oppression and discrimination caused by capitalism and colonialism. The global South is thus not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of these populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is here rather a metaphor of the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level, and a metaphor as well of the resistance to overcome or minimise such suffering. It is, therefore, an anticapitalist, anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the global North,[15] in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia and racism.

The two premises of an epistemology of the South are as follows.[16] First, the understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world. This means that the progressive change of the world may also occur in ways not foreseen by Western thinking, including critical Western thinking (Marxism not excluded). Second, the diversity of the world is infinite. It is a diversity that encompasses very distinct modes of being, thinking and feeling, ways of conceiving of time and the relation among human beings and between humans and non-humans, ways of facing the past and the future and of collectively organising life, the production of goods and services, as well as leisure. This immensity of alternatives of life, conviviality and interaction with the world is largely wasted because the theories and concepts developed in the global North and employed in the entire academic world do not identify such alternatives. When they do, they do not valorise them as being valid contributions towards constructing a better society. To my mind,

therefore, we do not need alternatives; we need rather an alternative thinking of alternatives. The construction of epistemologies of the South must be built by four steps: sociology of absences, sociology of emergences, ecology of knowledges, intercultural translation.

Sociology of Absences

By sociology of absences I mean research that aims to show that what does not exist is actually actively produced as non-existent, that is to say, as an unbelievable alternative to what exists. Its empirical object is impossible from the point of view of conventional social sciences. Impossible objects must be turned into possible objects, absent objects into present objects. Non-existence is produced whenever a certain entity is discredited and considered invisible, non-intelligible or discardable. Thus there is no sole, rather several ways to produce absences. What is common to them is the same monocultural rationality. I distinguish five logics behind four modes of production of absence or non-existence: ignorant, backward, inferior, local or particular, and unproductive or sterile.[17]

The first logic derives from the 'monoculture of knowledge' and 'rigour of knowledge'. It is the most powerful mode of production of non-existence. It consists in turning modern science and high culture into the sole criteria of truth and aesthetic quality, respectively. The complicity that unites the 'two cultures' resides in the fact that both claim to be, each in its own field, exclusive canons of production of knowledge or artistic creation. All that is not recognised or legitimised by the canon is declared non-existent. Non-existence appears in this case in the form of ignorance or lack of culture.

The second logic resides in the 'monoculture of linear time', the idea that history has a unique and well known meaning and direction. This meaning and direction have been formulated in different ways in the last two hundred years: progress, revolution, modernisation, development, and globalisation. Common to all these formulations is the idea that time is linear and that at the cutting edge of time are to be found the core countries of the world system and, along with them, the dominant knowledges, institutions and forms of sociability. This logic produces non-existence by describing as backward whatever is asymmetrical vis-à-vis whatever is declared forward. It is according to this logic that Western modernity produces the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous, and that the idea of simultaneity conceals the asymmetries of the historical times that converge into it. The encounter between the African peasant and the officer of the World Bank in his field trip illustrates this condition. They meet simultaneously but are not considered contemporaneous. In this case, non-existence assumes the form of residuum, which in turn has assumed many designations for the past 200

years, the first being the primitive, closely followed by the traditional, the premodern, the simple, the obsolete, the underdeveloped.

The third logic is the logic of social classification, based on the monoculture of 'naturalisation of differences'. It consists in distributing populations according to categories that naturalise hierarchies. Racial and sexual classifications are the most salient manifestations of this logic. Contrary to what happens in the relation between capital and labour, social classification is based on attributes that negate the intentionality of social hierarchy. The relation of domination is the consequence, rather than the cause, of this hierarchy, and it may even be considered as an obligation of whoever is classified as superior (for example, the white man's burden in his civilising mission). Although the two forms of classification (race and sex) are decisive for the relation between capital and labour to stabilise and spread globally, racial classification was the one most deeply reconstructed by capitalism, as Wallerstein and Balibar (1991) have shown, and, even more acutely, Césaire (1955), Quijano (2000), Mignolo (2000), Dussel (2001), Maldonado-Torres (2004) and Grosfoguel (2007).[18] According to this logic, non-existence is produced as a form of inferiority, insuperable inferiority because natural. The inferior ones, because insuperably inferior, cannot be a credible alternative to the superior ones.

The fourth logic of production of non-existence is the 'logic of the dominant scale'. According to this logic, the scale adopted as primordial determines the irrelevance of all other possible scales. In Western modernity, the dominant scale appears under two different forms: the universal and the global. Universalism is the scale of the entities or realities that prevail regardless of specific contexts. For that reason, they take precedence over all other realities that depend on contexts and are therefore considered particular or vernacular. Globalisation is the scale that in the last 20 years acquired unprecedented relevance in various social fields. It is the scale that grants privileges to entities or realities that widen their scope to the whole globe, thus earning the prerogative to designate rival entities as local. According to this logic, non-existence is produced under the form of the particular and the local. The entities or realities defined as particular or local are captured in scales that render them incapable of being credible alternatives to what exists globally and universally.

Finally, the fifth logic of non-existence is the 'logic of productivity'. It resides in the monoculture of the criteria of capitalist productivity. According to this logic, economic growth is an unquestionable rational objective. As such, the criterion of productivity that best serves this objective is unquestionable as well. This criterion applies both to nature and to human labour. Productive nature is nature at its maximum fertility in a given

production cycle, whereas productive labour is labour that maximises gen-
erating profit likewise in a given production cycle. According to this logic,
non-existence is produced in the form of non-productiveness. Applied to
nature, non-productiveness is sterility; applied to labour, sloth or profes-
sional disqualification.

There are thus five principal social forms of non-existence produced by
metonymic reason: the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the
non-productive. They are social forms of non-existence because the realities
to which they give shape are present only as obstacles vis-à-vis the realities
deemed relevant, be they scientific, advanced, superior, global or productive
realities. They are, therefore, disqualified parts of homogeneous totalities
which, as such, merely confirm what exists and precisely as it exists. They
are what exists under irretrievably disqualified forms of existing.

Sociology of Emergences

The sociology of emergences consists in replacing the emptiness of the
future according to linear time (an emptiness that may be all or nothing) by
a future of plural and concrete possibilities, utopian and realist at one time,
and constructed in the present by means of activities of care.

To deal with emergences implies speculativeness, and thus requires some
philosophical elaboration. The profound meaning of emergences can be
grasped in many different cultural and philosophical traditions. As regards
Western philosophy, emergences are a marginal topic, best dealt with by
Ernst Bloch**.** The concept that rules the sociology of emergences is the
concept of Not Yet (*Noch Nicht*) advanced by Ernst Bloch (1995). Bloch
takes issue with the fact that Western philosophy was dominated by the
concepts of All (*Alles*) and Nothing (*Nichts*), in which everything seems to
be contained in latency, but from whence nothing new can emerge. Western
philosophy is, therefore, a static philosophy. For Bloch, the possible is the
most uncertain and the most ignored concept in Western philosophy
(1995:241). Yet, only the possible permits to reveal the inexhaustible wealth
of the world. Besides All and Nothing, Bloch introduces two new concepts:
Not (*Nicht*) and Not Yet (*Noch Nicht*). The Not is the lack of something and
the expression of the will to surmount that lack. The Not is thus distinguished
from the Nothing (1995:306). To say No is to say yes to something different.
The Not Yet is the more complex category because it expresses what exists
as mere tendency, a movement that is latent in the very process of manifesting
itself. The Not Yet is the way in which the future is inscribed in the present.
It is not an indeterminate or infinite future, but rather a concrete possibility
and a capacity that neither exists in a vacuum nor is completely predetermined.
Indeed, they actively re-determine all they touch, thus questioning the

determinations that exist at a given moment. Subjectively, the Not Yet is anticipatory consciousness, a form of consciousness that, although extremely important in people's lives, was completely neglected by Freud (Bloch 1995:286-315). Objectively, the Not Yet is, on the one hand, capacity (potency) and, on the other, possibility (potentiality). Possibility has a dimension of darkness as it originates in the lived moment, which is never fully visible to itself, as well as a component of uncertainty that derives from a double want: 1) the fact that the conditions that render possibility concrete are only partially known; 2) the fact that the conditions only exist partially. For Bloch, it is crucial to distinguish between these two wants: it is possible to know relatively well conditions that exist only very partially, and vice-versa.

The Not Yet inscribes in the present a possibility that is uncertain, but never neutral; it could be the possibility of utopia or salvation (*heil*) or the possibility of catastrophe or damnation (*unheil*). Such uncertainty brings an element of chance, or danger, to every change. This uncertainty is what, to my mind, expands the present, while at the same time contracting the future and rendering it the object of care. At every moment, there is a limited horizon of possibilities, and that is why it is important not to waste the unique opportunity of a specific change offered by the present: *carpe diem* (seize the day). In accord with Marxism, which he in any case interpreted in a very creative way, Bloch thinks that the succession of horizons leads or tends toward a final state. I believe, however, that not agreeing with Bloch in this regard is not relevant. Bloch's emphasis stresses the critique of the mechanical conception of matter, on the one hand, and the affirmation of our capacity to think and act productively upon the world, on the other. Considering the three modal categories of existence – reality, necessity, and possibility (Bloch 1995:244-245) – lazy reason focused on the first two and neglected the third one entirely.

According to Bloch, Hegel is mainly responsible for the fact that the possible has been neglected by philosophy. According to Hegel, because the possible is contained in the real, either it does not exist or is not different from what exists. In any case, it need not be thought of. Reality and necessity have no need of possibility to account for the present or future. Modern science was the privileged vehicle of this conception. For this reason, Bloch invites us to focus on the modal category that has been most neglected by modern science: possibility. To be human is to have a lot ahead of you (1995:246). Possibility is the world's engine. Its moments are: 'want' (the manifestation of something lacking), 'tendency' (process and meaning), and 'latency' (what goes ahead in the process). Want is the realm of the Not, tendency the realm of the Not Yet, and latency the realm of the Nothing and the All, for latency can end up either in frustration or hope.

The sociology of emergences is the inquiry into the alternatives that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities. Whereas the sociology of absences amplifies the present by adding to the existing reality what was subtracted from it by metonymic reason, the sociology of emergences enlarges the present by adding to the existing reality the possibilities and future expectations it contains. In the latter case, the enlargement of the present implies the contraction of the future inasmuch as the Not Yet, far from being an empty and infinite future, is a concrete future, forever uncertain and in danger. As Bloch says, by every hope, there is always a coffin (1995:311). Caring for the future is imperative because it is impossible to armour hope against frustration, the advent against nihilism, redemption against disaster. In a word, it is impossible to have hope without the coffin.

The sociology of emergences consists in undertaking a symbolic enlargement of knowledges, practices and agents in order to identify therein the tendencies of the future (the Not Yet) upon which it is possible to intervene so as to maximise the probability of hope vis-à-vis the probability of frustration. Such symbolic enlargement is actually a form of sociological imagination with a double aim: on the one hand, to know better the conditions of the possibility of hope; on the other, to define principles of action to promote the fulfillment of those conditions.

The sociology of emergences acts both on possibilities (potentiality) and on capacities (potency). The Not Yet has meaning (as possibility), but no direction, for it can end either in hope or disaster. Therefore, the sociology of emergences replaces the idea of determination by the idea of care. The axiology of progress is thus replaced by the axiology of care. Whereas in the sociology of absences the axiology of care is exerted vis-à-vis available alternatives, in the sociology of emergences the axiology of care is exerted vis-à-vis possible alternatives. Because of this ethical dimension, neither the sociology of absences nor the sociology of emergences are conventional sociologies. But they are not conventional for another reason: their objectivity depends upon the quality of their subjective dimension. The subjective element of the sociology of absences is cosmopolitan consciousness and non-conformism before the waste of experience. The subjective element of the sociology of emergences is anticipatory consciousness and non-conformism before a want whose fulfillment is within the horizon of possibilities. As Bloch says, the fundamental concepts are not reachable without a theory of the emotions (1995:306). The Not, the Nothing, and the All shed light on such basic emotions as hunger or want, despair or annihilation, trust or redemption. One way or another, these emotions are present in the non-conformism that moves both the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences.

Ecology of Knowledges

The third core idea of the epistemology of the South is the ecology of knowledges.[19] The ecology of knowledges is founded on the idea that there is no ignorance or knowledge in general; every kind of ignorance ignores a certain kind of knowledge and every kind of knowledge triumphs over a particular kind of ignorance.[20] Learning some kinds of knowledges may imply forgetting others and ultimately ignoring them. In other words, concerning the ecology of knowledges, ignorance is not necessarily the original condition or starting point; it may well be the point of arrival. That is why throughout every stage of the ecology of knowledges it is crucial to ask if what is being learnt is valuable, or should be forgotten or not learnt. Ignorance is merely a discredited form of being and making when what has been learnt is more valuable than what is being forgotten. The utopia of inter-knowledge is learning other knowledges without forgetting one's own. Such is the idea of prudence underlying the ecology of knowledges.

The ecology of knowledges starts with the assumption that all practices of relations among human beings, as well as between human beings and nature, imply more than one form of knowledge, hence also of ignorance. Epistemologically, modern capitalist society is characterised by the fact that it favours practices in which scientific knowledge prevails. This privileged 'status' granted to scientific practices means that their interventions in human and natural reality are also privileged. Any crisis or catastrophe resulting from such practices is socially acceptable and counted as inevitable social cost that can be overcome by new scientific practices.

Since scientific knowledge is not socially distributed with proper proportion, the interventions in the world it favours tend to concern social groups with access to scientific knowledge. Social injustice is grounded in cognitive injustice. However, the struggle for cognitive justice will not be successful if it depends only on the idea of a more balanced distribution of scientific knowledge. Besides the fact that a balanced distribution is impossible under the conditions of global capitalism, this kind of knowledge has intrinsic limits regarding the kinds of possible intervention in the real world. Such limits are the result of scientific ignorance and inability to recognise alternative forms of knowledge and engage with them in terms of equality. Under the ecology of knowledges, granting credibility to non-scientific knowledge does not imply discrediting scientific knowledge. What it does imply is using it in a counter-hegemonic way. This consists, on the one hand, in exploring alternative scientific practices made visible through plural epistemologies of scientific practices[21] and, on the other, in promoting interdependence between scientific and non-scientific knowledges.

The principle of the incomplete nature of all kinds of knowledge is the condition of the possibility of epistemological dialogue and debate among them all. What every kind of knowledge brings to such dialogue is the way in which it manages a certain practice to overcome a certain kind of ignorance. The confrontation and dialogue among knowledges are confrontation and dialogue among difference processes through which practices that are ignorant in different ways turn into practices of knowledge in different ways. All kinds of knowledge have internal and external limits. The internal limits are restrictions concerning interventions in the real world. The external limits result from the recognition of alternative interventions made possible by other forms of knowledge. The hegemonic forms of knowledge only understand the internal limits. The counter-hegemonic usage of modern science constitutes a parallel exploration of both internal and external limits. Hence, the counter-hegemonic usage of science cannot be restricted to science alone; it only makes sense in an ecology of knowledges.

Intercultural Translation

The fourth core idea of an epistemology of the South is intercultural translation, understood as a procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible. Such a procedure does not endow any set of experiences with the statute either of exclusive totality or homogenous part. At different moments of the work of translation, the experiences of the world are treated either as totalities or as parts, as well as realities that do not exhaust themselves in those totalities or parts. For instance, seeing the subaltern both inside and outside the relation of subalternity.

According to Banuri (1990), what most affected the South negatively since the beginning of colonialism was to have concentrated all its energies in adapting and resisting the impositions of the North.[22] Having in mind the same kind of concern, Serequeberham (1991:22) identifies the two challenges facing African philosophy today. First, a deconstructive challenge which consists in identifying the Eurocentric remains inherited from colonialism and present in the most diverse sectors of collective life, from education to politics, from law to culture. Second, a reconstructive challenge which consists in revitalising the historical and cultural possibilities of the African legacy, interrupted by colonialism and neo-colonialism. The work of translation aims to capture these two moments: the hegemonic relation among the experiences and what in the latter (especially the experiences and resistance of the victims) remains beyond the said relation. In this twofold movement of social experiences relations of mutual intelligibility emerge which must not result in the 'cannibalisation' of some by others.

The work of translation concerns both knowledges and practices (and their agents). The 'translation of knowledg*es'* assumes the form of a 'diatopical hermeneutics'. This kind of work is what makes the ecology of knowledges possible. 'Diatopical hermeneutics' consists in interpreting two or more cultures, aiming to identify isomorphic concerns among them and the different answers they provide. I have proposed an exercise in diatopical hermeneutics apropos the isomorphic preoccupation regarding human dignity, bringing together the Western concept of human rights, the Islamic concept of *umma* and the Hindu concept of *dharma* (Santos 1995:333-347; 2002:39-60).[23] Two other exercises of diatopical hermeneutics strike me as important. The first focuses on the concern for productive life as it is expressed in the modern capitalist conceptions of development and in Gandhi's conception of *swadeshi*,[24] or the indigenous peoples' conception of *Sumak Kawsay*. The capitalist conceptions of development have been reproduced by conventional economics. They are based on the idea of infinite growth resulting from gradually subjecting practices and knowledges to the logic of the market. *Swadeshi* and *Sumak Kawsay*, in turn, are based on the idea of sustainability and reciprocity.

The second exercise of diatopical hermeneutics consists in translating among various conceptions of wisdom and different visions of the world and the cosmos. It takes place, for example, between Western philosophy and the African concept of sagacity.[25] The latter underlies the actions of many African movements and organisations.[26] It resides in a critical reflection on the world that has as its protagonists what Odera Oruka calls *sages*, be they poets, traditional healers, storytellers, musicians, or traditional authorities. According to Odera Oruka, sage philosophy

> (…) consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom (well known communal maxims, aphorisms and general commonsense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community. While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and the popular wisdom. Thoughts can be expressed in writing or as unwritten sayings and argumentations associated with some individual(s). In traditional Africa, most of what would pass as sage-philosophy remains unwritten for reasons, which must now be obvious to everyone. Some of these persons might have been partly influenced by the inevitable moral and technological culture from the West. Nevertheless, their own outlook and cultural well-being remain basically that of traditional rural Africa. Except for a handful of them, the majority of them are 'illiterate' or semi-illiterate (1990:28).

Diatopical hermeneutics stems from the idea that all cultures are incomplete and may, therefore, be enriched by engaging in dialogue with or confronting other cultures. Recognising the relativity of cultures does not necessarily imply adopting relativism as a philosophical stance. It does imply, however, conceiving of universalism as a Western particularity whose supremacy as an idea does not reside in itself, but rather in the supremacy of the interests that support it. The critique of universalism derives from the critique of a general theory. On the contrary, diatopical hermeneutics presupposes what I call negative universalism, the idea of the impossibility of cultural completeness. In the transition period we traverse, the best formulation for negative universalism may well be to designate it as a residual general theory: a general theory on the impossibility of a general theory.

The idea and feeling of want and incompleteness create motivation for the work of translation which, in order to bear fruit, must be the crossing of converging motivations with origin in different cultures. The Indian sociologist Shiv Vishvanathan formulated eloquently the notion of want and motivation that I here designate as the work of translation. Says Vishvanathan (2000:12): 'My problem is, how do I take the best of Indian civilisation and at the same time keep my modern, democratic imagination alive?' If we could imagine an exercise of work of translation conducted by Vishvanathan and a European or North American intellectual/activist or social movement, it would be possible to think of the latter's motivation for dialogue formulated thus: 'How can I keep alive in me the best of modern and democratic Western culture, while at the same time recognising the value of the world that it designated autocratically as non-civilised, ignorant, residual, inferior, or unproductive?'

The second type of the work of translation is undertaken among social practices and their agents. All social practices imply knowledge, and as such they are also knowledge practices. When dealing with practices, however, the work of translation focuses specifically on mutual intelligibility among forms of organisation and objectives and styles of action and types of struggle. What distinguishes the two types of translation work is, after all, the emphasis or perspective that informs them. The specificity of the translation work concerning practices and their agents becomes clearer in situations in which the knowledges that inform different practices are less distinguishable than the practices themselves. This happens particularly when the practices take place inside the same cultural universe. Such would be the case of a work of translation between the forms of organisation and the objectives of action of two social movements, say, the feminist movement and the labour movement in a European, Latin American or African country.

The work of translation aims to clarify what unites and separates the different movements and practices so as to ascertain the possibilities and limits of articulation and aggregation among them. Because there is no single universal social practice or collective subject to confer meaning and direction to history, the work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of subaltern practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential. For instance, in Mexico, in March 2001, the Zapatista indigenous movement was a privileged counter-hegemonic practice inasmuch as it was capable of undertaking the work of translation between its objectives and practices and the objectives and practices of other Mexican social movements, including the civic and labour movements and the feminist movement. From that work of translation resulted, for example, that the Zapatista leader chosen to address the Mexican Congress was a woman, Comandante Esther. By that choice, the Zapatistas wanted to signify the articulation between the indigenous movement and the women's liberation movement, and thus deepen the counter-hegemonic potential of both.

In recent times, the work of translation has become even more important as a new counter-hegemonic or anti-systemic movement took shape. This movement has been calling for an alternative to neoliberal globalisation on the basis of transnational networks of local movements. It caught the media's attention in Seattle in November 1999 and gained its first global organisational form in the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2001.[27] The movement of counter-hegemonic globalisation reveals the increasing visibility and diversity of social practices which, in various corners of the globe, resist neoliberal globalisation. It is a constellation of many and much diversified movements. On the one hand, there are local movements and organisations not only very different in their practices and objectives but also embedded in different cultures. On the other, transnational organisations, some from the South, some from the North, that also differ widely among themselves. The articulation and aggregation among all these different movements and organisations, as well as the creation of cross-border networks, require a giant work of translation. What do the participatory budgeting practised in many Latin American cities, the participatory democratic planning based on *panchayats* in Kerala and West Bengal in India, and the forms of self-government of the indigenous peoples of Latin America and rural populations in Africa have in common? What can they learn from one other? In what kinds of counter-hegemonic global activities can they cooperate? The same questions can be asked about the pacifist and the anarchist movements, or the indigenous and gay movements, the Zapatista movement, the ATTAC,[28] the Landless Movement in Brazil, and the Narmada River movement in India, and so on and so forth.

These are the questions that the work of translation aims to answer. It is a complex work, not only because the movements and organisations involved are many and very diverse, but also because they are embedded in diverse cultures and knowledges. That is to say, the work of translation falls simultaneously on knowledges and cultures, on the one hand, and on the practices and agents, on the other. Moreover, this work tends to identify what unites and separates them. The common points represent the possibility of an aggregation from bottom up, which is the only alternative to a top-down aggregation imposed by a general theory or a privileged social actor.

Conclusion

In this article, I have used the concept of public sphere to illustrate the epistemological and theoretical tasks involved in creating new possibilities of progressive social transformation aimed at putting an end to the monumental Eurocentric theoretical justification of the unequal relations between the global North and the global South. I explored such possibilities by sketching in rough brush the contours of one or many epistemologies of the South. Seen from the latter, the public sphere is the tribalism of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Both capitalism and colonialism converted such a localism into a global aspiration and a universal theoretical concept, at the same time that an abyssal divide between metropolitan and colonial societies made public sphere unthinkable in colonial societies and transformed such denial of universality into the vindication of the universal idea. Unthinking such historical construction only becomes a credible theoretical task to the extent that theoretical work positions itself as the facilitating or supporting rearguard of the social movements and struggles that fight against capitalism and the many metamorphoses of colonialism.

Notes

1. A Google search on the concept shows more than five million results.
2. I have been working out this concept in empirical research projects conducted in countries as different as Portugal, Colombia, Brasil, India, Mozambique and South Africa. Thes projects are part of a much larger project entitled, 'Reinventing Social Emancipation' . As a result, four books have been so far published, Santos (ed.) 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010.
3. As mentioned below, the modern West does not have a single view of the world. It has a plurality of views, even if the dominant one has overshadowed all the others and has become the one that was successfully exported to/ imposed on the 'rest' of the world. See Santos, 2009a. As a consequence, the other views are little known even inside the global North and are not easily

identified as Western views when evaluated from the perspective of the global North.

4. See Santos, 2008a.
5. See Habermas, 1987a.
6. See Santos, 2009a.
7. Santos, 2007:45-89.
8. Habermas, 1984, 1987.
9. See Santos, 1995:479-519 and Santos, 2004:157-197.
10. The last attempt to produce a modern critical theory was that of Foucault focusing on the totalising knowledge of modernity – modern science. Contrary to current opinion, I consider Foucault a modern, not a postmodern critic. He represents the climax and, paradoxically as well, the defeat of critical theory. Pushing to its ultimate consequences the disciplinary power of the panopticon construed by modern science, Foucault shows that there is no emancipatory way out inside this 'regimen of truth,' since resistance itself becomes disciplinary, hence internalised, consented oppression. Foucault's great merit was to have shown the opacities and silences produced by modern science, granting credibility to alternative 'regimens of truth', other ways of knowing that had been marginalised, suppressed and discredited by modern science (Santos 2004). Foucault contributed immensely to disarming the imperial North epistemologically, but he was unable to recognise the efforts of the anti-imperial South to arm itself epistemologically. He was not aware that there were other knowledges and experiences in question (interview with Boaventura de Sousa Santos *in* Tavares 2007:133).
11. On these authors, see Santos, 2009a.
12. Actually, the system of reappropriation works both ways. For the past 20 years, we have witnessed the World Bank's appropriation of watchwords of critical theory, such as participatory democracy and participation in general.
13. Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas (Free Trade Area of the Americas).
14. Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas).
15. There is also a global North in countries of the South, consisting of the local elites that take advantage of the production and reproduction capitalism and colonialism. This is what I call the imperial South.
16. On the epistemology of the South, see Santos, 2006a; 2006b; 2008b and 2009b. See also Santos and Meneses (eds.), 2009.
17. See Santos, 2004:157-197.
18. Quijano considers the racialisation of power relations as an intrinsic feature of capitalism, a feature that he designates as the 'coloniality of power' (2000:374).
19. On this topic, see Santos, 2007:45-89; 2008a; 2009c:509-541.
20. Santos, 1995:25; 2005a; 2007; 2008b.
21. See Santos (ed.), 2007.

22. Banuri argues that the capitalist and colonial project for the development of the South was negative for the South, 'not because of bad advice or evil intention on the part of the councillors or consultants of development ... but because the project constantly forced the colonial populations to separate their energies of *positive* search from a social change defined by themselves and focus on the *negative* objective of resisting the cultural, political and economic domination of the West' (italics in the original) (Banuri 1990:66).

23. On the concept of *umma*, see above all, Faruki, 1979; An Na'im, 1995, 2000; Hassan, 1996; on the concept of *dharma*, see Gandhi, 1929/32; Zaehner, 1982.

24. See Gandhi, 1941, 1967. On *swadeshi* see also, among others, Bipinchandra, 1954; Nandy, 1987; Krishna, 1994.

25 Similar conceptions may be found, for instance, among the indigenous peoples.

26. On sage philosophy see Oruka (1990, 1998) and also Oseghare, 1992; Presbey, 1997.

27. On counter-hegemonic globalization, there is a bibliography on the rise. See, among others, Santos, 1995:250-377; 2002 (ed.); 2006b; Keck y Sikkink, 1998; Evans, 1999; Brecher *et al*. 2000; Cohen and Rai, 2000.

28. Acronyme of *Association pour la Taxation des Transactions Financières pour l'Aide aux Citoyens.*

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