

S Y M P O S I U M D e b a t i n g
k n o w l e d g e :
A R e p l y

In Search of the Negation of the Negation

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I would like to thank my commentators for engaging with my argument in this paper. Their engagement bears witness to the epistemological context of our western time. The erosion of deep-seated certainties calls both for self-reflexivity and for collective searching, for openness and collaboration. This is a rough process because the factors that created the conditions for a new epistemological attitude are the same as those that impede its development. Western epistemology has finally conceded that the eye does not see itself — and that is the irreducible blind spot in our knowledge. This, however, means two contradictory things: since all of us have eyes, we share the same blind spot; but since our eyes differ from *the* eyes of everybody else, we have unique, unshareable blind spots. The first meaning facilitates and even demands collaboration, while the second meaning makes it impossible, or at least self-defeating. The fact that two meanings coexist constitutes the limit of epistemological collaboration. This limit cannot, therefore, be fully eliminated. But it can be reduced if we adopt an epistemological posture that privileges what we share (the blind spot we all have) and play down what we cannot share (the uniqueness of our blind spot). This posture translates itself into a hermeneutics that favors tolerance to the detriment of suspicion, bridging instead of polarizing, collective predicament instead of individual rescue. Peter Wagner and João Caraça seem to be closer to this epistemological posture than Jan Nederveen Pieterse. But all of them raise important points. They all address the general structure of my argument rather than the details of its unfolding. I shall try to do the same in responding to their comments. My commentators raise three major issues: the relationship between social regulation and social emancipation; the nature of the epistemological divide; the question of power. Even though all comments deal with these issues, each one of them focuses on one of them in particular. At the outset I must say that none of these issues is discussed in any detail in my paper. Instead, I start out by presenting a brief outline of my position on them discussed and argued at length elsewhere (de Sousa Santos, 1995). I then dedicate most of my paper to show the

limits of a given form of knowledge, what I call knowledge-as-regulation. At the end of the paper, and again very briefly, I mention some possible ways of overcoming or at least reducing the impact of such limits. I concede that brief outlines turn easily into simplistic or schematic formulations, thereby lending themselves to justifiable criticism.

Concerning the issue of regulation/emancipation, which is the main focus of Pieterse's comment, I conceive the relationship between them in dialectical terms. When I say on page 268 that 'it is the tension between regulation and emancipation that keeps both alive and credible' I mean 'tension' in a strong dialectical sense. Indeed, I consider this relationship to be the most distinctive feature of western modernity. I thus agree with most of what Nederveen Pieterse says. His is a good critique, but not a critique of my position. Underlying his critique there is a systematic misreading of my argument. It starts with my conception of regulation and emancipation as the twin pillars of western modernity. Among other analogies Nederveen Pieterse sees in this conception an analogy with the two pillars of the Temple of Solomon. Nothing in my conception warrants such an analogy. The pillars of the temple, which was supposed to last forever, are static guardians at the entrance of the temple, both symbols of strength and stability. One of the pillars was named Jachin, meaning 'we shall establish', the other Boaz, meaning 'in it is strength' (1 Kings, 7.21). On the contrary, in my conception the twin pillars are the invisible foundation upon which the paradigm of western modernity developed with no claim to eternity, rather inherently torn apart between stability and innovation, order and progress. These are pillars on top of which no lily work is sustainable (1 Kings, 7.22). The problem with thinking by analogy is that it runs the risk of becoming the analogy of thinking.

My pillars entail dialectical movement rather than static duality. In my view, the exhaustion of the paradigm of western modernity lies precisely in the erosion of such movement due to the amalgamation of its constitutive moments, the collapse of emancipation into regulation, the cannibalization of emancipation. Instead of a double binding between social regulation and social emancipation, we face a double crisis, a crisis of regulation and a crisis of emancipation, each one feeding on the other. Both *La pensée unique* and the 'Washington Consensus' derive their arrogance from this stalemate. There is no trace here of a dialectical movement, and that is why I say that the regulation that does not emancipate does not even regulate. I can hardly see how this situation can possibly be thought of as a solution, and much less as a dialectical solution rather than as a problem. There is no trace here of what the dialectical movement implies, namely the negation of the negation and the double binding between realization and abolition. Reading Jan Nederveen Pieterse's comments, I wonder if he is not confusing dialectical *Aufhebung* with the Third Way. On the contrary, Peter Wagner identifies most clearly the orientation of the dialectical movement in western modernity: self-regulation as Rousseau brilliantly imagined it. Self-regulation is the marker of the presence (not the dissolution) of emancipation in regulation. Without such a horizon and the tension that lies in it, social life is vulnerable to all kinds of despotism and societal fascisms.

As I see it, the current crisis of the dialectical movement in western modernity is not dialectical. For that reason, our time offers itself both to delirious affirmations and to delirious negations. Without the negation of the negation, negation is mere destruction, without contradiction, affirmation is self-aggrandizing complacency. This is a time both for civilizational pessimists and euphoric proselitists. Following Ernst Bloch I would say that in a world obsessed by Nothing or All there is no room for the Not Yet. Under such circumstances, even if we think that destruction or complacency is not a sensible alternative, thinking of other alternatives will not suffice because the thinking that brought us here is itself either destructive or complacent. This grounds my claim that we need an alternative thinking of alternatives. And thus I turn to the second issue: the nature of the epistemological divide, most forcefully raised by Peter Wagner and also very much present in João Caraça's comment.

Very perceptively, Peter Wagner sees a tension or ambiguity between a strong view and a weak view in my argument about the epistemological divide, and decides in favor of the weak view, surmising that this might be my own position. And so it is, with a twist. In my view, the predicament of the dialectical movement in the societal project of western modernity can also be traced in its epistemological project: emancipatory knowledge, rather than being the other of regulatory knowledge, has become just another regulatory knowledge. Reinventing the tension between knowledge-as-regulation and knowledge-as-emancipation is thus in itself an emancipatory task. Formulated in this way, however, the dichotomy between the two types of knowledge may be misleading. It conveys the idea that on both sides there are equally structured bodies of knowledge. This is not the case. Knowledge-as-regulation is basically modern science, particularly in its incarnation as technoscience and the common sense or rather common senses it induces (more on this below). On the contrary, knowledge-as-emancipation, besides being a Not Yet, a task rather than a given, is to be constructed as a complex constellation of knowledges. This asymmetry is crucial and ignoring it is at the source of the degradation of the dialectical movement. Indeed, the cannibalization of knowledge-as-emancipation started at the moment when the latter (and the social groups sustaining it) thought of itself as an emancipatory knowledge that could be as structured and as scientific as regulatory knowledge. The credibility of scientific socialism was obtained not only at the cost of a massive epistemicide both within and without the socialist camp, but also at the cost of the sustainability of the emancipatory tasks. At the time this fateful development occurred, it was probably not evident that emancipation through science could only take place as emancipation from science or even as the emancipation of science. The evidence, as usual, came too late to be of consequence.

The monolithic character of a given body of knowledge can only be captured from the outside, from the variety of social experience it dismisses as irrelevant, from the repetition of consequences usually borne out by groups of people that are complete outsiders to the production of knowledge. Nederveen Pieterse fails to see that from the point of view of the Mozambican peasant or the state official 'negotiating' the terms of the structural adjustments with the IMF economist, it

is absolutely irrelevant whether this economist has been trained in neoclassical economics, rational choice or new institutional analysis. Knowledge-as-emancipation, on the contrary, is a struggle against the waste of experience and for a constant participatory monitoring of consequences and experimentation. Such drive for plurality cannot be sustained if knowledge itself is not plural. Hence the idea of the constellation of knowledges, or archipelago of knowledges, as Caraça prefers. What glues together these knowledges is both the acceptance of incompleteness, and hence of plurality, and the acceptance of constant participatory monitoring of consequences. In sharing this they approach differently but convergently the idea of a prudent knowledge for a decent life. I fully agree with Peter Wagner that such a body of knowledges provides no guarantee against perversion, against hetero-regulation. Their weakness, however, is also their strength. Since they cannot afford not to exercise constant epistemological vigilance, they are slow knowledges; but they are also capable of tracing perversion before it is irreversible. Such capacity depends on their power as alternative knowledges. And now I move to the final issue, the question of power-knowledge most forcefully raised by João Caraça.

I concede that in this paper I do not properly address this issue. In my defense, I can only say that this issue has been the central one in my work, and that I have already dedicated many pages to it. Foucault has been a founding influence. I differ from him on two accounts. First, I see more unity than separation between the two forms of knowledge identified by him: juridical knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. Second, the constitution of the socialized subject is always incomplete. Regulatory knowledge socializes by inducing the production of common sense. But since the latter is much more fragmented and chaotic than the former, there occur disjunctures that create opportunities for desocialization and resistance.

I distinguish six space-times in society (householdplace, workplace, marketplace, communityplace, citizenplace and worldplace) which generate six forms of power and of common sense (patriarchy, exploitation and capitalist nature, fetishism of commodities, unequal differentiation, domination and unequal exchange) (de Sousa Santos, 1995: 403-55). In any given society at any given point in time the regulatory power of regulatory knowledge is premised upon the degree of isomorphism between context-blind science and contextual common senses. Because of the plurality of the latter, such an isomorphism is inherently unstable and problematic. Knowledge and power do mirror each other, as Caraça emphasizes and I concur, but the mirrors are curious mirrors, full of surprising reflexions. In the disjunctures, emancipatory knowledges manifest themselves at first as a hunger and a dissatisfaction, a Not Yet of absent agents and absent knowledges. The success of the questioning is measured by the extent to which, in each space-time, power relations are replaced by relations of shared authority.

Reference

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