Conversations in Postcolonial Thought

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CHAPTER 4

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Boaventura de Sousa Santos is a professor of sociology at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, and a distinguished legal scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Can you talk about your early intellectual formation? You trained as a legal scholar, so how did your broader concerns relate to your interest in law?

Well, very early on I developed the idea—which, in fact, is based on Durkheim's work—that law is one of the privileged instruments [with which] to analyze social relations and the way in which they evolve and get transformed in society. So my interest, probably from the very beginning, was both sociological and philosophical, and I always thought that law could perform that function, even though, at the time, I didn't have the same type of concerns that I developed later. So, when I finished my degree in law in Coimbra, I then went to a different university in Berlin to study philosophy of law and sociology of law, because, at the time, they were the topics that I was most interested in.

This was my first encounter with the philosophy of law in Germany. For many in Portugal, and in Europe in general, philosophy as such, and philosophy of law in particular, was written in German, so if you didn't know German, you were out. That's why I decided to go to Germany and deepen my knowledge of both German and philosophy. It was my first broadening, in intellectual terms, of the perspectives of law that were expanded when, in 1969, I went to the United States to get a degree in sociology of law, working on what was called at the time "law and development." This was a way of developing my understanding of the interaction that I had observed and studied very early on in Durkheim as well as the relation between law and the development of society. From then on, I moved from philosophy of law to sociology. It was this gradual process of expanding my interests that, in the end, got me into epistemological issues, which have become very central for me in the last ten years.
How did you develop your sense of political consciousness?

It developed by phases and in a kind of serendipitous way, very often and very contingent also. I'm a child from a working-class family in Portugal, and I heard—I cannot confirm that, but it was said—that I was the first working-class kid coming to the law school at the University of Coimbra, which was very elitist at the time, and it was a kind of scandal in itself but even more so because I was the best student in class. So there was something rather shocking about my being there. For my family, the most important thing was for the only child of the family to get a university degree, and I indeed was the first in the family to get a university degree. So I was not much involved in political activity; however, I did belong to the progressive Catholic youth movements that existed here.

Portugal was under fascism, or a kind of fascism, from 1928 to 1974, and at the time, it was a period of great repression, but we had here, at the university, a group of progressive Catholic students that were trying to discuss ideas of democracy, human rights, and so on, but we were very much repressed by the hierarchy. We had some support from the chaplains of the Catholic youth, but we suffered repression from the bishop and others, and that was the reason why I abandoned religion—the Catholic religion—very early on. So my political involvement went through various stages.

When I moved to West Berlin, it was the height of the Cold War, so this was really the time of the confrontation between the two worlds. I was very curious about what was going on on the other side of the wall, and since I was a foreigner, I could cross the wall every day. And then on a May Day celebration parade, I fell in love with an East German woman and she became my girlfriend, so you travel, you know, when the passion is at a very high level—I used to travel almost every day, crossing Friedrichstrasse or Checkpoint Charlie, which are the two points through which we would go from the West to the East. And I could see the other side, and the other side was the high time of Stalinism. I used to smuggle products—chocolates, cigarettes, stockings, all kinds of things—to the other side. And I used to bring letters in my shoes: I brought letters from people who wanted to leave East Germany and come to the West.

My political training at the time was strongly conditioned by this, and coming from a dictatorship myself, I was very much impressed by the lively democratic debates in West Berlin. I already had an anti-colonial posture because the critique of colonialism was part of our progressive Catholic movement, so in Berlin, I gave some talks for the students on Portugal and colonialism: Portugal, "the heir of colonialism." In fact, many people from the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), which later became extremely important, were very curious, and they came to my talks wondering whether I would be defending colonialism. In fact, I did not defend it; I was on the opposite side. They even invited me to join their organization. I didn't, because I was a foreigner, and I was cautious at that time because I didn't know them very well.

This, in a sense, prevented me from moving into a more socialist or Marxist training, inclination, or formation. Because of the impact of the Cold War, the other side of the Wall was a space in which I saw Stalinism and suppression of freedom. It was at this time that a very famous professor, Robert Havemann, was ousted and later imprisoned just because he had written a very interesting book in which he criticized, in a very mild way, the government in the Democratic Republic of Germany, as it was called. I was very impressed by that, and developed some of my democratic ideas there. However, when I arrived in the United States in 1969, it was the time of a radical change in my political activism, political training, formation, and ideological orientation because it was there that I would become a Marxist.

I had already been trained in German philosophy, but it was in the United States that I deepened all my Marxist readings because I arrived at a very crucial moment, at the height of the Vietnam War and of the protests against the war, the civil rights movements, and the Black Panther Party—a period that saw a great radicalization of American society. It was also a time in which we were developing a very deep critique of the conventional structural-functionalist sociology that had dominated the field for so long. Our target was Talcott Parsons, at that time considered the "father" of American sociology.

I was in my PhD program at that time. Some of the students had a sociological background, and some a legal background, coming from Australia, Europe, Israel, and other countries. We started our reading groups, in which we read Das Kapital and many other works, and we discussed many ideas among ourselves. But in fact, there was also, at the time, very progressive teaching at Yale University that in fact disappeared five years later when the crisis of the movement came to an end, in a sense. I was a student of a very distinguished Hegelian professor, J. N. Findlay, then at Yale. I took classes with him and took other courses on Marx and Marxism, that was my entry into a kind of intellectual transformation that was also a political transformation for me. Although these readings and teachings transformed me, what really transformed me intellectually, personally, and politically was in 1970, when I went to Brazil to do field research for my PhD thesis, conducting participant observation in one of the favelas of Rio.

I lived in the favela for four months. Spending my days and nights in the community was really a sea change in my life. It was a large community, 60,000 people at the time, and I was trying to analyze the system of informal law and the ways in which the community would solve conflicts inside the community through the residents' association. They had no access to the official legal
system because they themselves were an illegal community. And there were lots of problems inside the community, and that was the time in which I learned that, beyond academic knowledge, there were other kinds of knowledge, and beyond official law, there was informal, unofficial law.

I learned that there were ideas of human dignity and respect that were very important and were completely outside our lenses in our academic life; these ideas were coming from people who were considered ignorant, marginal, illegal, and so on, when in fact they were struggling for a dignified life in the most undignified conditions. And I really would spend hours and hours talking with them, in long conversations in which I could see the wisdom of the world as well as different ways of understanding the world and our relation with nature and neighbors and so on, which really transformed me. Most of the organizational work within the community was done illegally, clandestinely, because, at the time in Brazil, we also had a dictatorship that was very vicious in 1970 and 1971. Some of the leaders of the residents' association and the political mobilizations were members of the Communist Party, so it was very dangerous for them to be part of this research.

We developed, gradually, a trust relationship precisely because I was not North American, because if I were North American, they would never have talked to me. They were convinced that all the anthropologists and sociologists that would come to the favelas at the time were North American and, in one way or the other, connected with the CIA. And I think they were right in most cases, even though one of my friends—a great North American anthropologist, Anthony Leeds—had done very important work there, too. But indirectly or directly, such work was often used by imperialistic institutions.

So this was my training in the real politics of the world, and in fact, the embryo of these ideas came to shape my life and interests, particularly in the development of new kinds of knowledge or "ecology of knowledges." These are knowledges born in struggles; they don't come to us through reading other books or reading other people. We come into the context of life situations, sometimes risky situations for your own life, and only through this contact can we have access to other kinds of understandings of reality and other ways of understanding the transformation of reality. So that was a very important moment for me.

Two or three years later, there was also a very important moment in this transformation that moved me away from a more orthodox Western Marxism that I was following at the time to a more cosmopolitan form of political thinking, within which Marxism played a very important role but became one component among others in a broader constellation of critical thinking. This occurred in 1972 or 1973 when I become a very good friend of Ivan Illich.

Ivan Illich was a great visionary and educator from Austria who lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he had a wonderful, very progressive center for popular education for progressive ideas, the Intercultural Documentation Center (Centro Intercultural de Documentación [CIDOC]). In fact, I met many of the political leaders of the left there, including the leader of the peasant leagues in Brazil, Francisco Julião, who was in exile in Mexico at the time and lived there. We had a fabulous time. I even taught a course with a very important sociologist from France, André Gorz, on the topic of law and revolution. So, as you can see, law was there, but I was broadening my interest, and I became much more aware of the diversity of other kinds of knowledge in Latin America and in the world. This led to a certain distancing from the Western conceptions of Marxism. There were core ideas that would be very important, and continue to be important in my work today, but I started to resent the fact that Marxism, in a sense, shared the same conception of history as linear time, and because of that, Marxists had a kind of ambiguous vision of colonialism itself—particularly British colonialism. Therefore, I distanced myself from that, as I always felt that probably the development of the collective forces could not be infinite, in theory.

Ivan Illich played a very important role because he was the one pleading for native technologies and local knowledge. I was not totally convinced by him. There were wonderful debates between the two of us during the night because I came from a very poor country in Europe, and a dictatorship, so I also felt there were some elements of modernity that we would need here, and technological progress and so on, but I was aware that we have to see that technology was never neutral and that there were different alternative technologies.

The 1970s were crucial to me also because, sometime later, the revolution came here in Portugal: the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974. This was another big transformation in terms of my political activism. I had been politically active mostly while working in grassroots organizations like the residents' association, and all of a sudden, I found myself in the midst of a revolution in which I had to participate in institution building. After 48 years of dictatorship, everything had to be rebuilt in terms of the university and the social sciences and so on. I was the third member of the Portuguese Sociological Association, which I helped start. I was the founder of the Centre for Social Studies (Centro de Estudos Sociais [CES]) and the founder of the School of Economics with which CES is affiliated. I was also, for 12 years, the president of the Scientific Council of the School of Economics, which at the time was the most important administrative body of the school. So this was a very intense period in which I moved from my more internationally oriented activism to more national activism, because I was concerned about Portugal.

I became very active in the cooperative movement here. I became a member of the peasants' cooperatives, and I co-founded one of the cooperatives nearby and became a member. For 12 years, I did the most extensive field research, and
because I was a member, I was not studying about them, but I was working with them and studying with them. I learned how to milk cows and helped in all kinds of training that was necessary for the cooperative. They became my good friends; even today, I go there often to have dinner and stay with them, even though the cooperative then had a crisis and collapsed. We had controlled production, but we didn't control distribution, and cooperatives in this context were very difficult to sustain. I also had my school of economics to administer, so I couldn't really dedicate myself fully to both. This was a period in which I was totally absorbed by the Portuguese political and social process. And it was in the late 1980s that I moved again to my international interests of the past.

In 1984, I conducted what was probably the first field research on the postcolonial period in the Cape Verde Islands; to me, this was a very important research project. In Latin America, I engaged in a case study for sociological research, and I did work in Brazil and Colombia. In the latter country, I connected with another very important sociologist in my life, Orlando Fals Borda, who was one of the founders of action-research. So I started again with all my involvement in the social movements across Latin America, which really came to fruition in 2001 with the emergence of the World Social Forum. I have been participating in the World Social Forum since the very beginning, not so much in organizational terms, but mainly in conceptual and political formulations. My activities became more cosmopolitan, and it was then that I could see different traditions of political activism and cultural brandings in political activism that came from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The World Social Forum in Mumbai was a key transformation, as I became familiar with the struggles in other regions of the world, such as the outstanding example of the struggles and resistance of the Dalits [the “untouchables” in India]. So, as you can see, my political involvement continues to grow along with my intellectual development.

**How do you conceptualize the postcolonial, and how would you situate your work within the genre?**

I see myself as a postcolonial thinker, and I think that my work has some specificities in that respect, but what we have to start with is how to define what is meant by colonialism. Colonialism is a system of naturalizing differences in such a way that the hierarchies that justify domination, oppression, and so on are a product of the inferiority of certain people and not the cause of their inferiority. Their inferiority is “natural,” and because it is natural, they are “naturally” inferior, they “have” to be governed, and they “have” to be treated and dominated. This part of the definition doesn't distinguish colonialism from sexism, so we have to move on a bit further from that.

Historically, colonialism also means “foreign” occupation. This foreign occupation is very important because it is a negation of all the conceptions of territoriality, meaning states, political organizations, and cultures that exist within the occupied territories. Even here we could also see a relationship with sexism, which is, in a sense, also a dimension of occupying the body of the woman—that is, the bodies are occupied in very much the same way as the collective bodies of the territories of the colonized. But there are differences, and the main difference is that colonial domination involves the destruction of other cultures, while sexism may exist within the same culture. In modern colonialism, we have deep colonial differences, deep cultural differences, and hierarchies. The destruction of knowledge (besides the genocide of indigenous people) is what I call epistemicide—the destruction of the knowledge of these populations and their culture, memories, ancestries, and all the ways in which they relate to others and to nature. Their legal forms, political forms, organization—everything—is destroyed and put at the service of the colonial occupation.

Colonialism also creates a problem for us in relation to postcolonialism; that is to say, that may be a naïve way of thinking that postcolonialism refers to a postcolonial period, while in fact, postcolonialism claims just the opposite: colonialism didn't end with the end of historical colonialism, because there are other ways through which occupation continues—not foreign occupation, tutelage, and the prohibition of a state formation, but other forms of occupation. In Europe, racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia are other ways through which you can see colonialism at work. At the level of relations among states, colonialism is also very much present, particularly in the relations between the European states and their former colonies; this is where Nkrumah's term neo-colonialism (which he coined) comes into being (Nkrumah 1974).

I see myself as a postcolonial thinker because, within the tradition of critical thinking, I cannot see capitalism as separate from colonialism. Colonialism is, in a sense, the evil twin. I'm not saying that capitalism is the good guy. What I'm saying is that much of the Western-centric critical thinking—Marxism included—has looked just at capital and never focused on the other side of capital, which is colonial domination and also patriarchal domination. Thus colonialism belongs structurally to the modernity of the West and to capitalism, and that is why my ways of thinking focus very much on the ways in which colonialism has been part of capitalism.

In light of that, there are many kinds of oppression or domination other than those that Marxism has dealt with, such as exploitation—that is, capital labor exploitation. What I mean is that colonial domination, oppression, and the relations between the colonizer and the colonized became absolutely key in my understanding of the various forms of domination because the forms of domination never act in pure forms but in constellations of oppression. We
still have slave labor today, which demonstrates how the long duration of this underside of capitalism continues to exercise these forms of labor and domination that are not in the "official" script of liberalism or even Marxism.

I'm very much concerned with these matters, and that's why my thinking has turned more seriously to epistemological issues—that is, an engagement with the ways of knowing from the perspectives of those who have suffered in a systematic way because of the injustices, dominations, and oppressions of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. This is the definition I give of "epistemologies of the South," which is a crucial epistemological transformation in order to reinvent social emancipation and to develop a kind of critical thinking that is measured up by the needs of social emancipation on a global scale—not simply based on a Western understanding of the world. We need to develop these epistemologies of the South in a much broader way, and this has been my work for the last ten years. So, in that sense, yes, I do consider myself a postcolonial thinker.

What do you consider to be the main contributions of postcolonial studies? What do you think postcolonial thinkers do to interrupt discourses of colonialism?

In general, what I think of as the main contribution of postcolonial studies, as I understand them, is that they interrupt one of the key narratives of Western modernity, which is the narrative of continuous progress and linear climb within which colonialism performs a certain positive role. On the contrary, we come to the conclusion that there are different colonialisms but that all of them are bad. Additionally, our role as postcolonial thinkers is to show that all the conceptions of Western modernity are truncated forms because they operate on the basis of an "abyssal line" that creates radical exclusions. The abyssal line is the line that separates the metropolitan societies from the colonized societies. The Western-centric conceptions focus exclusively on the metropolitan societies, the societies on this side of the line. The "universal" ideas of Western modernity are therefore based on an abyssal exclusion of the societies on the other side of the line, societies to which such ideas, however supposedly universal, were not applicable. The "other side" is thus abyssally excluded, so much so that it is produced as invisible and therefore not relevant nor considered for the construction of any kind of relevant reality in theoretical or political terms.

Postcolonial thinkers also interrupt the story or the narrative of the progressive law throughout Western modernity. For instance, critical thinking of Western modern Marxist orientation sees labor law emerging at the end of the nineteenth century as the embryonic form of the welfare state—which it was, in fact, in Europe because it was the first time the liberal conception of the equality of the partners (or parties) in a contract or civil litigation was really challenged in light of the evident inequality of power between the worker and the employer. Labor law had to compensate for that inequality in one way or another by somehow neutralizing this inequality. So labor law does develop as a kind of a very progressive body of law, but all this happens in Europe, on this side of the line. On the other side of the line and precisely at the same time, in the colonies, labor law was being developed as forced labor, as a kind of penal law. This double reality is another interruption that I think is absolutely crucial in my way of thinking.

Another interruption, which is even more confrontational, concerns the acceptance by the Western liberal, or Marxist, thinking of the core metaphor of Western modernity as the movement from the state of nature to civil society, which has been developed by all the liberal thinkers since Hobbes and Rousseau and then accepted, in one way or the other, even by Marxist thinkers. From the perspective of the epistemologies of the South, civil society and the state of nature grow together. On this side of the line, we have the civil society; on the other side of the line, we have the state of nature created by the same forces—colonialism and capitalism. These, I think, are measured contributions to the debunking of a story that was told for more than one hundred years without interruption and one that I now think is bankrupt, and that's why postcolonialism is so different from postmodernism.

Initially, I saw my criticism of modernity as what I call "oppositional postmodernism," which was my way of moving to postcolonialism. But I didn't name it "postcolonialism" because my idea at the time was to criticize the postmodern critique of modernity, which in fact made a supposedly radical critique of modernity without criticizing the most basic structure of modernity—precisely the abyssal line. That's why I consider my postmodernism as a kind of opposition to postmodernism, because the conventional postmodern critique in fact wanted, in its supposed radicality, to eliminate even the idea of social emancipation as being another modern narrative. My idea was that, working in Latin America and Africa, I could never have conceived of the idea that social emancipation was no longer needed. On the contrary, it is more needed than ever, and we have to reinvent it. In order to reinvent it, we need a new oppositional thinking, an oppositional thinking that came to fruition with postcolonialism in the last 15 years or so.

What do you think is distinctive about the postcolonial rising from the experience of Portuguese colonialism?

I think that this is where my contribution may also be distinctive. I argue that Portuguese colonialism was very distinct in many different ways, and my basic
idea is that, if the colonialisms are different, postcolonialisms also have to be different. I was always very concerned and very much in disagreement with the Anglo-Saxon form of postcolonialism for two reasons: first, because it was based on the British experience, and second, because it was a culturalist program and, from my Marxist training and the realities that I saw in Latin America and Africa particularly, I thought political economies should be part of the discussion. So we should not have a kind of postcolonial cultural idea, but on the contrary, bring into it the political economy, and in a sense, the Portuguese experience allowed and facilitated that approach for various reasons.

Portuguese colonialism was semi-peripheral, as we call it according to the world-system theory. Actually, both Portugal and Spain, at the end of the seventeenth century, were already out of the game, as they had lost most of their hegemony in the world-system to the Dutch and then to the British, and as a result, some hierarchies within colonialisms and empires developed. Portugal was an informal colony of England, and we see here the very complexity of empires, because Portugal is an imperial center that, in financial terms, is dominated by, or subordinated to, the hegemonic empire of England, the British Empire. In addition, we see a creation of differences within the “Western world.” Southern Europe was a periphery, subordinated in economic, political, and cultural terms to northern Europe, the core Europe that produced the enlightenment. This has been my debate with some postcolonial thinkers, particularly in Latin America, and also in Europe, who think that there is just one Europe or one Western modernity.

I think that Portugal and Spain show that, in fact, from the very beginning, from the seventeenth century and probably earlier than that, there is internal colonialism inside Europe, which now is very visible with the financial crisis; therefore, there was no single Europe. In one of my studies, I show that the Portuguese and the Spaniards in the seventeenth century were described by the northern Europeans with the same type of characteristics that the Portuguese and Spaniards attributed to the indigenous and native peoples in the New World and Africa. They were described as lazy, lascivious, ignorant, superstitious, and unclean. Such descriptions were applied to them by the missionaries or the monks that would come from Germany or France to visit the monasteries and people in the south.

I argue, therefore, that there was internal colonialism, and in fact, I believe that we cannot understand the current financial crisis in Europe without the presence of colonialism inside Europe and the way northern Europe addresses the realities of the southern countries. I think that this allows us to give greater complexity to current conceptions of the West, a topic on which I have often clashed with Walter Mignolo and others. I argue that there are other Europes inside Europe even today—for example, the “Indigènes de la Republique” in France, a very active movement of the second generation of immigrants from the Maghreb with which my collaborators and I work very closely. I believe they are Europe; they are European citizens, as the Roma people are also citizens of Europe. There is the myth of European values, which is something that was created after the Second World War and is really a façade that hides all these complexities in Europe. This has also led me to an even more complex way of looking at the West and at forms of Western modernity that I think could help in our alliance with movements for social emancipation in different parts of the world, but they were suppressed inside Europe precisely because they didn’t serve the needs of European expansion, colonialism, and capitalism.

I therefore suggest that there have been many traditions that could have been used in a more cosmopolitan way but that were not found serviceable. They were not functional to colonialism and capitalism because, for instance, they established serious doubts about the existence of the Christian God. How could the missionaries go to Africa and Latin America with those doubts that Pascal formulated so eloquently? They needed certainties, and so this thinking about uncertainty was really left out. Portuguese colonialism allows us to see these complexities.

Portuguese colonialism spread out more than any other form of colonialism; it spread across three continents and for a longer period of time because it started in 1415 and lasted until 1975. It therefore represents the longest duration of colonialism and imperialism, and one wonders how a semi-peripheral country could sustain such an empire. Sanjay Subrahmanym aims thinks that there were three Portuguese empires: the empire of the Atlantic, the African empire, and the Indian and Asian empire. They were very articulated but also very diverse forms of domination. Portugal is the only empire in which we have two colonies that became sub-imperial powers within the same empire: Brazil was sub-imperial for West Africa; Goa in India was the center of the empire for the Indian Ocean and for Asia. For me, this diversity of imperialism is very telling.

Some postcolonial thinkers do not attribute very much significance to this difference, but I do. Take the case of Brazil, which is quite striking. Portugal, in order to keep its independence from the Napoleonic invasions, moved the capital to the colony—that is, an imperial power moved its core/capital to one of its colonies in order to preserve its independence vis-à-vis another overpowering, imperial nation (England). For me, this is quite significant in modern history, and it’s going to be very important for Brazil, as a settlement colony and probably explains why Brazil is today an emergent BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, and China] country. These differences, in my view, are quite complex but bring complexity into postcolonial studies because they force us to see better the complexity of the colonized/colonizer relationship that Fanon and Aime Césaire speak about.
All along, there is an extended cycle of colonialism during which Portugal established very different sets of relations with the colonies. At the beginning, in East Africa, the relations cannot even be spoken of as colonial because they were, rather, merchant relationships free from the power of the empire. The native people were not considered inferior; the colonial inferiority of the nineteenth century was not present at the time, so we see these different relationships at play, which again demonstrates the difference of the Portuguese experience, an experience that thus de-centers postcolonialism. Postcolonialism was focused first and foremost on the British Empire and second on the New World, which is very clear in Latin American postcolonial studies, as if the New World was the founding structure of Western modernity.

I don’t think this is the case, because in 1492, we have Christopher Columbus then we have Vasco da Gama, and the trip to India (1497–1498); in the 1500s, there is Pedro Álvares Cabral in Brazil. Look at the differences between the “characteristic features” of the newly “discovered” territories, which the navigators bring from each of these expeditions. Pedro Álvares Cabral brings some Indians, parrots, spices, and things like that. Vasco da Gama brings ambassadors to discuss in Portugal what the relationships of the Portuguese should be in those areas. What is the difference? The difference is that, while in the Atlantic Ocean, the Portuguese and the Spaniards were very instrumental in creating a new kind of globalization; in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese engaged in a very old globalization already existing. These are the complexities of Portuguese colonialism and the diversity of situations that brings us more complexity in our postcolonial thinking, and that’s where I am.

Who are your main influences, and how have they shaped and impacted your work?

I’m a complex mixture because I have traveled and gone through so many intellectual and political trajectories. I think that one of the most founding influences for me were in fact the favela dwellers. The squatter settlement dwellers were absolutely transforming because of the shock; I had never seen people in such misery. I was coming from Portugal, a poor country, but it was decent in the sense that everybody was poor and there was not the same gap between rich and poor as I noticed in Brazil. All these deep miseries are at the limit of survival—illness, hunger, malnutrition, and violence—which were really terrible, and to see such wisdom coming from these people was very important to me.

I have to say that, on the opposite side, I was influenced by the French and German philosophers. I studied Hegel, as I said, but subsequently, my favorite philosophers became those that criticized most radically the Hegelian tradition, including Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, who still today remain influential in my way of thinking. There were many others that became very influential. Franz Fanon, of course, and Gandhi were important influences as intellectuals, as well as Ernst Bloch and his work, The Principle of Hope.

My work has also brought me together with many influential activists, as in the revolution in Portugal where, for a couple of months, I was the liaison person between the university and the movement of the captains. For me, it was a very interesting role to move every day between the revolutionary discourses of the time and the academic discourses of the university. I tried to bring them together, which was not very easy, as you can imagine.

Your work has developed across many fields. Could you talk a bit more about your current political activism and engagement outside of the academy?

Well, it has been very diversified. Today, particularly with the crisis in Europe, I am very active politically inside Portugal, and I think that my research center represents the source of the resistance against the pensée unique, the idea that there is no alternative to the neoliberal (dis)order. Most of the critical work that is publicized in newspapers and on television comes from researchers from this center, and I myself have been very much involved in the political struggles of the country today.

I’ve also been very much involved in the struggles in Latin America, particularly with the indigenous peoples. This started with my interest in analyzing social movements across the world. My sociological engagement has led me to actually become part of the movement, where I work with the people and learn through them. That’s why I’ve developed the concept that I’m not a vanguard intellectual but, rather, a “rearguard” intellectual. I go with social movements; I try to facilitate their work; I try to show some of the dilemmas that other movements in other contexts have faced; and I try to bring to the fore comparative density and some lessons of history.

For me, it’s very important with my concerns around the epistemologies of the South that they are not just framed as resistances against victimization—that is, it’s really about the presentation of alternatives, of new ways of thinking, of transforming society with new ways, new definitions, and new conceptions of dignity and respect. I have learned these ways of being from indigenous peoples, particularly from Afro-descendant peoples in Latin America, so now I’m becoming more and more involved with the African social movements.

I’ve been working particularly in Mozambique and Angola, because they are being victimized by the same multinational corporations I was confronted
with in my work in Latin America. There is a Brazilian multinational corporation (Vale do Rio Doce) that extracts minerals in Brazil, Mozambique, and other countries of Africa. It was considered (by the NGO Public Eye) the worst company in the world in terms of human rights a few years ago. I helped bring together peasant organizations from Brazil and Mozambique, all victims of the same plundering of natural resources.

My activism today is very much in line with the lessons of the World Social Forum, and that, in my view, symbolizes the transition from a politics of movements to a politics of inter-movements. What I mean by this is that women's movements have to interact with indigenous movements, human rights with anti-xenophobia movements, and undocumented migrant workers with indigenous peoples. We really have to try to bring in more of these alliances, and for that, we also need a lot of intellectual work, theoretical work—what I call “intercultural translation.” In 2003, I launched the idea of “The Popular University of Social Movements,” which develops these ideas by bringing together academic knowledge and popular knowledge of the social movements.

As a scholar who works in the so-called Lusophonic tradition, how do you relate to the question of Eurocentrism?

I never use that expression; I think that’s part of postcolonial thinking, to criticize all these expressions that are expressions of the colonizer. Nobody in Angola, or in Mozambique for that matter, calls himself Lusophonic. Instead, I bring to the foreground the specificities of Portuguese colonialism and Portuguese postcolonialism to add new layers of criticism to Eurocentrism, and I think we are bringing them because, for me, the focus on the British Empire has developed a very naive conception of Eurocentrism that didn’t go deep enough into analyzing “our” Eurocentrism used inside Europe to destroy the “other” Europeans. This struggle has to be brought into contact with the struggles outside Europe, and I think that Portuguese colonialism and empires have contributed to deepen the different layers; the new layers of Eurocentrism.

The fact that Portuguese colonialism lasted until 1975 means that I could still be part of an anti-colonial movement, which is different from most of my colleagues in France or Britain because, when they became intellectuals or scholars, colonialism had gone and they never became postcolonial. In our case, we had to fight colonialism and postcolonialism in the same sets of generations because of the duration of Portuguese colonialism. This duration also allows us to see the seamy side of Eurocentrism in a very different way—that is, how Portuguese colonialism was used to defend apartheid and the gold mines of South Africa, which is very important, and additionally, how Portuguese colonialism was used to defend agreements of the Second World War with the sacrifice of the Portuguese and of the people they were colonizing. So these are very violent and corrupt forms of capitalism that we can visualize through these experiences.

We have projects in our center that are now unveiling even more crudely the forms through which the NATO powers used the Portuguese to fight with Rhodesians and South Africans of apartheid against all the liberation struggles, not because they were interested so much in Angola or Mozambique, but because they were interested in all the natural resources of that region. This is the seamy side that comes to the very foreground through the Portuguese experience, and that’s why I think this so-called Lusophone world can’t examine adequately all these other forms or Eurocentrism. As such, when we approach Portuguese colonialism, we talk about Eurocentrism, colonialism, and capitalism in a different, more diversified, and probably more profound way.

In contemporary academia, do you think there is a need for a decolonization of sociology, and do you think postcolonial thinking has been acknowledged enough in mainstream social sciences?

Well, they are two different questions. In relation to the latter, I don’t think so. This thinking has certainly not been acknowledged; these thinkers are looked at with suspicion in very different ways, and there is even sometimes a kind of a colonial undertone of recognition of postcolonialism in a perverse way. To elaborate, they recognize, or accept, postcolonial studies once they are taught or professed by postcolonial people, and this is a very typical feature of Western modernity. They apparently include, but they do so in an excluding way. I think that postcolonial thinking will take a long time to be acknowledged because there is a weak recognition that, as long as we have capitalism, we are going to have colonialism in one way or the other—so the recognition of postcolonialism is always going to be a contested terrain. There is still a long way to go.

As for the decolonization of the social sciences, this is a topic with which I’m very much involved, and I think, again, that there is a lot to be done. In my work, I try to question the monocultures of knowledge, scale, productivity, and so on because I argue that the social sciences are the very products of those monocultures—particularly sociology, which was the discipline for the “us” study, and anthropology, for the “them” study. If we are to decolonize these disciplines, there won’t be disciplines in the end. But there will be something else if we transform these monocultures into ecologies: ecologies of knowledge, ecologies of recognitions, ecologies of temporalities, ecologies of productivities, and ecologies of scale.
Finally, in your work, you have tried to articulate a project of the Global Left, and you are also keen to relate your work in terms of the Global South. Can you talk more about the relationship between what you see as the Global Left and the Global South?

It’s a good question. In fact, all the questions are good, but this particular one is a really good one. Why? Because the Global South, for me, is a metaphor; it’s not a geographical entity. It’s the metaphor for the systematic suffering caused by colonialism and capitalism. Australia is part of the Global North, even though there is a South inside, which are the indigenous people. The Global South calls for resistance and for alternative. The critical thinking and the tradition calling for social transformation against the status quo is what we call, in Eurocentric terms, the Left. But things are much more complicated because the Western-centric Left was racist and ignored or demonized most of the struggles of the people in the Global South in their resistance against oppression and discrimination.

Therefore, when I refer to the Global Left, I am inviting a refoundation of the Left. A refoundation based on an intercultural understanding of radical democratization of social relations among humans and between humans and nature. Such democratization consists of transforming relations of unequal power into relations of shared authority in the family, in the factory, in the home, in the streets, in the community, in the public sphere, and in the research centers and universities and to do so in a way that means do not contradict the ends—that transformation encompasses self-transformation. So it’s this transformation of unequal power relations into shared authority that I’m most concerned with. This transformation involves polarizing or radicalizing differences between oppressors and oppressed and depolarizing or de-radicalizing differences among the oppressed. This is just the opposite of what the conventional Left has been doing in the last thirty years.

The Left has to be global but cannot be the same Left with the same premises of the conventional Left, because it has to be intercultural to begin with and capable of reciprocal translation between different conceptions of a better society. What is common about the different struggles is the struggle for dignity, respect, and a better life that people think they deserve because they are unjustly discriminated against by structures of power. So the struggle against these injustices is what may be characterized as, in a broader sense, a Left thinking.

Why does it have to be global? Because, in fact, capitalism is not a mode of production anymore; it’s a global style of life, a global ontology. It’s an entity that in fact encompasses all our lives and relations with others and with nature. Therefore, the Left needs a broader idea of our struggle. One may think that the scale of struggle is so big that it is beyond human capacity, and people become cynical. No, I work with people that cannot afford to be cynical because, as I
usually say, they are alive today, but they don’t know if they will be living tomorrow. They can feed their children today, but they don’t know whether they can feed them tomorrow. They cannot be cynical; they cannot afford to be cynics, so they are resisting. They are looking for alternatives, and I think that the Global Left is an unending process; it’s always an incomplete process of looking for alternatives of dignity and respect so that humanity ceases to be just an idea.

Today, there is no common humankind in my view because, in our modern world, there is no working humanity without some social groups being labeled as subhuman. (According to the contexts, they may be women, gays, suspected terrorists, enemy combatants, undocumented migrant workers, indigenous or tribal people, Afro-descendants, and/or human obstacles to development such as peasants or others.) The aspiration to a more complete humanity is, in itself, infinite, and that’s probably the best metaphor to bring together the Global South with the Global Left.

Note

1. Parti des Indigènes de la République (party of the indigenous of the republic/ Natives of the Republic) is an anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-Zionist political movement in France and has been active since 2005. The party was founded by activist Youssef Boussoumah, and the lead spokesperson is Houria Bouteldja.

Selected Key Works


