
FORMER WEST:
ART AND THE CONTEMPORARY AFTER 1989
Edited by
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BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht
The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England

This book has been published in the context of the curatorial and artistic research experiment FORMER WEST (2008–2016) developed by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht and realized through manifold partnerships with artists, theorists, activists, as well as art and educational institutions transnationally.

ART, 1989, THE CONTEMPORARY

TIMING THE FORMER

UNDERSTRUCTURES

TOWARD ANOTHER POLITICAL ECONOMY?

POWER AND TRUTH (AFTER THE INTERNET)

CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE "WE"

PROSPECTS

Creating a Distance from the Western-Centric Political Imagination

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

The global North is getting smaller and smaller in economic as well as political and cultural terms, and yet it cannot make sense of the world at large other than through general theories and universal ideas. Such a *habitus* can be viewed as the expression of a somewhat anachronistic manifestation of western exceptionalism, even if it remains very destructive when translated into imperial politics. From this perspective, the global North seems to have little to teach the world. Would not the historical opportunity for the global North to learn from the experiences of the global South lie precisely here? After five centuries of "teaching" the world, the global North seems to have lost the capacity to learn from the experiences of the world. In other words, it looks as if colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in non-colonial terms, that is, in terms that allow for the existence of histories other than the universal history of the West.

This condition is reflected in all the intellectual work produced in the global North and, most specifically, in western, Eurocentric critical theory.[1] A sense of exhaustion haunts this tradition. It manifests itself in a peculiar and diffuse uneasiness expressed in multiple ways: irrelevance, inadequacy, impotence, stagnation, paralysis. Such uneasiness is all the more disquieting because we are living in a world in which

there is so much to be criticized, and in which an ever-growing number of people live in critical conditions. If there is so much to criticize, why has it become so difficult to build convincing, widely shared, and powerful critical theories—theories that give rise to effective and profound transformative practices?

For the past 30 years, growing difficulties—often presented as perplexities in the face of unintelligible political repertoires, unpredicted mobilizations and solutions, impasses attributed to a supposed lack of alternatives, and a variety of more or less sophisticated protocols of surrendering—have beset western critical thinking both in its Marxist and libertarian streams. A number of dilemmas occur at the level of the very political imagination that sustains both critical theory and emancipatory politics.

Strong Questions and Weak Answers

One reason to create a distance from the Eurocentric critical tradition is that it provides only weak answers for the strong questions confronting us in our time. Strong questions address not only our specific options for individual and collective life, but also the societal and epistemological paradigm that has shaped the current horizon of possibilities within which we make our options.

Weak answers, on the contrary, are those that do not challenge the horizon of possibilities. They fail to abate the perplexity caused by the strong questions and may, in fact, increase it.

The first strong question can be formulated in this way: If humanity is one alone, why are there so many different principles concerning human dignity and social justice, all of them presumably unique, yet often contradictory among themselves? The western-centric critical answer to this question is that such diversity is only to be recognized to the extent that it does not contradict universal human rights.[2] This is a weak answer, because, by postulating the abstract universality of the conception of human dignity underlying the concept of human rights, it dismisses the perplexity underlying the question, which precisely interrogates the possibility of such an abstract universality.[3] The fact that such a conception is western-based is considered irrelevant, as the historicity of human rights discourse does not interfere with its ontological status.[4]

Movements or grammars of resistance have been emerging against oppression, marginalization, and exclusion whose ideological bases often have very little to do with the dominant western cultural and political references prevalent throughout the twentieth century. When they resort at all to the grammar of human rights to formulate their struggles, these movements do so in terms that fully contradict the dominant understanding of human rights. The most salient examples are those of the indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples that have become very politically active

in the last 30 years, particularly in Latin America. Conventional human rights thinking lacks the theoretical and analytical tools to position itself in relation to such movements and, even worse, it does not understand the importance of doing so. It applies the same abstract recipe across the board, hoping that thereby the nature of alternative ideologies or symbolic universes will be reduced to local specificities with no impact on the universal canon of human rights.

Another strong question: what degree of coherence is required between principles, whatever they may be, and the practices that take place in their name? This question gains a particular urgency in contact zones between the global North and the global South, or between the global West and the global East, because it is there that the discrepancy between principles and practices tends to be highest. More and more we witness the massive violation of human rights in the name of human rights, the destruction of democracy in the name of democracy, the killing of innocent civilians in the process of supposedly protecting them, the devastation of livelihoods in the name of development, the massive deployment of surveillance techniques and restrictions of basic freedoms in the name of preserving freedom and security. The ideological investments used to conceal such discrepancies are as massive as the practices themselves.

The answer given by Eurocentric critical theory is a weak one. Though it denounces the discrepancy between principles and practices, it tends to subscribe uncritically to the idea that the principles of human rights, democracy, development, humanitarian intervention, etc., do not lose credibility in spite of their increasingly more systematic and glaring violation in practice, both by state and non-state actors.

A third strong question emerges out of the rising presence of spirituality and religion in political struggles and of the ways it confronts the western critical tradition. Is the process of secularization, considered to be one of the most distinctive achievements of western modernity, irreversible? What might be the contribution of religion to social emancipation, if any? Again, the Eurocentric critical tradition answers on the basis of the Enlightenment premises and the conventional human rights they give rise to. Human rights take secularization for granted, including the secular nature of their own foundation. Religion belongs to the private sphere and, therefore, from a human rights perspective, the right to religious freedom is one right among others.[5] This is a weak answer, because it assumes as a given what precisely is being questioned: the idea that freedom of religion is only possible in a world free of religion. What, then, if that is not the case?

A fourth question goes like this: is the conception of nature as separate from society, so entrenched in western thinking, tenable in the long run? It is becoming widely accepted that one of the novelties of the new millennium is that it will see capitalism reach its ultimate ecological limits, that the insatiable exploitation of nature must have an

end, lest human life on the planet becomes unsustainable. This question raises particular perplexity, since all western thinking, whether critical or not, is grounded on the Cartesian idea that nature is a *res extensa*, and, as such, an unlimited resource unconditionally available to human beings.

The answer that western thought gives is weak; no matter how many qualifiers are added to the concept of development, development keeps intact the idea of infinite growth. Actually, global capitalism has never been so avid for natural resources as today, to the extent that it is legitimate to speak of a new extractivist imperialism.

Yet another strong question: is there any room for utopia in our world? The concept of an alternative society and the struggle for it were the backbones of both critical theory and left politics throughout the twentieth century. The historical strength of Marxism has resided in its unique capacity to articulate the idea of an alternative future with an oppositional way of living in the present. But, in recent decades, much of critical thinking and left politics seems to have lost the capacity to formulate the idea of a credible postcapitalist future. Without a conception of an alternative society, the current state of affairs will not generate any impulse for radical opposition.

The End of Capitalism Without End

It is as difficult to imagine the end of capitalism as it is difficult to imagine that capitalism has no end. The fall of the Berlin Wall had a devastating effect on the idea of postcapitalist futures, but it is hard to believe that capitalism may escape the fate of all historical phenomena, that is, the fate of having a beginning and an end. This difficulty has split Eurocentric critical thinking, both in the global North and in the global South, into two strands that have been sustaining two different political options for the left.

One strand has stopped worrying about imagining the end of capitalism, focusing its creativity on developing a *modus vivendi* capable of minimizing the social costs of capitalist accumulation and its grounding principles of possessive individualism, competition, and the infinite expansion of exchange values. Social democracy, Keynesianism, the welfare state, and the developmentalist state of the 1960s, in what was then called the Third World, are its main political forms. The bankruptcy of this strand is today dramatically evident in the financial and economic crises of Europe and the United States. It has found continuity in Latin America, particularly in Brazil. It points to a new kind of strong state involvement in economic development—public/private partnerships and wealth redistribution—based not on universal rights, as in the case of European social democracy, but rather on significant, means-tested money transfers targeted to vulnerable social groups. It leads to a new state form, the neodevelopmentalist state.

The other, minority, strand of the Eurocentric critical tradition is strongly convinced that capitalism will end one day, and better sooner than later. But it finds it difficult to imagine how the end of capitalism will come about and what will follow it. The Latin American subcontinent offers the most vivid political manifestations of this difficulty. It is experienced in two contrasting ways. It consists either of imagining postcapitalist alternatives after the collapse of "real socialism" (the debate over the "socialism of the twenty-first century"),[6] or of imagining postcapitalist alternatives by reinventing precapitalist social relations, prior to conquest and colonialism.

Imagining postcapitalism *after* capitalism haunts the Eurocentric left in its multiple forms, as illustrated, in the last ten years, by the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Imagining postcapitalism *before* capitalism haunts the indigenous movements throughout Latin America. Attempts at combining the two imaginations are visible in such hybrid conceptions as the "socialism of *sumak kawsay*" in Ecuador or "communitarian socialism" in Bolivia. They seem to be failing, because they are reciprocally unintelligible unless an effort at intercultural translation is attempted, which, so far, has not been the case. Common to both is the idea that capitalism and colonialism belong together as forms of domination.

The End of Colonialism Without End

It is as difficult to imagine the end of colonialism as it is to imagine that colonialism has no end. Postcolonial or decolonial studies and struggles in the past three decades have shown how entrenched colonialism is in both private and public life, even many decades after the end of historical colonialism. Again, Eurocentric emancipatory politics has been split into two main responses. One, incapable of imagining the end of colonialism, denies the existence of colonialism itself. The political independence of the colonies thus has meant the end of colonialism; since then, anti-capitalism has been the only legitimate political objective. This line of thinking focuses on class struggle and hence does not acknowledge the validity of ethno-cultural-racial struggles.

The other strand of the critical tradition reads the historical processes leading to independence to show that internal colonialism has continued after independence. It is very difficult to imagine an alternative to colonialism, because internal colonialism is not only, or mainly, a state policy; it is rather a social grammar that permeates social relations, public and private spaces, culture, mentalities, and subjectivities. It is a way of life, a form of unequal conviviality that is often shared both by those who benefit from it and by those who suffer its consequences. According to this critical tradition, the anti-capitalist struggle must be fought side by side with the anti-colonial struggle. Class domination and ethno-cultural-racial

domination feed on each other, which means that the struggle for equality cannot be separated from the struggle for the recognition of difference. The postcolonial challenge has thus been inscribed in all the regions of the world that were once subjected to European colonialism, and the inscription has lasted from the conquest, invasion, or occupation into our time. These dilemmas confronting the progressive political imagination are reflected in the array of subdilemmas that have an even more direct impact upon the theories that have been developed to account for emancipatory social transformation.

The Paradox of Urgency and Civilizational Change

We live in a time torn apart by two extreme and contradictory temporalities disputing the timeframe of collective action. On the one hand, there is a sense of urgency. A long series of phenomena seems to demand that absolute priority be given to immediate or short-term action, because the long-term may not even exist if the trends expressed in those phenomena are allowed to evolve without control: global warming and the imminent ecological catastrophe; unregulated financial capital; the vanishing sustainability of the livelihoods of vast populations (as in the case of water, for example); eternal war and unjust destruction of human life; depletion of natural resources; and, finally, social inequality that gives rise to new forms of social fascism. To be sure, these phenomena that create the pressure of urgency vary in the global North and in the global South, but most of them are present everywhere, albeit in different forms and intensities.

On the other hand, there is a sense that our time calls for deep and long-term civilizational changes. The phenomena above are symptoms of deep-seated structures, which cannot be confronted by short-run interventionism insofar as the latter is as much a part of the civilizational paradigm as the state of affairs it fights. The twentieth century proved with immense cruelty that to take power is not enough and that it is necessary to transform power.[7] This double and paradoxical uncertainty poses new epistemological, theoretical, and political challenges. It invites open-ended formulations of an alternative society whose strength relies more on the intensity with which it rejects the current state of affairs than on precision. Such open-ended formulations consist of affirming the possibility of a better future and another possible world without knowing for sure if the latter is realizable and what it will be like. It is, therefore, a very different utopia from the modern utopias that are at the foundation of the Eurocentric critical tradition.

The coexistence of these polar temporalities is producing great turbulence at the core of Eurocentric theory and practice. But the fact that both senses coexist disfigures the terms of the cleavages and makes them more or less meaningless. Under these circumstances, theoretical

reconstruction in the Eurocentric tradition and style becomes difficult, messy, and unconvincing.

In my view, the World Social Forum (WSF) has shown the bankruptcy of this theoretical tradition and style by responding pragmatically to the unresolved tensions between contradictory temporalities and theoretical claims.

These different timeframes of struggle have come to coexist peacefully in the WSF for a number of reasons. First, they translate themselves into struggles that share the same mix of institutional and post-institutional/direct collective action. This is a significant departure from the Eurocentric leftist theorizing that has dominated the twentieth century. Second, mutual knowledge of such diverse temporalities among movements and organizations has led to the idea that the differences among them are much wider in theory than in practice. A radical call for immediate action could be the best way of giving credibility to the need for a civilizational change, if for no other reason than the unsurpassable obstacles it would be bound to run up against. The WSF also has drawn attention to untheorized possibilities such as those brought about by major movements that combine in their overall activism both immediate-time and civilizational-time frameworks. This has been (and is) the case with the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST, Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil, which combines illegal land occupations to feed hungry peasants with massive actions of popular political education aimed at a much broader transformation of the Brazilian state and society.[8] It is also the case with indigenous movements in Latin America and in India, which are calling for the validity of non-Eurocentric cosmovisions and conceptions of the state, while also fighting to stop the megaprojects that are already under way and have ruined their livelihoods.

The WSF simply opens a space for discussion and coalition-building among movements and organizations, the outcomes of which could be most diverse. An overriding sense of a common purpose, however vaguely defined, to build another possible world tends to deemphasize theoretical polarizations among the movements and invite the latter to concentrate on building more intense coalitions wherever and whenever the affinities are inviting. Selectivity in coalition-building becomes a way of avoiding unnecessary polarization.

Very Old or Very New? The Example of the Yasuní-ITT Project

Emerging in the present is yet another temporal trajectory, this time reflecting political innovation as the very new versus the reinvention of the very old. In order to illustrate this difficulty in valorizing adequately new/old fields of alternatives, I will refer briefly to one of the transformations that has recently been proposed in Latin America: the Yasuní-ITT project in Ecuador.[9] It is an alternative to the prevalent developmentalist-extractivist

capitalist model of development in most of the global South. It calls for an international co-responsibility of a new type, a new relation among more and less developed countries, and it aims at a new post-oil model of development. Ecuador is a poor country, despite being—or because of being—rich in oil. Its economy depends heavily on oil exports: oil income constitutes 22 percent of the gross national product and 63 percent of exports. The human and environmental destruction in Amazonia caused by this economic model is truly impressive. As a direct consequence of oil exploitation by Texaco and later by Chevron, between 1960 and 1990 two entire Amazonian peoples disappeared: the Tetetes and the Sansahauris.

The Ecuadorian initiative tries to break loose of this past and proposes that the Ecuadorian state vouches to leave unexploited the subsoil oil reserves estimated at 850 million barrels in three blocs of the Amazonian National Park of Yasuní, one of the most richly biodiverse regions of the planet, on the condition that the more developed countries reimburse Ecuador by half the income Ecuador would surrender as a consequence of this decision. According to government estimates, the exploitation will generate, in the course of 13 years, an income of 4 to 5 billion euros, while emitting 410 tons of CO^2 into the atmosphere. This could be avoided if Ecuador were to be compensated with two billion euros. This money would go to environmentally correct investments, such as renewable energies, reforestation, etc.; the money would be received as warranty certificates, credits that the "donor" countries would retrieve, with interest, should Ecuador decide to engage in oil exploitation.

Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, this proposal does not aim to create a carbon market; it rather aims to prevent carbon emissions. It does not limit itself to appealing to the diversification of energy sources; it suggests the need to reduce energy demands. It combines western environmental concerns with indigenous conceptions of the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth). It vindicates the right of nature to be protected as a living entity whenever the stability and regeneration of its vital cycles are threatened. It proclaims the idea of *sumak kawsay*, good living, as an alternative to the western conceptions of development, all of them considered unsustainable because they rely on infinite growth. It must be assessed as an indigenous contribution to the entire world. It has actually earned more followers as it has become clearer that environmental degradation and the unfair pillaging of irreplaceable natural resources are leading to the collective suicide of humankind.

What is at stake is the first great, concrete break with the developmentalist-extractivist economic model. The possibility of its becoming a precedent for other, similar initiatives in other countries is very threatening to global capitalism, and, particularly, to the powerful oil interests. On the other hand, the proposal demands an equally new pattern of international cooperation, a cooperation sustainable over the course of many years and capable of addressing two equally legitimate interests: Ecuador's interest in preserving its national sovereignty, given the risks it incurs in internationalizing its development plans; and the

interest of international taxpayers that their contributions not be used for ends not previously agreed upon. This will be a very different type of cooperation than the one that has prevailed in the center-periphery relations in the modern world-system.

This proposal raises several theoretical and political challenges, including how to deal with its temporal identity. Is it new because it aims at a postcapitalist future and constitutes an unprecedented novelty within the logic of modern development or, rather, is it new because it calls for an unprecedented return to, or reinvention of, an ancient precapitalist past grounded in indigenous, non-western conceptions of nature?

The matter becomes even more complex once we realize the initiative aims at the future by pointing to the past, and even to an ancient past. For a mode of thinking molded by the modern conception of linear time, this is absurd: whatever aims at going back to the past is old, not new. To be minimally consistent, it must involve an invention of the past, in which case the why and how of the invention become the issues.

The Ghostly Relation Between Theory and Practice

For the past 30 years, the most advanced struggles have had as protagonists social groups whose political existence Eurocentric critical theory (and the political left it founded) has not acknowledged: women, indigenous peoples, peasants, Afro-descendents, *piqueteros*, the unemployed, gays and lesbians, *indignados*, occupiers. These social groups very often organize themselves in ways totally different from those privileged by Eurocentric critical theory.

Consider the grassroots organizations developed by liberation theology, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas, and the transformative constitutionalism that began with the 1988 Constitution of Brazil, and was followed by many other constitutions in the 1990s and 2000s; the collapse of the traditional oligarchic parties and the emergence of parties of a new type; the Argentinian *piqueteros* and the MST in Brazil; the indigenous movements of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and the *Frente Amplio* of Uruguay; the emergence of self-designated revolutionary processes emerging out of liberal democratic elections; the successive victories of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the coexistence of popular power organizations with liberal democratic institutions; the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, and José Mujica in Uruguay; the struggle of the whole subcontinent against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (ALCA); the alternative project of regional integration, *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, or the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas). These practices and initiatives cannot but be recognized as progressive,

although most of them do not really fit the major theoretical traditions of the Eurocentric left, and may even contradict them. As an international event and a meeting point for so many practices of resistance and projects for an alternative society, the WSF has added a new dimension to this mutual ignorance and has created the conditions for a broader and deeper reflection on this problem.

The blindness of theory renders practice invisible or undertheorized, whereas the blindness of practice renders theory irrelevant. The blindness of theory can be seen in the way in which the conventional left parties, together with the intellectuals at their service, have initially refused to pay attention to the WSF and minimized its significance, or in the often racist views of the Eurocentric left with regards to the indigenous movement. This mutual misencounter generates, on the practice side, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary spontaneity and innocuous, self-imposed restriction, and, on the theory side, an equally extreme oscillation between the post-factum zeal and arrogant indifference to what is not amenable to reconstruction.

This ghostly relation yields political facts, made evident by the WSF process, decisive for our understanding of the present situation on the left.

Who Is the Enemy?

The discrepancy between short-term certainties and long-term uncertainties has never been so wide. For the last three decades, neoliberal capitalism has been subjecting social relations to the laws of the market. The exponential growth of social inequality, the brutal intensification of exploitation and exclusion confers to the resistance struggles a strong sense of short-term urgency and allows for ample convergences regarding short-term goals (struggles against savage privatizations, social and economic injustice, bailouts of the banking system, unregulated financial markets, budget cuts in social policies, scandalous fiscal bonanzas for mining companies, the International Monetary Fund's one-size-fits-all recipes, land-grabbing, neo-extractivism, etc.). What remains unclear is if the struggles are aimed at confronting capitalism on behalf of socialism or some other postcapitalist future, or, on the contrary, against *this* type of capitalism (neoliberalism) on behalf of a type of capitalism with a more human face.

The increasing uncertainty of the long-term in left politics is expressed in the transition from the certainty of the socialist future as the scientific result of the development of the productive forces, as found in Marx, to the binary of socialism or barbarism formulated by Rosa Luxemburg, to the idea that "another world is possible" that presides over the WSF. The long-term has always been the strong horizon of critical theory and left politics.

How to Measure Success or Failure?

For some, the crisis of the left since the 1970s is manifested in a certain retrogression of the class struggle and in its partial replacement by the so-called identity and cultural turns and the struggles they privilege. The WSF has been both a symptom and a confirmation of this transformation. For others, this has been a period teeming with innovation and creativity, in which the left has renovated itself through new struggles, new forms of collective action, new political goals.

Inconsequential Extremisms?

There is a theoretical extremism of a new kind. It concerns polarizations that are not directly linked to concrete political organizations, nor do they carry significant consequences.

As regards the subjects of *social transformation*, the polarization is between those for whom the struggles for social emancipation are to be fought by well-defined historical subjects, the working class and its allies, and those for whom such struggles are open to a plurality of ill-defined collective subjects, be they all the oppressed, "common people therefore rebels" (Subcomandante Marcos), the movement of movements (WSF), or the *multitude* (Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt).

Concerning the *goals of the social struggle*, the polarization is between the seizure of power and the total rejection of the concept of power, that is to say, between the statism that has prevailed on the left, one way or the other, and the most radical anti-statism.

Concerning *organization*, the polarization is between those for whom some kinds of centralized organizations are necessary to carry out successful struggles, such as parties and trade unions, and those who reject any kind of centralism or even any kind of organization beyond that which emerges spontaneously in the course of the collective action, by the initiative of the actors themselves as a whole.

We are facing, therefore, polarizations of a different kind, between new and more demarcated positions. This does not mean that the previous ones have disappeared; they have just lost their exclusivity and centrality.

To a great extent, such disjunctions are due to the fact that transformative political mobilizations in our time are not confined to the cultural universe of the Eurocentric left as we have known it. On the contrary, they go far beyond it. They belong to very distinct cultural, symbolic, and linguistic universes, and the disjunctions they give rise to will not be mutually intelligible without intercultural translation.[10]

While Eurocentric critical theory and left politics have been historically developed in the global North, indeed in only five or six countries of the global North, the most innovative and effective transformative left practices of recent decades have occurred in the global

South. The western critical tradition has developed in light of the perceived needs and aspirations of European oppressed classes, not in light of those of the oppressed classes of the world at large. Both from a cultural and a political economy point of view, the "European universalism" that this tradition embodies and the Frankfurt School celebrated, is indeed a particular reading of a particular reality.

Today, a wide variety of transformative progressive practices occur in the former colonial world outside Europe or North America, in unfamiliar places, and are carried out by different people who often speak very different, non-colonial or less hegemonic colonial languages, and whose cultural and political references are non-western. Moreover, when we translate their discourses into a colonial language, there is often no trace of the familiar concepts with which western left politics have been historically built, such as revolution, socialism, the working class, capital, democracy, and human rights. Instead, we encounter concepts such as land, water, territory, self-determination, dignity, respect, good living, and Mother Earth.

Theorizing After the WSF

The WSF originated in the global South based on cultural and political premises that defied all the hegemonic traditions of the Eurocentric left.

The experience of the WSF has made an important contribution to unraveling the ghostly relationship between theory and practice. It has made clear that the discrepancy between the left in books and the left in practice is one more western problem. In other parts of the world and even among non-western populations of indigenous peoples and immigrants in the West, there are other understandings of collective action, for which such a discrepancy does not make sense. The world at large is full of transformative experiences and actors that are not educated in the western left. Moreover, scientific knowledge, which has always been granted absolute priority in the western critical tradition, is considered by the new popular movements as only one kind of knowledge among many others.

In this way, the WSF poses a new epistemological question: if social practices and collective actors resort to different kinds of knowledge, an adequate evaluation of their value for social emancipation must be premised upon a new epistemology, which, contrary to hegemonic epistemologies in the West, does not grant a priori supremacy to scientific knowledge (heavily produced in the North). In other words, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. In order to capture the immense variety of critical discourses and practices and maximize their transformative potential, an epistemological reconstruction is needed. We do not need alternatives so much as we need an alternative thinking of alternatives.

Such a reconstruction must start from the idea that the hegemonic left critical tradition is colonialist, imperialist, racist, and sexist. It is imperative to go South and learn from the South. Such an epistemology in no way suggests that North-centric critical thinking and left politics must be discarded and thrown into the dustbin of history. Its past is, in many respects, honorable and has significantly contributed to the liberation of the global South. What is needed is an intercultural dialogue and translation among different critical knowledges and practices: South-centric and North-centric, popular and scientific, religious and secular, female and male, urban and rural, and so forth.

The WSF's other contribution to the theory/practice conundrum lies in the way it has refused to reduce its openness for the sake of efficacy or political coherence. While there is an intense debate inside the WSF about this issue, I am convinced that the idea that there is no general theory of social transformation capable of capturing and classifying the immense diversity of oppositional ideas and practices present in the WSF has been one of its most innovative and productive principles.

The coalitions and articulations made possible among individual participants and among social movements are generated from the bottom up, and tend to be pragmatic and to last for as long as they are seen as furthering each movement's objectives. While in the tradition of the conventional left, particularly in the global North, politicizing an issue tends to polarize it, often leading to factionalism, in the political mobilizations of the last 15 years and particularly in the global South, politicization goes hand in hand with depolarization, with the search for common grounds, and with agreed-upon limits to ideological purity or ideological messiness.

Throughout the twentieth century, left politics gradually lost contact with the practical aspirations and options of the activists engaged in concrete political action. Between concrete political action and theoretical extremism, a vacuum was formed. This new political culture represents an attempt at overcoming the ghostly relationship between theory and practice.

Conclusion

Distancing ourselves from Eurocentric critical thinking is a precondition for the fulfillment of the most crucial theoretical tasks of our time: that the unthinkable be thought, that the unexpected be assumed as an integral part of the theoretical work. Vanguard theories, by definition, do not let themselves be taken by surprise. In the current context of social and political transformation, we need *rearguard* theories. I have in mind theoretical work that follows and shares the practices of social movements very closely, raising questions, establishing synchronic and diachronic comparisons, symbolically enlarging such practices by

means of articulations, translations, and possible alliances with other movements, providing contexts, clarifying or dismantling normative injunctions, facilitating interaction with those who walk more slowly, bringing in complexity when actions seem rushed and unreflective, and simplicity when action seems self-paralyzed in reflection. The grounding ideas of a rearguard theory, then, are: craftsmanship rather than architecture; committed testimony rather than clairvoyant leadership; intercultural approximation to what is new for some and very old for others.

We face modern problems for which there are no modern solutions. We live in a "post" or "neo" Westphalian world in which the state shares the field of international relations with frequently more powerful non-state actors. Sovereignty is being eroded, while powerful states and non-state actors coalesce to take control of the lives of people and of natural resources in less powerful states. Capitalism is experiencing one of the most destructive moments in its recent history, as witnessed in new forms of primitive accumulation by dispossession, from land-grabbing to the theft of wages and bank bailouts; in the subjection to capitalist law of common goods and resources; in the eternal renewal of colonialism, revealing, in old and new guises, the same genocidal impulse, racist sociability, thirst for appropriation, and violence exerted upon resources deemed infinite and upon people deemed inferior. The criminalization of social protest, paramilitarism, and extrajudicial executions complement the scene.

Of course, western modernity has also produced a critical tradition that, from the beginning, has questioned both the problems and the solutions proposed by bourgeois and liberal politics, Marxism being the most prominent example. But Marxism shares too much of bourgeois, western modernity, not only its philosophical and epistemological foundations, but some of its proposed solutions, such as the belief in linear progress, the unlimited use of natural resources as part of the infinite development of the forces of production, or even the idea that colonialism might be part of the progressive western narrative, albeit with some qualifications.

In light of this, the need for creating a distance vis-à-vis the Eurocentric tradition seems increasingly urgent. This need, however, is not determined by a sudden intellectual or political awareness. Its formulation is in itself a historical process deriving from the ways in which western modernity, both in its bourgeois and Marxist versions, has come to be embodied in political processes across the globe in the last 200 years. As global capitalism and its satellite forms of oppression and domination have expanded, more and more diverse landscapes of peoples, cultures, repertoires of memory and aspiration, symbolic universes, modes of livelihood and styles of life, conceptions of time and space, etc., have been dialectically included in the conversations of humankind through untold suffering and exclusion. Their resistance,

often through subaltern, clandestine, insurgent cosmopolitan networks, has managed to confront public suppression carried out by capitalist and colonialist forms of physical, symbolic, epistemological, or even ontological violence. The end result of this exclusionary inclusion has been a tremendous expansion of hermeneutic communities, some public, some clandestine, some worldwide, some local, some western-based, some non-western-based.

This is the core characteristic of our time, one condition that is still to be fully acknowledged, theorized, and accounted for. This being the case, it follows that the repertoire of the modes, models, means, and ends of social transformation are potentially much vaster than those formulated and recognized by western modernity, including its Marxist versions. Ultimately, keeping a distance from the Eurocentric tradition amounts to being aware that the diversity of world experience is inexhaustible, and that, therefore, it cannot be accounted for by any single general theory. Keeping a distance allows for the counterposing of the epistemologies of the South to the dominant epistemologies of the global North.

This is a revised and abridged version of "Creating a Distance in Relation to Western-Centric Political Imagination and Critical Theory," in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), published here with permission of the author.

1. On the difficulties of constructing a new critical theory, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Why Is It So Difficult to Construct a Critical Theory?," *Zona Abierta*, no. 82–83 (1998), pp. 219–229.
2. We know that human rights are not universal in their application. Four international regimes of human rights are consensually distinguished in the world in our time: the European, the Inter-American, the African, and the Asian regimes. For an extended analysis of the four regimes, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense*, pp. 330–337; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation* (London: Butterworths, 2002), pp. 280–311; and the bibliographies cited.
3. The conventional understanding of human rights includes some or all of the following characteristics: they are universally valid irrespective of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they operate and of the different human rights regimes existing in different regions of the world; they are premised upon a conception of human nature as individual, self-sustaining, and qualitatively different from non-human nature; what counts as a violation of human rights is defined by universal declarations, multilateral institutions (courts and commissions), and established, global (mostly North-based) nongovernmental organizations; the recurrent phenomenon of double standards in evaluating compliance with human rights in no way compromises the universal validity of human rights; the respect for human rights is much more problematic in the global South than in the global North.
4. See more on this in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (London: Verso, 2007).
5. For an extensive analysis, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *If God Were a Human Rights Activist* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
6. On the topic of socialism of the twenty-first century, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Socialism, 21st Century," *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 21 May 2007, online at: http://www.ces.uc.pt/opiniao/bss/182en.php.
7. The idea of refusing to take power has been popularized on the basis of an

incorrect interpretation of the ideas of Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Neozapatistas. See John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

8. See also Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Flávia Carlet, "The Movement of Landless Rural Workers in Brazil and their Struggles for Access to Law and Justice," in *Marginalized Communities and Access to Justice*, Yash Ghai and Jill Cottrell, eds. (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 60–82.
9. On intercultural translation, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).