

BOOK REVIEW

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS, *DECOLONISING THE UNIVERSITY. THE CHALLENGE OF DEEP COGNITIVE JUSTICE*, 2017, CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PRESS, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, ISBN (10) 1-5275-0003-9, (13) 978-1-5275-0003-7, 457PAGES

The University is at a crossroads. It has been resistant to social change throughout its different histories in different parts of the world. Yet it has also changed considerably over the years. It has been subject to influence from both internal and external forces and continues to be so today, also being a site of conflict as with any other institution. I would argue that it is caught up in the struggle for hegemony, certainly in Western countries, but also beyond. This brings to the fore interesting subversive practices which are part and parcel of the struggle for renegotiation of relations of hegemony. I would also argue that the widely diffused models of universities are those reflecting the interests of hegemonic forces which are often at odds with the interests of subaltern groups or nations some of whom, at various historical times, sought to decolonise in particular ways – Julius Nyerere’s speeches and policies, for the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, come to mind. People in western and non-western parts of the globe seek to reimagine and provide signposts for re-negotiating hegemonic university relations through subversive practices both within and outside the precincts of the established universities. In the latter case, they do so through the emergence of alternative spaces and institutions with subaltern interests at heart. In the former case, they engage in action ‘in and against’ established institutions. The alternative spaces can be sporadic (e.g. sit-ins and sit-outs, occupy movements with alternative libraries and tent learning) or of longer duration (e.g. the Cooperative University¹ network in the UK).

1 www.co-op.ac.uk/cooperativeuniversity

All these alternative initiatives feature in the literature. The book under review is, in my estimation, one of the most provocative and inspiring examples of this kind. Written by one of the finest sociologists around, it cannot be otherwise. Boaventura De Sousa Santos has been constantly scouring, over the years, epistemologies that take us beyond Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge. This process includes his earlier work in the Brazilian favelas. In this book, Boaventura De Sousa Santos provides a *tour de force* with regard to the sociology of knowledge surrounding the evolution of universities and dissonances or ruptures encountered at different stages of these institutions' history. One cannot, as he persuasively argues, disconnect discussions around universities and higher seats of learning from those concerning epistemology and therefore the question and nature of knowledge. The limitations of the knowledge concerned and its connection with the institution are, as one would expect, underlined. This is, after all, very much in keeping with Boaventura's insights concerning epistemologies of the South (De Sousa Santos, 2016) and issues of epistemicide (the Western colonial appropriation or attempt at 'killing' of knowledge embraced and propounded by subaltern groups) and cognitive injustice. The projected hegemonic view of the University is decidedly Neo-colonial and Eurocentric. The book, a boon for readers of this journal interested in postcolonial issues, culminates in an insightful overview of some of the most forward looking subversive and subaltern polyphonic approaches to university education found predominantly in southern contexts such as Chiapas and Brazil. Latin America, with its tradition of participatory popular education, also reflected in the popular university in such places as Peru (supported by José Carlos Mariátegui in *the Peruvian case*), is at the forefront of this exposition. Great attention is devoted to such SSM²-oriented institutions as the *Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandez* (ENFF), named after a prominent Brazilian sociologist. The ENFF is closely connected to the *Movimento Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (*Movimento Sem Terra*, in short: MST), the landless peasant movement about which we have had 'copy' in this journal. Also foregrounded in this regard is the UNITIERRA (*Universidad de la Tierra*) network of peasant universities in Chiapas with its base in San Cristóbal de las Casas. The figure of Gustavo Esteva, in connection

2 Subaltern Social Movements (Kapoor, 2011)

with this network of what I would call 'learning webs', would immediately suggest Ivan Illich as a major influence (see Pradesh and Esteva, 1998) rather than Paulo Freire who, for his part, serves as a key source of inspiration to the MST and, by association, the ENFF.

Needless to say, of the two, the Brazilian school faces the greater threat. As Boaventura states, it suffered attacks (including ransacking) during the period of the interim post-Dilma government (after the *Golpe Blanco* – white coup). I would now assume that it will suffer greater attacks under the Right-wing government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro. The attempts to deny it the status, accorded by the Lula government, of a tertiary level institution, will no doubt intensify as would be the hitherto foiled attempts to deny Paulo Freire the title of 'Patron of Brazilian Education'. With regard to the popular, and also polyphonic, nature of this type of university (open to different voices), let us not forget that Boaventura himself was a main proponent, at one of the World Social Forums, of the establishment of the *Universidade Popular dos Movimentos Sociais* (Popular University of Social Movements).

The need to search for epistemological signposts from outside the Eurocentric world and excavate subjugated knowledges and histories, besides highlighting pockets of contemporary innovative practice, is key for a decolonizing education responsive to the different realities of the world. In the first place, cognitive justice must be restored. The West, as Boaventura and many other authors have indicated (e.g. Vandana Shiva with regard to food production and other soil practices), has taken credit for initiatives and concepts that should have been attributed to other contexts. This constitutes cognitive injustice. This applies to Western patenting of knowledge unabashedly expropriated from Indigenous and other subjugated peoples. Boaventura's chapter on Ibn Khaldun, recognised, in many circles, as one of the founding figures of the social sciences, is very instructive. What I find remarkable, in Boaventura's book, is his argumentation regarding the manner in which a recognised Western pillar of Sociology, Emile Durkheim, whose studies are *de rigueur* for any aspiring sociologist, seems to owe so much to Khaldun without any recognition, on the Frenchman's part, of any indebtedness to the 14th century Tunis-born scholar - cognitive injustice. Boaventura pulls no punches when asking

something to this effect: Would one expect a 19th century French luminary to acknowledge the intellectual influence of a 14th century North African Muslim ensconced, I would dare add, in a territory that would eventually (1881) become a French protectorate (around the time Durkheim was writing)? I can hear the colloquial rider: ‘not on your life’. This reminds me of the Italy-based Egyptian scholar, Mahmoud Salem Elsheikh’s term ‘the debtor’s syndrome’ (Elsheikh, 1999, p. 38). In Elsheikh’s case, it is the indebtedness of the West to Islamic and Arab (not to be conflated) thought.

This includes the establishment of universities. While Boaventura gives pride of place to a University in Mali, others recognise Arab universities as extant forerunners to the medieval European ones (Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco and Al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt, the latter mentioned in the book). Others, such as Ruth Hayhoe and Qiang Zha (2006), would mention the Chinese academies in this regard.

All told, we are presented with an erudite, insightful, courageously-argued and forward looking compendium of writings that coalesce into a persuasive argument. It constitutes a massive contribution to the literature on decolonization, higher education and the sociology of knowledge. It contains the by now prominent discussion, by the author, concerning the University as an institution that is standing at a crossroads.³ The University has alternative paths from which to choose given that the old Eurocentric and elitist Humboldtian ideal, connected with *Bildung*, is well past its sell-by-date. Times have changed and geographies of knowledge have expanded. There is no longer – indeed, there probably never was – an exclusively western solution to world problems. Different epistemologies ‘call all in doubt’, to adapt John Donne’s famous phrase with regard to the Eurocentric trends of his time. The University, in its mainstream form, seems to have, by and large, chosen the neoliberal path rendering it responsive to current hegemonic

3 It developed out of a 2010 keynote delivered at the Aula Magna Studiorum Bologna (University of Bologna) on the occasion of the XXII Anniversary of the Magna Charta Universitatum. An earlier version was published in the journal *Human Architecture*. Two colleagues and I had the pleasure of including it in the section on Higher Education in the *International Critical Pedagogy Reader* (Darder et al, 2015). This is a revised version.

western Capitalist interests ('hegemonic globalisation' in Boaventura's terms). The focus, for the most part, as indicated in this book, is on efficacy, proletarianisation of academic staff as service providers (they include ever increasing adjunct academics on fixed contracts, forming part of the precariat) and students as consumers. There are however other pathways for the university to consider. Some 'alternative, grassroots oriented' centres are doing so already (Mayo, 2019), providing directions for a polyphonic university in the making, often marked by subversivity. For those of us who are inspired by them, Boaventura's book provides much grist for the mill.

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