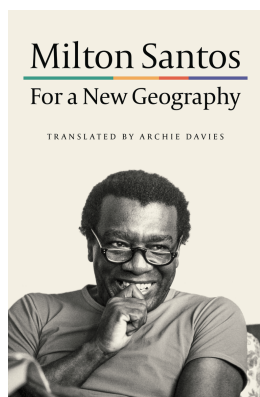


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# Book Reviews

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**Milton Santos [1978] 2021: *For a New Geography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Translated by Archie Davies.**



The Black Brazilian geographer Milton Santos is arguably one of the most influential radical geographers from the formerly colonized world, though possibly unfamiliar to many readers of this journal. Originally published as *Por uma Geografia Nova* in São Paulo in 1978 shortly after his return from two years at the University of Dar es Salaam, Santos envisioned this as the first of five volumes articulating ‘the general theme of *Human Space*’ (p. 3). In his terrifically informative and thoughtful introduction, the translator Archie Davies notes that the remaining four volumes were not published as planned, but Santos did publish another nine monographs (including one in English, *The Shared Space*, in 1979). This volume, as its title indicates, seeks to lay out a

vision for a ‘New Geography’ capable of making sense of the world Santos inhabited. Consisting of 18 short chapters, the book is organized around three interlinked lines of argument.

The first part critiques Geography as it was in 1978. Working through a remarkable breadth (by current standards) of French, German, Russian and Anglophone geographical scholarship ranging over the best part of two centuries, Santos takes the reader from ‘founders’, through environmental determinism and the regional tradition, to the post-1945 ‘new’ geographies (spatial science, models and systems thinking, behavioral geography). Notwithstanding this succession of ‘revolutions’, he argues that little of importance has changed. He demonstrates that this first-world scholarship is blinded by its focus on spatial units of analysis (regions, cities, isotropic planes), blissfully ignoring the shaping effect of the global economic processes so central to the third world he inhabited.

Arguing that the global discipline was ‘occupied by North American thought’ (p. 64) after 1945, Santos’ critique long predates contemporary attempts to decolonize mainstream Geography. He castigates geographers for treating space as Newtonian rather than socially constructed, and for ignoring time and thus how contemporary landscapes are a palimpsest of previous landscapes and production systems. He saw the mathematization of Anglophone geography as elevating method and data collection over the careful theorization that attends to reality. Spatial science theories ‘are nothing less than ... forms of philosophical idealism, if not of abstract empiricism’ (p. 66), treating ‘human liberty as absolute’ (p. 53).

In the second section, Santos turns to the question of how space should be studied, arguing that the discipline is in crisis because geographers have failed to carefully conceptualize space—despite this being their distinctive disciplinary role within the social sciences. He advances a very contemporary conception of space. Citing Whitehead, Einstein and Leibnitz (uncannily like David Harvey 18 years later in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*), he contends that space is relational, an emergent social construct that is shaped by the mode of production but which in turn also shapes socio-ecological processes. This is essentially Soja's socio-spatial dialectic, with Santos drawing on Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* two years before Soja popularized it among Anglophone geographers. He critiques Marxist scholarship for not taking space seriously and stresses that space and time are intimately related. Distinguishing space from landscape, he makes the claim that 'spatial structure in the past is in the present [and ...] present space is also future space' (p. 114).

Third, Santos lays out his vision of what a revolutionary New Geography should look like. First and foremost, it means thinking globally: situating what is happening locally within the context of the capitalist globalization that is a 'perverse universalization, because under its façade of generalization is discrimination: the increasing power of some and the increasing poverty and vulnerability of the immense majority' (p. 131). Second, it means conceptualizing societal and biophysical processes as inseparable and co-constitutive. While these are familiar lines of argument today, Santos advanced them some two decades before most radical Anglophone geographers turned their attention to them.

Oddly, given the many parallels in their work, Samir Amin (a third-world Marxist who conceptualized in the 1970s how capitalist globalization triggers dependence and stagnation in the now decolonized third world) does not make it into the otherwise comprehensive bibliography. Writing at a time when state-led development was leaving the stage, Santos stresses the importance of the state in shaping space at various scales. The argument culminates with what he argues should be conceptually key to this New Geography: relationally constructed socio-spatial formations, enabling 'the study of human societies ... permanently reconstructing space inherited from previous generations, across the many instances of production' (p. 150).

Santos proceeds through conceptual vignettes and aphorisms rather than the kind of rigorous book-length argument we have come to expect from the likes of Harvey, placing more responsibility on the reader to piece the arguments together. The volume is also, by now, an historical account of Geography in the 1970s. Yet it is a remarkable piece of scholarship: for the range of geographical and philosophical thinking that Santos ranges over, for the sophistication of his thinking, and for his capacity to anticipate key developments in first-world geographical political economy. It is also a reminder of what is lost when Anglophone and first-world perspectives colonize global scholarship.

While Santos spent most of his time and energy in Brazil, France and Africa, he was also based at the University of Toronto for a time (1972–3), moved a bit within early US radical geography circles, published in *Antipode* in 1977, and received attention in the English-speaking world when *The Shared Space* was published in 1979. Yet his scholarship largely disappeared from the Anglophone canon thereafter, only now being revived through the efforts of historians of geographic thought. Readers of this book will be made aware of how attending to the thinking of geographers from the post-colony could (have) reshape(d) the trajectory of first-world radical/critical geography, and of the limits of Anglophone blinkers. They will also no doubt wonder which other scholars of the post-colony these blinkers have made invisible, and how their contributions can be recovered.

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