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# A Non-Occidental West?

## Learned Ignorance and Ecology of Knowledge

*Boaventura de Sousa Santos*

### Abstract

In this article I argue that, in spite of the apparently unshakable hegemony of the historical, philosophical and sociological arguments invoked by the canonical history of Europe and the world to demonstrate the uniqueness of the West and its superiority, there is room to think of a non-Occidental West. By that I mean a vast array of conceptions, theories, arguments that, though produced in the West by recognized intellectual figures, were discarded, marginalized or ignored because they did not fit the political objectives of capitalism and colonialism at the roots of Western modernity. In the article I tackle specifically three topics: the conceptions of antiquity, modern science and a teleology of the future. Among many others who might be selected, I resort to three eccentric figures – Lucian of Samosata, Nicholas of Cusa and Blaise Pascal – to exemplify some of the paths that might guide us in the construction of a non-capitalist, non-colonialist intercultural dialogue. Such paths are here designated as those of learned ignorance, ecology of knowledge, wager on another possible world and artisanship of practices.

### Key words

ecology of knowledge ■ learned ignorance ■ Lucian of Samosata ■ Nicholas of Cusa ■ Blaise Pascal ■ post-colonialism

**I**S A non-Occidental West possible? In order to show what I mean specifically by Occidentalism, and whether a non-Occidental West is possible or not, I shall first discuss an author, Jack Goody, whose work has been dedicated to dismantling every one of the historical and sociological arguments invoked by the canonical history of Europe and the world to demonstrate the uniqueness of the West. My focus is his most recent book, *The Theft of History* (2006). Throughout this book, the author refers to the

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‘West’, meaning Europe, ‘often western Europe’, a small region of the world which, for various reasons and mainly from the 16th century onwards, managed to impose its conceptions of past and future, of time and space, on the rest of the world. It has thus made its values and institutions prevail, turning them into expressions of western exceptionalism, thereby concealing similarities and continuities with values and institutions existing in other regions of the world. The hegemony of this position has reached such proportions that it is surreptitiously present even in the authors who have given more credit to the achievements of other regions of the world. Goody mentions Joseph Needham, Norbert Elias, Fernand Braudel and Edward Said who, he argues, end up being Occidentalists in their struggle against Eurocentrism. ‘A trap,’ he adds, ‘postcolonialism and postmodernism frequently fall into’ (Goody, 2006: 5). According to Goody, a true ‘global history’ is only possible to the extent that both Eurocentrism and Eurocentric anti-Eurocentrism, both Occidentalism and Orientalism, are superseded. Such history is more accurate on the epistemological level and more progressive on the social, political and cultural levels. Only this kind of history will allow the world to recognize itself in its infinite diversity, which includes as well the infinite diversity of similarities and continuities. This kind of history puts an end to all teleologies, because the latter always presupposes electing a specific past as a condition to legitimize a unique future.

Is such history possible? Yes, if it is understood as being situated in the plurality of places and times from which it is written, hence as always having a partial nature. To what extent is the global history proposed by Goody partial? Goody thinks that the best way to fight Eurocentrism in a non-Eurocentric way is to show that all the things attributed to the West as being exceptional and unique – be it modern science or capitalism, individualism or democracy – have parallels and antecedents in other world regions and cultures. The West’s preponderance, therefore, cannot be explained by means of categorial differences, but rather by means of processes of elaboration and intensification.

Goody’s conception of history has the great merit of proposing a humble West, a West sharing with other world regions a much broader mosaic of human creativity. Acknowledging that western creativity is relative implies negating the power of the reasons invoked to impose it worldwide. A more plausible explanation lies in the reasons of power, the ‘guns and sails’, with which the West knew how to arm itself. The partiality of this history consists in that the humbleness of the West vis-à-vis the world is reached by concealing the processes, themselves not humble at all and indeed quite arrogant, by means of which some versions of the achievements of the West managed to impose themselves internally, at the same time that they imposed themselves on the rest of the world. To be sure, Goody is aware of this, but by not giving it emphasis enough he suggests that the West’s geographical unity (problematical in itself) is transferred to the unity of its political, cultural and institutional achievements. Thus, what is questioned is the exceptionalism of the West’s achievements, not the historical

processes that led to our understanding of them today. Continuity with the world conceals the internal, categorial discontinuities. In a word, a humble West may turn out to be an impoverished West.

Could this be an insidious form of Occidentalism? The very term – Occidentalism – has generated some controversy in recent years. At least two very distinct conceptions can be identified. First, Occidentalism as a counter-image of Orientalism: the image that the ‘others’, the victims of western Orientalism, construct concerning the West.<sup>1</sup> Second, Occidentalism as a double image of Orientalism: the image the West has of itself when it subjects the ‘others’ to Orientalism.<sup>2</sup> The first conception carries the reciprocity trap: the idea that the ‘others’, as victims of western stereotypes, have the same power – because they have the same legitimacy – to construct stereotypes regarding the West. The second conception and the critique of the hegemonic West it implies are now a legacy of critical theory and underlie Jack Goody’s oeuvre. To pursue it further, two paths are conceivable. The first one, pursued by Goody in *The Theft of History*, consists in identifying the West’s external relativity, that is to say, the continuity between the innovations attributed to the West and similar experiences in other world regions and cultures. The second one consists in identifying the West’s internal relativity, that is to say, the infinite diversity of western experiences and the continuity or discontinuity among those that succeeded and ended up being identified as specific of the West, and those that were abandoned, suppressed or simply forgotten. Either of these paths is legitimate. However, since either of them can be pursued *ad infinitum*, the global history or sociology to which either of them leads will always be partial. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, it is worth pursuing both with equal perseverance.

In this article I focus on the second path, taking off from Goody’s own arguments. Among the many thefts of history analyzed by Goody, I isolate three: the conceptions of antiquity, modern science and a teleology of the future. I will try to show that these thefts against alien, nonwestern property also took place among western co-proprietors and that from these inside thefts the West emerged greatly impoverished. We live in a time in which criticizing the West in the West comes close to self-flagellation. To my mind, this stance is necessary and healthy, given the damage brought about by the imperialism and neocolonialism on which the hegemonic West feeds itself. I believe, nonetheless, that devolving some of the objects stolen inside the West itself is crucial to create a new pattern of interculturality, both globally and inside the West. There is little to be expected from the interculturality currently maintained by many in the West if it does not entail retrieving an originary experience of interculturality. In the beginning was interculturality, and from there we went on to culturality. Only an intercultural West will want and understand the interculturality of the world and contribute to it actively. The same is probably true of other world cultures, past and present.

To my way of thinking, it is imperative to enlarge the historical experience of the West, namely by giving voice to western traditions and

experiences that were forgotten or marginalized because they did not conform to the imperialist and Orientalist objectives prevailing after the convergence of modernity and capitalism.<sup>3</sup> I convene these experiences and traditions not out of historical interest. The aim is to intervene in the present as if it had other pasts beyond the past that made it into what it is today. If it could have been different, it can be different. My concern is to show that many of the problems confronting the world today result not only from the waste of experience that the West imposed upon the world by force, but also from the waste of experience that it imposed upon itself to sustain its own imposing upon the others.

As regards antiquity, Goody (2006: 26–67) argues that the idea of the uniqueness of classical antiquity – *polis*, democracy, freedom, economy, rule of law, art, *logos* – is a Hellenocentric and teleological construction which, against the truth of the facts, aims to attribute the uniqueness of modern Europe to a beginning as unique as modern Europe itself. Such reasoning loses sight of the continuity between the achievements of classical Greece and the cultures with which it had close relations, from Persia to Egypt and from Africa to Asia, and neglects the latter's contribution to the cultural legacy appropriated by the West. In this article I resort to Lucian of Samosata (125–180) to illustrate the existence of another classical antiquity, an antiquity that is centrifugal vis-à-vis Greece's canonical achievements and multicultural in its roots. I am interested in Lucian of Samosata because I believe he can assist us with one of the tasks I consider crucial to reinvent social emancipation: distancing ourselves from the theoretical traditions that led us to the deadend in which we find ourselves.

Regarding modern science, Goody engages in dialogue with Joseph Needham in his monumental *Science and Civilization in China* (1954–). According to Needham, up until 1600, as far as science is concerned, China was as advanced as Europe, if not more advanced. Only after the Renaissance, a cultural process exclusive to Europe, was Europe able to gain advantage over China by converting science into exact knowledge, based on mathematized hypotheses about nature and systematic experimental verification. Goody (2006: 125–53) refutes this break or categorial differentiation based on the Renaissance and its alleged affinity with the capitalist ethos (the relation between exact knowledge and profit established by the bourgeoisie). According to him, there was no scientific revolution and modern science is not qualitatively different from previous science; it is but the intensification of a long-lasting scientific tradition. I am not engaging in this debate. What I contest is the fact that, although duly highlighting the antecedents of the Renaissance and the existence of other renaissances in other cultures and times, Goody nonetheless agrees with Needham – and indeed with the conventional history of European modernity – as regards the Renaissance's homogeneous characteristics and their relations with modern science. The truth is that in the Renaissance there were many different conceptions, some of them swerving substantially from the ones that came to ground the notion of exact knowledge underlying modern

science. In order to illustrate one such conception, I resort to Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), a great Renaissance philosopher, whose theories had no followers because they could never be used to support the arrogance with which the West engendered Orientalism and its double image, Occidentalism.

Finally, *The Theft of History* is a radical critique of the teleology prevailing in the canonical, Eurocentric tradition of European and world history. Teleology consists in projecting into the West's more or less remote past some unique characteristic or asset that explains the West's preponderance in the present world and the linear certainty of its future trajectory. Goody critiques teleology by questioning, one by one, every originary asset or characteristic which is supposedly at the origin of the categorial or qualitative difference of the West in relation to the rest of the world. In this regard as well, my aim is not to question Goody, but rather to introduce another tradition of western modernity, a tradition that has been forgotten or marginalized precisely because it rejects history's teleology, and so cannot be put at the service of the West's religious and civilizing certainties. The tradition I mean is Blaise Pascal's wager.

Lucian of Samosata, Nicholas of Cusa and Blaise Pascal are my points of departure to reflect on the theoretical and epistemological conditions to supersede Occidentalism and put an end to the theft of history.

### **Philosophy for Sale**

Let us suppose that, because they stopped being useful to their followers, the philosophies and theories that have accompanied us for the past decades or, in some cases centuries, were offered for sale: determinism, free will, universalism, relativism, realism, constructivism, Marxism, liberalism, structuralism, functionalism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, pragmatism, postcolonialism, and so on and so forth. Let us likewise suppose that not only the followers of given theories had come to the conclusion that their own theories had become useless, but also all the others. They would therefore not be interested in buying any of them. Potential buyers, if any, would be necessarily outsiders vis-à-vis the world – let us call it the academic world – in which the different theories had developed. Before deciding to buy, they would naturally ask two questions: how useful is this or that theory for me? How much does it cost? To avoid being left unsold, the different theories, or their creators for them, would have to reply persuasively, so as to suggest to the calculating mind of the potential buyer a good relation between utility and price. To be sure, since a large number of theories would be offered for sale, the competition among them would be very high. The difficulty the theories would have in answering the questions would greatly depend on the fact that theories are used to imposing their usefulness, not to offering it and defining it in terms of truth – the truth, of course, being priceless. The outcome of the sale would depend not only on the buyers' purse, but also on the value they would ascribe to the uses of the theories; the latter would have no way of influencing either the purse, the value or the decisions.

I am sure we all agree that if such a sale would in itself be a great scandal, the hierarchy of value-price it would establish among the theories would be even greater. But the scandal of scandals would be if lucky buyers, finding utility in theories which we consider rival (for instance, determinism and free will), were to buy them as one lot for the sake of complementary uses.

Lest the scandal turn on me, let me add that, if such a sale were to take place, it would not be unheard of. Precisely such a sale was proposed around 165 CE by a centrifugal figure of classical antiquity, a marginal classic of western culture, who was born a ‘barbarian’, a ‘Syrian’, in Samosata, by the river Euphrates. I mean Lucian of Samosata and refer to his dialogue ‘The Sale of Creeds’ (1905: 190), in which Zeus, with the assistance of Hermes, offers for sale the various schools of Greek philosophy, some of them brought in by their own founders: Pythagoreanism, Diogenes, Heraclitus and Democritus (one lot), Socrates, Chrysippus, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Peripatetic Scepticism. Hermes attracts the potential buyers, all of them merchants, by shouting loudly, ‘For sale. A varied assortment of live creeds. Tenets of every description. Cash on delivery; or credit allowed on suitable security!’ (1905: 190). The ‘merchandise’ gets displayed and the merchants keep coming. The latter have the right to question every philosophy offered for sale, and they invariably begin by asking how useful each philosophy may be to the buyer, his family, or his group. The price is set by Zeus who, oftentimes, simply accepts the offers made by the buying merchants. The sale is totally successful. Hermes orders the theories to stop offering resistance and follow their buyers, and makes a final announcement: ‘Gentlemen, we hope to see you here tomorrow, when we shall be offering some lots suitable for plain men, artists and shopkeepers’ (1905: 206).

In this as in other satirical works, Lucian of Samosata aims to create distance vis-à-vis the established knowledge. He turns the theories into objects, rather than subjects, creates a field of externality about them, and submits them to tests for which they were not designed. He does not allow them to argue amongst themselves, rather urging them to contend for the attention of strangers whose preferences they have no way of controlling. He subjects them to the chaos of the society in which they are produced and shows them that the truth to which they aspire – the truth described by Lucian as ‘this shadowy creature with the indefinite complexion . . . all naked and unadorned, shrinking from observation, and always slipping out of sight’ (1905: 213) – does not lie in corresponding to a given reality, rather in corresponding to a reality yet to be given, to utility in terms of social criteria and objectives in a broad sense.

This distance vis-à-vis the theoretical canon is inscribed in Lucian of Samosata’s own origin and trajectory. Samosata, the city where he was born, now flooded by the Atatürk Dam, in Turkey, had been part of the Commagene kingdom, in ancient Armenia, later absorbed by the Roman Empire as part of the Syrian province. This was a region of very intense

commercial and cultural crossings, endowed with a lively ‘Mischkultur’ in which Greek philosophy and literature coexisted with Christianity and Judaism, as well as with many other cultures of the near and middle East. Lucian, a Hellenized Syrian who called himself a ‘barbarian’, left his homeland to pursue his career as a rhetorician in the cultural centres of the Roman world.<sup>4</sup>

To my mind, today the distance vis-à-vis the received theoretical tradition is more necessary than ever, due to one of the most important features of our time, perhaps the one that best defines its transitional character (Santos, 1995). I mean the discrepancy between strong questions and weak answers. Strong questions address not only our options of individual and collective life but also and mainly the roots and foundations that have created the horizon of possibilities among which it is possible to choose. They are, therefore, questions that arouse a particular kind of perplexity. Weak answers are the ones that refuse to question the horizon of possibilities; they cannot, therefore, abate this perplexity and may, in fact, increase it. Questions and answers vary according to culture and world region. However, the discrepancy between the strength of the questions and the weakness of the answers seems to be common. It derives from the current variety of contact zones involving cultures, religions, economies, social and political systems, and different ways of life, as a result of what we ordinarily call globalization.<sup>5</sup> The power asymmetries in these contact zones are as large today, if not larger, as in the colonial period, and they are more numerous and widespread. The contact experience is always an experience of limits and borders. In today’s conditions, it is the contact experience that gives rise to the discrepancy between strong questions and weak answers.

The specificity of this discrepancy in the paradigmatic transition we are now living results from the fact that the problems of our time – the problems that call for strong questions – no longer concern the privileged knowledge of our time, i.e. modern science, to the extent that it became institutionalized and professionalized. In its origin, science was fully aware that the most important problems of existence escaped it, such as, at the time, the problem of God’s existence, the meaning of life, the model or models for a good society, the relations between human beings and other creatures which, not being human, shared with humans the dignity of being likewise creations of God. All these problems converged to another one, and one far more of a dilemma for science: the problem that science cannot account for the foundation of its scientificity, that is to say, of scientific truth as truth. From the 19th century onwards, however, as a result of the increasing transformation of science into a productive force of capitalism, a double reduction of such a complex relation among ways of knowing occurred.

On the one hand, the epistemological hegemony of science turned it into one single, accurate, and valid kind of knowledge. As a result, only the problems for which science could have an answer were deemed worthy of consideration. Existential problems were reduced to what could be said scientifically about them, which entailed a dramatic conceptual and



analytical reconversion. Thus emerged what I call, after Ortega y Gasset (1987: 39), *orthopedic thinking*: the constraint and impoverishment caused by reducing the existential problems to analytical and conceptual markers that are strange to them. With the increasing institutionalization and professionalization of science – concomitant to the development, pointed out by Foucault, from the ‘universal intellectual’ to the ‘specific intellectual’ – science began to give answers only to those problems raised by itself. The immensity of the underlying existential problems disappeared, due to another reduction meanwhile occurring. As is usually the case regarding any hegemony, the hegemony of science spread beyond science, subjecting philosophy, theology and the humanities in general to a process of scientification with as many multiple forms as the multiple faces of positivism. As orthopedic thinking stretched beyond science and the disciplines became institutionalized and professionalized, the problems they dealt with were only the problems they themselves could formulate. The result was academic answers for academic problems that were increasingly more distant and reductive vis-à-vis the existential problems at their origin, increasingly more irrelevant answers to account for the latter.

This vast process of epistemological monopolization did not occur without contradictions. They can be seen precisely in the discrepancy between strong questions and weak answers that characterizes our time. I select one such question at random: if there is only one humanity, why such a wide diversity of principles, conceptions and practices of human dignity and why such obvious divergences and even contradictions among them? The answer offered by orthopedic thinking consists in reducing said diversity to the abstract universalism of human rights: there is diversity as long as it is recognized by universal human rights. It is a weak answer because it negates what it affirms (universalism) by affirming what it negates (diversity). If human rights are multiple and internally diverse, there is no reason to believe that such multiplicity and diversity confine themselves to the ones that human rights contain (Santos, 2007c). Suffice it to realize that the internal differentiation of human rights, far from being an auto-poetical, systemic process, is the result of social contradictions and struggles which, among many other manifestations, translate themselves into rights.

To be sure, the discrepancy between strong questions and weak answers is a general feature of our time. It constitutes its epochal spirit, but its impact on the global North and the global South is very different. Weak answers have some credibility in the global North, because that is where orthopedic thinking developed most and also because, once translated into politics, weak answers secure the continuation of the global North’s neo-colonial domination of the global South, allowing the citizens of the global North to benefit from such domination without being aware of it. In the global South, weak answers translate themselves into ideological impositions and all kinds of violence in the citizens’ daily lives, excluding the elites, the small world of the imperial South, the ‘representation’ of the global North in the global South. In the epochal spirit, however, the feeling

that this difference of impacts, even if real and abyssal, conceals the tragedy of a common condition grows deeper and deeper: the saturation of the *junk knowledge* incessantly produced by an orthopedic thinking that has long stopped thinking of ordinary women and men. This condition expresses itself in the ungraspable lack of credible and prudent knowledge capable of securing us all – women, men, and nature – a decent life.<sup>6</sup>

This lack does not allow us to identify, let alone, define, the true dimension of the problems afflicting the epoch. The latter appear as a set of contradictory feelings: exhaustion which does not conceal lack; unease which does not conceal injustice; anger which does not exclude hope. Exhaustion results from incessant victory indoctrination where citizens endowed with the simple lights of life see only defeat, solutions where they see problems, expert truths where they see interests, consensuses where they see resignation. Unease derives from the increasingly more apparent absence of reasonableness from the rationality proclaimed by orthopedic thinking, an injustice-producing machine that sells itself as a machine of happiness. Anger emerges at social regulation disguised as social emancipation, individual autonomy used to justify neoslavery servitude, the reiterated proclamation of the impossibility of a better world to silence the idea, very genuine if diffuse, that humanity and nature both are entitled to something much better than the current status quo. The masters of orthopedic thinking take advantage of exhaustion to turn it into total fulfilment: the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). As to unease and anger, they are ‘treated’ with medical prostheses, the anesthesia of consumption and the vertigo of the entertainment industry. None of these mechanisms, however, seems to function in such a way as successfully to disguise, by functioning efficaciously, the abyssal dysfunction from which its necessity and efficacy stem.

This epochal spirit suggests the same distancing vis-à-vis the theories and disciplines as the one displayed in Lucian of Samosata. Distancing implies the predominance of a negative epistemology and a concomitant, equally negative, ethics and politics. The reasons to reject what exists ethically, politically, and epistemologically are far more convincing than those invoked to define alternatives. Fully to assume our time means to acknowledge this disproportion and act from there. In other words, it means to radicalize rejection and look for alternatives while recognizing their radical uncertainty.

On the epistemological level, the only one I here deal with, rejection implies a certain kind of epistemological direct action. It consists in taking over the theories and disciplines regardless of their owners (schools, trends of thought, institutions) with a threefold objective: first, to show that the theories and disciplines lose their composure and serenity when they are challenged by questions, no matter how simple, which they did not ask themselves; second, to identify complementarities and complicities where the theories and disciplines see rivalries and contradictions; third, to show that the efficaciousness of theories and disciplines lies as much in what they

show as in what they conceal, as much in the reality they produce as existent, as in the reality they produce as nonexistent.

To accomplish the first objective it is useful to conceive of experiments in which the theories and disciplines are left with no option but to resort to non-theoretical and non-disciplinary responses to questions they themselves have not foreseen. When questioned, their orthopedic manipulation of reality will be of no use to them. The answer will not be orthopedic. To accomplish the two remaining objectives, let us resort to Lucian of Samosata and metaphorically offer for sale, just like Zeus and Hermes, the different theories and disciplines. The latter, having consolidated themselves by dictating various forms of utility to society, will not readily accept that their utility be the object of assessment. Likewise, the theories and disciplines which, on behalf of capitalism, have theorized the universality of competition as opposed to cooperation, the economy of egoism as opposed to the economy of altruism, and buying/selling as opposed to the gift will not accept being themselves offered for sale, and by squatters, at that. Assuming the condition of our time consists in not only rejecting orthopedic thinking but also looking for alternatives from the point of view of their radical uncertainty. Before I engage in identifying these alternatives, let me analyze the two major uncertainties confronting our time.

*The paradox of finitude and infinitude.* The first uncertainty concerns the inexhaustible and ungraspable diversity of social experiences in the world. The liberation movements against colonialism and the new social movements – feminism, ecology, the indigenous movement, the Afro-descendent civil rights movement, the peasant movement, liberation theology, the urban movement, the LGBT movement – in addition to enlarging the scope of the social struggles brought along new conceptions of life and human dignity, new symbolic universes, new cosmogonies, gnoseologies and even ontologies. Paradoxically, this process, pointing as it does to the infinitude of human experience, occurred along with another, seemingly contradictory one, which gradually revealed the finitude of the planet earth, the unity between humanity and the nature inhabiting the world (the Gaia hypothesis), and the limits of life sustainability on earth. What we call globalization contributed, in a contradictory way, to deepen a twofold experience of infinitude and finitude.

How is it that in a finite world the diversity of human experience is potentially infinite? This paradox places us, in turn, face to face with an epistemological lack: the knowledge we lack to capture the inexhaustible diversity of the world. The uncertainty caused by this lack is even greater if we keep in mind that the diversity of world experience includes the diversity of knowledge existing in the world. Which kinds of knowledge could reveal the diversity of the world experience? How to go about identifying, evaluating and hierarchizing the many and so diverse kinds of knowledge constituting the experience of the world? How to articulate and compare the kinds of knowledge we do know with the kinds of knowledge we do not know?

*The paradox of urgency and civilizational change.* We live in a time torn apart by two extreme and contradictory temporalities disputing the time frame of collective action. On the one hand, there is a sense of urgency. Global warming and the imminent ecological catastrophe, the conspicuous preparation for a new nuclear war, the vanishing life sustainability (water, for example) of vast populations, the uncontrolled drive for eternal war and the violence and unjust destruction of human life it causes, the depletion of natural resources, the exponential growth of social inequality giving rise to new forms of social despotism, social regimes only regulated by extreme power differences or status hierarchies of a new kind, neofeudal hierarchies. All these facts seem to impose that absolute priority be given to immediate or short-term action as the long term may not even exist if the trends expressed in those facts are allowed to evolve without control. Most certainly the pressure of urgency lies in different factors in the global North and in the global South, but it seems to be present everywhere.

On the other hand, there is a sense that our time calls for deep and long-term civilizational changes. The facts mentioned above are symptoms of deep-seated structures and agencies, which cannot be confronted by short-term interventionism, as the latter is as much part of the civilizational paradigm as the state of affairs it fights. The 20th century proved with immense cruelty that to take power is not enough, that, rather than taking power, it is necessary to transform power. The most extreme versions of this temporality even call for the transformation of the world without taking power.

This double and paradoxical uncertainty poses new epistemological and political challenges. It invites open-ended formulations of an alternative society, the strength of which has more to do with rejecting the current state of affairs than with defining alternatives. They consist in affirming the possibility of a better future and another possible world<sup>7</sup> without knowing if the latter is possible and what it will be like. It is, therefore, a very different utopia from modern utopias.

In order to face these challenges, I resort to two forgotten traditions of western modernity: Nicholas of Cusa's learned ignorance, to confront the first uncertainty, and Pascal's wager. Both conceptions were formulated by authors who lived the uncertainties of their time very intensely. Their doubts were not methodical, as in Descartes, but rather epistemological or even ontological. They were both ignored precisely because they did not go well with the certainties which western modernity aimed to guarantee. That is to say, they are at the antipodes of the orthopedic thinking that prevailed in the following centuries. They were ignored but, by the same token, they were not colonized either. They are, therefore, more transparent, both as regards their potential and their limits. Since they did not take part in the modern adventure, they stayed in the West but remained marginal to the West. They would have been useless, if not dangerous, for an adventure which was as much epistemological as political: I mean the imperial project of global colonialism and capitalism which created the abyssal divide between what

today we designate as global North and global South.<sup>8</sup> The traditions created by Nicholas of Cusa and Pascal are the South of the North, as it were, and are thus better prepared than any other to learn from the global South and collaborate with it towards building epistemologies capable of offering credible alternatives to orthopedic thinking.

### **Learned Ignorance**

Nicholas of Cusa, philosopher and theologian, was born in Germany in 1401 and died in Umbria in 1467. Between 1438 and 1440, he wrote the work entitled *De Docta Ignorantia* (Cusa, 1985). Confronted with the infinitude of God (whom he called the ‘Absolute Maximum’), the author engages in a reflection around the idea of knowledge in not knowing. The important thing is not to know, he argues; the important thing is to know that you do not know. ‘Indeed,’ says Nicholas of Cusa, ‘no greater knowledge can endow any man, even the most studious, than to discover himself supremely learned in his ignorance, which is proper to him, and he will be the more learned, the more ignorant he knows himself to be’ (1985: 6). What is new about Nicholas of Cusa is that he uses the excuse of God’s infinitude to propose a general epistemological procedure that is valid for the knowledge of finite things – the knowledge of the world. Since it is finite, our thought cannot think the infinite – there is no ratio between the finite and the infinite – but it is limited even in its thinking of finitude, in its thinking of the world. All we know is subject to this limitation, hence, to know is, above all, to know the limitation. Hence the notion of knowledge in not knowing.

The designation ‘learned ignorance’ may sound contradictory, for the learned person is, by definition, not ignorant. The contradiction is, however, only apparent, since learnedly not-knowing requires a laborious knowing process on the limitations of what we know. In Nicholas of Cusa there are two kinds of ignorance: ignorant ignorance, which is not even aware that it does not know, and learned ignorance, which knows what it is that it does not know. We may be tempted to think that Nicholas of Cusa simply parrots Socrates, but this is really not the case.<sup>9</sup> Socrates is not aware of the idea of infinitude, which only appears in western thought through Christian-based neo-Platonism.<sup>10</sup> This idea, undergoing multiple metamorphoses (progress, emancipation), is to play a crucial role in the construction of the paradigm of western modernity. But its fate inside this paradigm is completely different from that in Nicholas of Cusa’s thought. The dominant versions of the paradigm of modernity turned the infinite into an obstacle to overcome: the infinite is the infinite zeal to overcome it, controlling it, taming it, reducing it to finite proportions. Thus, infinitude, which from the outset ought to arouse humility, becomes the ultimate foundation of the triumphalism underlying the hegemonic rationality, that of orthopedic thinking. On the contrary, in Nicholas of Cusa infinitude is accepted as such, as consciousness of a radical ignorance. The aim is not to control or master it, but to acknowledge it in a twofold way: through our total ignorance of it; and through the limitations it imposes on the accuracy of the knowledge we

have of finite things. Before the infinite, no arrogance is possible, only humility. Humility does not mean negativity or skepticism. Reflective acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge implies an unsuspected positivity. Indeed, to acknowledge the limits is somehow to be already beyond them (André, 1997: 94). The fact that it is not possible to reach the truth with accuracy does not release us from searching for it. Quite the opposite, what lies beyond limits (the truth) rules what is possible and demandable within the limits (veracity, as the search for the truth).

It comes as no surprise that, almost six centuries later, the dialectics of finitude/infinity characterizing the present time is very different from Nicholas Cusa's. The infinity we face is not transcendental, resulting, rather, from the inexhaustible diversity of human experience and the limits to know it. In our time, learned ignorance will entail a laborious work of reflection and interpretation of those limits, of the possibilities they open and the exigencies they create for us. Moreover, the diversity of human experience includes the diversity of ways of knowing human experience. Our infinity has thus a contradictory epistemological dimension: an infinite plurality of finite ways of knowing human experience in the world.

The finitude of each way of knowing is thus twofold: it is made up of the limits of what it knows about human experience in the world; and the limits (albeit much larger) of what it knows about the world's other ways of knowing, hence about the knowledge of the world supplied by other ways of knowing. The knowledge that does not know is the knowledge that fails to know the other ways of knowing which share with it the infinite task of accounting for the experiences of the world. Orthopedic thinking is no adequate guide for us in this uncertainty, because it grounds a kind of knowledge (modern science) that does not know well enough the limits of what it allows one to know of the experience of the world, and even less well the other kinds of knowledge that share with it the epistemological diversity of the world.

Actually, besides not knowing the other kinds of knowledge, orthopedic thinking refuses to acknowledge their very existence. Among the available experiences of the world produced as non-existing, the kinds of knowledge that do not fit orthopedic thinking become particularly important. Thus, one of the main dimensions of the sociology of absences is the sociology of absent ways of knowing, that is to say, the act of identifying the ways of knowing which the hegemonic epistemology produces as nonexistent.<sup>11</sup>

To be a learned ignorant in our time is to know that the epistemological diversity of the world is potentially infinite and that each way of knowing grasps it only in a very limited manner. In this respect, too, our condition is very different from Nicholas of Cusa's. Whereas the not-knowing knowledge he postulates is singular and hence entails one learned ignorance alone, the learned ignorance appropriate to our time is infinitely plural, as plural as the possibility of different ways of knowing. At any rate, just as in the case of Nicholas of Cusa's learned ignorance, the

impossibility of grasping the infinite epistemological diversity of the world does not release us from trying to know it; on the contrary, it demands that we do. This demand, or exigency, I call ecology of knowledge. In other words, if the truth exists only in the search for truth, knowledge exists only as ecology of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Once we are aware of the differences that separate us from Nicholas of Cusa, it is easier to learn his lesson.

### **Ecology of Knowledge**

Being infinite, the plurality of knowledge existing in the world is unreachable as such, since each way of knowing accounts for it only partially, and from its own specific perspective alone. On the other hand, however, since each way of knowing exists only in that infinite plurality of knowledge, none of them is able to understand itself without referring to the others. Knowledge exists only as a plurality of ways of knowing, just as ignorance exists only as a plurality of forms of ignorance. The possibilities and limits of understanding and action of each way of knowing can only be grasped to the extent that each way of knowing offers a comparison with other ways of knowing. Such comparison is always a reduced version of the epistemological diversity of the world, the latter being infinite. What I call ecology of knowledge lies in this comparison.

The limits and possibilities of each way of knowing reside, thus, ultimately, in the existence of other ways of knowing. They can only be explored and valorized in comparison with other ways of knowing. The less a given way of knowing knows the limits of its knowing about other ways of knowing, the less aware is it of its own limits and possibilities. This comparison is not easy, but herein lies the learned ignorance we need in our time.

The comparison is difficult because the relations among ways of knowing are haunted by an asymmetry. Each way of knowing knows more and better about itself than about the others. This asymmetry I term epistemological difference. It occurs among ways of knowing within the same culture and more intensely among ways of knowing existing in different cultures. It is also complex because, even though it is an epistemological asymmetry, as regards the praxis of relations among ways of knowing, it does not manifest itself simply as an epistemological question. Actually, it is experienced predominantly as a political question. That is to say, the asymmetry of ways of knowing overlaps the asymmetry of powers. As concerns ideal types, there are two opposite modes of activating this asymmetry. The first one is to maximize it by pushing to the utmost ignorance regarding the other ways of knowing, that is, by declaring the latter's nonexistence. This I call epistemological fascism, because it amounts to violent destruction or concealment of other ways of knowing. Epistemological fascism exists in the form of epistemicide.

The ecology of knowledge faces two problems: (a) how to compare ways of knowing given the epistemological difference; (b) given that the plurality of knowledge is infinite, how to create the set of ways of knowing that partake of the ecology of knowledge. To deal with the former, I propose



translation; to deal with the latter, artisanship of practices. I analyze the topic of intercultural translation elsewhere (Santos, 2004). Here, I focus on the artisanship of practices.

### **Artisanship of Practices**

Just like epistemological fascism, the ecology of knowledge is an epistemological and political option. Since the set of ways of knowing integrating the ecology of knowledge is always limited, how these sets are constituted needs to be defined. In principle, an unlimited number of ecologies of knowledge is possible, as unlimited as the epistemological diversity of the world. Each exercise of ecology of knowledge implies a selection of ways of knowing and a field of interaction in which the exercise takes place. One and the other are defined in terms of non-epistemological objectives. The specific social and political contexts giving rise to the given concern determine the ways of knowing that will integrate a certain ecology-of-knowledge exercise. The concern with preserving biodiversity may lead to an ecology combining scientific, peasant or indigenous knowledge.<sup>13</sup> The concern with fighting discrimination may lead to an ecology of ways of knowing produced by different social movements: feminist, anti-racist, gay, lesbian, human rights, indigenous, Afro-descendants, and so on and so forth. The concern with the spiritual dimension of social transformation may lead to ecologies involving religious and secular ways of knowing, science and mysticism, different liberation theologies (feminist, postcolonial, etc.), western, eastern, indigenous, African philosophies, etc. The concern with the ethical and artistic dimension of social change may include all the aforementioned ways of knowing, as well as the humanities as a whole and literature and the arts.

The ecology of knowledge is the epistemological dimension of a new kind of solidarity among social actors or groups. It is an internally diverse solidarity, in which each group gets mobilized by its own, autonomous mobilization reasons, while believing that the collective actions which may turn such reasons into practical results go way beyond what is possible to carry out by a single social actor or group. The ecology of knowledge signals the passage from a politics of movements to a politics of inter-movements.

This characterization of the reasons that create the need for the ecology of knowledge and select the ways of knowing which, in a concrete situation, integrate it, helps us as well to identify the fields of interaction in which the ecology of knowledge occurs. They do so in the context of social practices already constituted, or to be constituted, whose epistemological dimension is just one among others. From these practices emerge the questions addressed to the various ways of knowing in presence. Such questions are epistemological only to the extent that they are practical, that is to say, to the extent that they have consequences for the context of practices in which the ecology of knowledge takes place. Hence, the ways of knowing are faced with problems which, on their own, they would never pose. In general, the ways of knowing are taken by surprise and are often incapable of solving



them. Crossed interpellation of ways of knowing is an attempt at overcoming such incapacity.

The priority given to practices brings about a fundamental change regarding the ways of knowing in presence. The superiority of a given way of knowing is no longer assessed by its level of institutionalization and professionalization, but rather by its pragmatic contribution to a given practice. One of the motors of epistemological fascism, which has characterized the relation of modern science with other ways of knowing, is thereby deactivated. This pragmatic displacement of the hierarchies of ways of knowing does not cancel out the polarizations among the ways of knowing, but reduces them to those deriving from the practical contributions to the desired action. In this sense, the ecology of knowledge turns all ways of knowing into experimental ways of knowing.

In this regard as well, Nicholas of Cusa's teaching is fruitful. In 1450 he composed three dialogues – *De Sapientia*, *De Mente* and *De Staticis Experimentis* – in which the main character is the Idiot, a simple, illiterate man, a poor craftsman who makes wooden spoons. In the dialogues he engages in with the accredited philosopher (the humanist, the orator), the Idiot becomes the sage capable of solving the most complex problems of existence on the basis of the experience of his active life, to which priority is given over contemplative life. As Leonel Santos says (2002: 73), 'The Idiot is contrasted with the learned, erudite man, one who holds scholarly knowledge grounded in authors and authorities, wherefrom he draws his competence, but one who has lost the sense of use and autonomous cultivation of his own faculties.'

The Orator provokes the Idiot: 'How presumptuous of you, poor Idiot, to thus diminish the study of letters, without which no one progresses!' (2002: 78). The Idiot replies: 'It is not presumption, great Orator, that prevents me from remaining silent, but charity. Indeed, I see you devoted to the quest for wisdom with much futile toil. . . . The opinion of authority turned you, a free man by nature, into something rather like a horse tied to the manger by a tether and eating only what is served to him. Your knowledge feeds on the authority of those who write, it is limited to an alien, not natural pasture' (2002: 79). And he adds: 'But I tell you that wisdom cries out in the markets and its clamor resounds in the squares' (2002: 79). Wisdom expresses itself in the world and in mundane tasks, especially in those that are the world of reason and imply operations of calculation, measurement, and weighing (2002: 81).

In these extremely ironic dialogues, the Idiot is nothing but the propounder of Nicholas of Cusa's learned ignorance.<sup>14</sup> The dialogues show that the great arguments among the schools of erudite knowledge lose their importance unless their relevance for practical life and experience is fully demonstrated. Significantly, Nicholas of Cusa's dialogues take place at the barber's or in the humble craftsman's workshop. The philosopher is, therefore, compelled to argue in a territory that is not familiar to him and for which he was not trained – the territory of practical life. This is the

territory where all practical relations are planned, opportunities calculated, risks measured, pros and cons weighed. This is the territory of the artisanship of practices, the territory of the ecology of knowledge.

### **The Wager**

To face the second condition of uncertainty of our time – not knowing if a better world is really possible – I propose another philosophical suggestion of western modernity now totally forgotten: Pascal's wager. Sharing the same forgetfulness and marginalization as Nicholas of Cusa's learned ignorance, Pascal's wager can also serve as a bridge to other, nonwestern philosophies and to other practices of social interpretation and transformation than those eventually sanctioned by orthopedic thinking. Actually, there is a basic affinity between learned ignorance and Pascal's wager. They both assume the uncertainty and precariousness of knowledge as a condition which, being a constraint and a weakness, is also a strength and an opportunity. They both struggle with the 'disproportion' between the finite and the infinite and try to push to the maximum limit the potentialities of what is possible to think and make within the limits of the finite.

Pascal starts from a radical uncertainty: the existence of God cannot be demonstrated rationally. Pascal says: 'If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible, and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is' (1966: 150). This leads him to ask how to formulate the reasons that might persuade a nonbeliever to change his mind and start believing in God. The answer is the wager. Although we cannot determine rationally that God exists, we can at least find a rational way to determine that to wager on his existence is more advantageous than to believe in his nonexistence. The wager involves a certain risk of winning or losing, as well as the possibility of an infinite gain. To wager on God's existence compels us to be honest and virtuous. And, of course, it also compels us to renounce noxious pleasures and worldly glories. If God does not exist, we lose the wager, but gain in turn a virtuous life, full of good deeds. By the same token, if he does exist, our gain will be infinite: eternal salvation. Indeed, we lose nothing by wagering and the gain can be infinite: 'in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing' (1966: 153).

The wager is rational because, in order to wager on the existence of God, you don't have to have faith. Its rationality is, however, very limited, for it tells us nothing about the real existence of God, let alone about God's nature. Since the existence and nature of God is always an act of faith, Pascal has to find some kind of mediation between faith and rationality. He finds it in custom. Says Pascal: 'Custom is our nature. Anyone who grows accustomed to faith believes it' (1966: 153). That is to say, by wagering repeatedly on the existence of God, the wagerer will end up believing in it.

As in the case of Nicholas of Cusa, the concern derived from the uncertainty of our time is very different from that of Pascal. What is at stake

now is not eternal salvation, the world beyond, but rather an earthly world better than the present one. Since there is no necessity or determinism in history, there is no rational way of knowing for sure if another world is possible, let alone how life would be there. Our infinite is the infinite uncertainty regarding the possibility of another and better world. As such, the question confronting us may be formulated in the following way: what reasons could lead us to fight for such a possibility, if the risks are certain and the gains so uncertain? The answer is the wager, the only alternative both to the theses of the end of history and the theses of vulgar determinism. The wager is the metaphor for the precarious yet minimally credible construction of the possibility of a better world, that is to say, the possibility of social emancipation, without which the rejection of or nonconformity before injustice in our world make no sense. The wager is the metaphor for social transformation in a world in which negative reasons and visions (what is rejected) are far more convincing than positive ones (identifying what we want and how to get there).

The truth is that the wager of our time on the possibility of a better world is very different and far more complex than Pascal's wager. The conditions of the wager are different as is the ratio between the winning and losing risks. What we have in common with Pascal are the limits of rationality, the precariousness of calculations and the awareness of risks. Who is the wagerer in our time? While for Pascal the wagerer is the rational individual, in our time the wagerer is the excluded, discriminated, in a word, oppressed class or social group and its allies. Since the possibility of a better world occurs in this world, only those with reasons to reject the status quo of the present world will wager on this possibility. The oppressors tend to experience the world in which they live as the best possible world. The same is true of all those who, not being directly oppressors, benefit from oppressive practices. As far as they are concerned, it is rational to wager on the impossibility of a better world.

The conditions of the wager in our time also differ largely from those of Pascal's wager. While in Pascal's wager God's existence or nonexistence does not depend on the wagerer, in our time the possibility or impossibility of a better world depends on the wager and the actions resulting therefrom. Paradoxically, however, the risks the wagerer runs are greater. Indeed, the actions resulting from the wager will occur in a world of conflicting classes and groups, of oppressors and oppressed, and so there will be resistance and retaliation. The risks (the possibilities of loss) are thus twofold: risks deriving from the struggle against oppression; and risks deriving from the fact that another and better world is, after all, not possible. Hence, the demonstration that Pascal offered his wagerer is not convincing: 'Whenever there is infinity and where there are not infinite chances of losing against that of winning there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything' (1966: 151).

In our time there are, therefore, many reasons to hesitate and not to risk everything. They are the other side of the prevalence of reasons for

rejecting the current state of affairs over reasons for specific alternatives to it. This has several consequences for the project of the wager on social emancipation. The first one concerns the wager's pedagogy. Unlike Pascal's wager, the reasons for the wager on social emancipation are not transparent. To become convincing, they must be the object of argumentation and persuasion: rather than the wager's demonstrative rationality, the wager's argumentative reasonableness. Since reasonableness is not the monopoly of any single type of knowledge, the wager's pedagogy must take place in conformity with the ecology of knowledge a new type of popular education adequate to the needs of inter-movement politics.<sup>15</sup> The second consequence of the wager's condition of our time concerns the kinds of action deriving from the wager. The radical uncertainty about a better future and the risks involved in fighting for it result in privileging actions focused on the everyday and amounting to improvements here and now in the lives of the oppressed and excluded. In other words, the wager privileges *actio in proximis*. Because of its success, this kind of action strengthens the wagerer's will and satisfies the sense of urgency for changing the world, that is to say, the need to act now lest later be too late. The wager does not fit *actio in distans*, for this would be an infinite risk before an infinite uncertainty. This does not mean that *actio in distans* is not there. It is, but not in its own terms. The changes of the everyday only ratify the wager to the extent that they, too, signal the possibility of social emancipation. In order to do so, they must be radicalized. Radicalization consists in searching for the subversive and creative aspects of the everyday, which may occur in the most basic struggle for survival. The changes of the everyday have thus a double valence: concrete improvement of the everyday and the signals they give of far larger possibilities. Through these signals, *actio in distans* becomes present in *actio in proximis*. In other words, *actio in distans* only exists as a dimension of *actio in proximis*, that is, as the will and reason of radicalization. Through the wager, it is possible to bring the everyday and utopia together, without dissolving into one another. Utopia is what is missing in the everyday to exempt us from thinking about utopia. Ortega y Gasset teaches us that the human being is the human being and her circumstance. I think we must go beyond him and say that the human being is also what is missing in her circumstance for her to be fully human.

## Conclusion

To have shown the possibility of conceiving a non-Occidental West is one of Jack Goody's major contributions for our time. In this article, I have tried to enhance such a possibility. Obviously, there is a wide gap between conceiving of a non-Occidental West and transforming such a conception into a political reality. Actually, I am convinced that it will not be possible to bridge that gap while living in a world ruled by global capitalism. The possibility of a non-Occidental West is closely linked to the possibility of a non-capitalist future. Both possibilities aim for the same result, even though they use very different tools and struggles. The conception of a

non-Occidental West translates itself into recognizing uncertainties and perplexities and turning them into the opportunity for emancipatory, political creativity. Until we confront the uncertainties and perplexities of our time, we are condemned to neo-isms and post-isms, that is to say, interpretations of the present which only have past.

Inspired by Lucian of Samosata, the distancing I proposed vis-à-vis the theories and disciplines constructed by orthopedic thinking is based on the fact that they have contributed to the discrepancy between strong questions and weak answers that characterizes our time. Such discrepancy translates itself into two daunting uncertainties: the one deriving from the incapacity to grasp the inexhaustible diversity of human experience; and the one resulting from aspiring to a better world without the support of a theory of history indicating that a better world is indeed necessary or at least possible. To face these uncertainties, I have proposed two epistemological suggestions based on two particularly rich traditions of western modernity, both marginalized and forgotten by the orthopedic thinking that has dominated for the past two centuries: learned ignorance, the ecology of knowledge deriving therefrom, and the wager. They reveal that erudite knowledge has a naive relationship with the knowledge it considers naive. They denounce the precariousness of knowledge (knowledge that does not know) and the precariousness of acting (wagering on the basis of limited calculations).

These proposals do not aim to eliminate the uncertainties of our time. They rather aim to assume them completely and use them productively, turning from constraint to opportunity. Even though learned ignorance, the ecology of knowledge and the wager are western in their origin, they represent a much broader rationality (because far more aware of their limits) than the rationality that ended up being dominant. Because they were marginalized and forgotten, they kept an openness vis-à-vis nonwestern traditions and problematics which western modernity lost by falling prey to orthopedic thinking. Because they were marginalized and forgotten, these traditions had a similar fate to that of many nonwestern ways of knowing, and so they are today better prepared to learn from them and, together with them, to contribute toward the ecologies of knowledge and interculturality.

Learned ignorance, the ecology of knowledge and the wager do not bring about a kind of social emancipation, let alone a typology of social emancipation. What comes forth is simply reasonableness and the will to fight for a better world and a more just society, a set of ways of knowing and precarious calculations, animated by ethical exigencies and vital necessities. The struggle for survival and liberation and against hunger and violence is the degree zero of social emancipation; in some situations, it is also its maximum degree. Social emancipation is somewhat like the *arte persectoria* of Nicholas of Cusa's Idiot, who makes wooden spoons without limiting himself to imitating nature (there is no spoon in nature) but also without attaining the idea of spoonhood accurately (the spoon's essence belongs to 'divine art'). Social emancipation is, thus, every action aiming at

denaturalizing oppression (showing that, besides being unjust, oppression is neither necessary nor irreversible) and conceiving of it in the proportions it can be fought with the resources at hand. Learned ignorance, the ecology of knowledge and the wager are the ways of thinking present in this action. Indeed, we only have proof of their existence in the context of this action.

### Notes

1. See Buruma and Margalit (2004). For a critique, see Bilgrami (2006) and for a critique of Bilgrami, Robbins (2007). For a very different version of this conception, the Chinese Occidentalism, see Chen (1992).
2. See Carrier (1992), Coronil (1996), Venn (2001) and, most recently, Gregory (2004).
3. On this topic see, among others, Santos (1995, 2004).
4. Lucian of Samosata is still today an eccentric figure of classical antiquity. Some classicists consider him a mere ‘journalist’ or ‘artist’. For an opposing view see, for example, C.P. Jones (1986) and Zappala (1990). A polemical treatment of Lucian as a satirist can be read in Sloterdijk (1987).
5. On the processes of globalization, see Santos (2002: 163–312).
6. The problematics of constructing a prudent knowledge for a decent life is analyzed in Santos (2007a).
7. ‘Another world is possible’ is precisely the motif uniting the social movements and organizations which, since 2001, have animated the World Social Forum (see Santos, 2006).
8. This abyssal division itself became an epistemological condition. On abyssal thinking see Santos (2007b).
9. Both concur, however, that what you know is far less important than what you don’t know, hence the need to give ignorance epistemological priority (see also Miller, 2003: 16).
10. Cf. André (1997: 94).
11. On the sociology of absences see Santos (2004).
12. Cf. Santos (2006: 18–29).
13. Specifically on the new ecological relation between science and other ways of knowing, see Santos (2007a) and Santos et al. (2007: xix–lxii).
14. The idea of privileging ignorance as a pedagogical principle has been approached by many authors, even if from very different viewpoints from Nicholas of Cusa’s. See, for instance, Rancière (1987).
15. Such a project of popular education underlies the proposal for the creation of the popular university of social movements that I have been defending (see Santos, 2006: 148–59).

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