

Chapter 2

The Return of the Territory

Milton Santos

Translated by Lucas Melgaço, Tim Clarke and Carolyn Prouse.

Abstract (by the translators) This chapter is an annotated interpretation and translation of Milton Santos’s key text, ‘O Retorno do Território’. In this chapter, Santos proposes for the first time the provocative concept of ‘used territory’. According to the geographer, used territory should be understood as both the result of historical processes, and the material and social basis of human actions. The idea of a return, indicated in the title, refers to the fact that in spite of the growing transnationalization of spaces through networks, the inhabited and used territories (or the banal spaces) create new synergies that challenge the world to a rematch. The text analyzes the relationships between the global and the local by invoking concepts such as verticalities and horizontalities, and the three forms of what Santos calls ‘happening’: homologous, complementary and hierarchical.

We live with a notion of territory that is inherited from an incomplete *modernity*^{1,2} and from its legacy of pure concepts—concepts that travelled through the centuries largely untouched. It is the use of the territory, not the territory itself, that should be the object of social analysis. The territory is an impure form, a hybrid, a notion that, for this reason, requires constant historical revision. What is permanent about the

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¹Translators’ note (TN): As a matter of emphasis, Santos capitalized a number of words in the original text in Portuguese. We opted, instead, to italicize them, as this is a more common convention in English.

²TN: In his book *A Metrópole Corporativa e Fragmentada: O Caso de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Nobel, 1990) Santos uses the metaphor ‘incomplete modernity’ to describe the metropole of São Paulo as a juxtaposition of traces of modernity (particularly due to economic opulence) and traces of backwardness inherited by the social and political structure. The notion can be understood thus as an unequal and selective modernization.

territory is the fact that it is our constant living environment. It is therefore crucial to understand the territory in order to avoid the risk of alienation, the risk of losing the sense of individual and collective existence, the risk of renouncing the future.

In short, we move, through the centuries, from the ancient individual communion of places and the *universe* to the idea of today's global communion: the universal interdependence of places is the new reality of the territory. In this long journey the *nation-state* was a milestone, a turning point, enthroning a legal-political notion of territory. This notion is derived from the knowledge and conquest of the world, from the *modern state* and the *Enlightenment* to the era of the valorization of so-called natural resources.

Today, nature is historic ... including the so-called 'environment'. Its 'local' value is relative, or in any case, relativized.

In the past, it was the *state*, after all, that defined places—evident from Colbert to Golbery,³ two paradigmatic names with respect to the effective subordination of the *territory* to the *state*. The *territory* was the basis, the foundation of the *nation-state*, and this state was at the same time shaped by the territory. Today, while we experience a dialectic of the concrete world, we have evolved from the already antiquated notion of a *territorial state* to the postmodern one of the transnationalization of the territory.

However, just as before not everything was, shall we say, 'statized' territory, today not everything is strictly 'transnationalized'. Even in places where the vectors of globalization are more coherent and effective, the inhabited territory creates new synergies and ends up challenging the world to a rematch. The active role of the territory makes us think about the beginning of *history*, although nothing is as it was before; hence, the metaphor of the rematch, the return.

Again, we must insist on the relevance, today, of the roles of science, technology and information. If we want to deepen the process of knowledge about this aspect of the total reality, it is not enough to talk about mundialization or globalization where the territory is concerned. The territory is made up of forms, but the used territory⁴

³TN: Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–1683) was a French engineer, geographer, economist and politician who served as the Minister of Finances during the reign of King Louis XIV. Among his concerns as a statesman and strategist was the construction of roads and canals to propel the country's economy, as well as Brazil's competition with its neighbours and with England. Golbery do Couto e Silva (1911–1987) was a general in the army and one of the most important theoreticians and strategists behind Brazil's 1964–1985 military government. He was the creator of the Brazilian National Security Doctrine and in 1966 he published the book *Geopolítica do Brasil*, which strongly influenced the armed forces during the military dictatorship.

⁴TN: The abstract concept of 'território usado' suggested by Santos could be translated into English as either 'used territory' or 'territory in use'. In the text 'The active role of Geography: A manifesto' Santos et al. elaborate further on the definition of the concept: 'An approach that considers the idea of the *used territory* leads to the idea of *banal space*, everyone's space, the whole space. It is the space of all humanity, regardless of its differences; the space of all institutions, regardless of their strength; the space of all companies, regardless of their power' (Santos et al. 2000: 104). See Santos, M. et al. (2000). O Papel ativo da geografia: Um manifesto. *Território*, 5(9), 103–109. A translation of this text into English was published by Antipode:

is made up of objects and actions, and is a synonym for human space, inhabited space. Even the analysis of fluidity⁵—the latter which serves a competitiveness that now governs economic relations—operates along the same lines. On the one hand, we have a virtual fluidity that is offered by objects created to facilitate this flow, which are increasingly technical objects; on the other, objects give us only a virtual fluidity, because real fluidity derives from human actions that are becoming increasingly informed, regulated, normatized.⁶

This reality allows the identification of new divisions⁷ of the territory today, cuts that go beyond the old category of the region. This is a result of the new construction of space and the new functioning of the territory through what I am calling horizontalities and verticalities. The horizontalities are the domain of contiguity, those neighbouring places that meet through territorial continuity. The verticalities are formed by points distant from each other, which are connected by all social forms and processes. From this scheme, we must reclaim François Perroux's idea of banal space, which he bequeathed to geographers and which he suggested to his disciple, Jacques Boudeville, could be tested in Brazil. The idea of banal space, more than ever, must be raised in opposition to the notion that is currently gaining ground in the territorial disciplines: the network.

Networks constitute a new reality that, in some ways, justifies this vertical formulation. But besides the networks, before the networks, despite the networks, after the networks, with the networks, there is the banal space, the space of all, the entire space. The networks constitute only a fragment of the space and the space of a few.

Today, the territory may be formed by both contiguous and networked places. However, the same places that form networks also form the banal space. They are the same places, the same points, but which simultaneously contain different functionalities, perhaps divergent or even opposite ones.

(Footnote 4 continued)

Santos, M. et al. (2017). The active role of geography: A manifesto. *Antipode*, 49(4). Retrieved February 1, 2017, from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/anti.12318/abstract>.

⁵TN: Santos's concept of fluidity of the territory encompasses both transportation (of goods and people) but also that of information (communication of data, money, ideas, orders, etc.). 'One of the characteristics of the world today is the exigence of fluidity to the circulation of ideas, messages, products or money, in the interest of hegemonic actors. The contemporary fluidity is based on technical networks, that are the foundations of competitiveness. Hence: the voracious search for even more fluidity, which leads to the search for even more effective techniques. Fluidity is at the same time cause, condition and result' (Santos, M. (1996). *A Natureza do Espaço: Técnica e Tempo, Razão e Emoção*. São Paulo: Hucitec. p. 218).

⁶TN: We have added the word 'regulated' here, not present in the original Portuguese, in order to ensure the reader fully understands what Santos means by 'normatized' ('*normatizado*', in the original text).

⁷TN: In fact, Santos uses the word '*recortes*' (cut or snip) which in this context can refer to both the divisions of the territory and to the different scales of analysis: a global cut, a local cut.

This simultaneous happening,⁸ made possible thanks to the miracles of science, creates new solidarities: the possibility of a solidary happening, despite all forms of difference between people and between places.

In fact, this solidary happening presents itself in three forms in the current territory: a homologous happening, a complementary happening and a hierarchical happening.

The homologous happening is related to the areas of agricultural or urban production that are modernized through specialized information. These areas lead to a rationality of behaviours presided over by the same information that creates a similitude of activities, producing functional contiguities that give the contours of the area thus defined. The complementary happening is that of the relationship between city and countryside and of the relationships between cities, which is also a result of the modern needs of the production process and of geographically close exchange. Finally, the hierarchical happening is one of the results of the tendency toward the rationalization of activities; it occurs under a command, an organization that tends to be concentrated, which forces us to consider the production of this command, its direction. This rationalization of activities under a concentrated command also contributes to the production of a sense, a meaning, imprinted on people's lives and in the life of the space.

In all cases, information has a role today that is similar to the one that belonged to energy in the remote past. Previously, especially before human existence, what brought together the different parts of a territory was the energy that originated from natural processes themselves. Over the course of history it is information that gains this function, to the point that it is today the true instrument of union between the various parts of a territory.

For the homologous happening and the complementary happening, that is, in the areas of homologous production in the city and in the countryside, the current territory is marked by an everyday life lived by rules that are formulated or reformulated locally. In this case, it is the use of information that tends to generalize. The hierarchical happening, on the contrary, refers to an everyday life that is imposed from outside, led by privileged information—an information that is secret, that is power itself. In the homologous and complementary happenings, we have a dominion of forces that are locally centripetal. The hierarchical happening, on the contrary, is the domain of centrifugal forces. There is undoubtedly in the latter case a centripetalism, but it is a centripetalism of the other.

In the first and second hypotheses, forms are primary, but the techniques are also relevant here, as they incidentally produce the forms used. In the case of the hierarchical happening, norms are primary, but it is politics rather than the techniques that is relevant.

The dialectic in the territory is thus reinforced. We might even say the dialectic of the territory since, by being used, the territory is human and can thus involve a

⁸TN: Santos uses the abstract term 'happening' ('acontecer', in Portuguese) with the global meaning of how actions, things, people and places interact.

dialectic. This dialectic affirms itself through a ‘local’ control of the ‘technical’ portion of production and a remote control of both the ‘technical’ and political portions of production. The technical portion of production allows local or regional cities to have some control over the lands that surround them. This command is based on the technical configuration of the territory, on its technical density and also, in some way, on its functional density, which can also be called informational density. On the other hand, distant control, locally realized through the political portion of production, is accomplished by global cities and their relays in the various territories. The result is the acceleration of the process of alienation of spaces and humanity,⁹ of which a component is the tremendous mobility currently available to people: that maxim of Roman law, *ubis pedis ibi patria* (where my feet are, there is my homeland), has lost or changed its meaning today. Additionally, local and international law are changing in order to recognize the right of those who were not born in a particular place to intervene in that place’s political life.

It is necessary to reflect on the conflict between, on one hand, the act of producing and living (a function of the direct process of production) and, on the other, the forms of regulation related to other instances of production. So, in our time, the importance of labour is renewed, conditioned by the technical configuration of the territory in rural and urban areas, and connected to the immediate process of production. The results of this labour are an important fact in understanding the present society.

Consequently, there is an escalating conflict between local space, a space lived by all neighbours, and global space, inhabited by a rationalizing process and with an ideological content of distant origin. This process and content arrive at each place with objects and rules established to serve them; hence, the interest in reclaiming the notion of banal space, that is, the territory of everyone, which is often contained in the limits of the work of everyone. The arrival of these objects and rules also accounts for the interest in counterposing the notion of banal space to that of networks, the latter being the territory of forms and rules for the service of a few. There is an opposition, therefore, between the entirety of the territory and some of its parts, or points, which is to say, the networks. But what produces, what commands, what disciplines, what normalizes, what imposes a rationality upon networks is the *world*. This world is that of the universal market and of world governments. The International Monetary Fund, World Bank, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, international organizations, global universities, the foundations that foster research by giving money, are all part of an intended world government. They give grounds to a perverse globalization and to attacks made today, in practice and ideology, against the *territorial state*.

When one says *world*, one is speaking mainly about the *market*, which today, unlike before, permeates everything, including people’s consciousness: we speak of

⁹TN: Santos often uses ‘*homem*’ (man) as the general term for humanity. We have decided to interpret ‘*homem*’ as the gender-neutral ‘humans’ or ‘people’ because Santos meant all of humanity, not strictly men. See Chap. 1 for a discussion of the politics of interpretation and translation.

the market of things, including nature; the market of ideas, including science and information; the political market. The political version of this perverse globalization is precisely the democracy of the market. Neoliberalism is the other arm of this perverse globalization, and both of these arms—the democracy of the market and neoliberalism—are mobilized to impede the affirmation of those ways of living whose solidarity is based on contiguity, in the solidary neighbourhood—in other words, in the shared territory. If this coexistence is exposed to an external regulation, it is combined with national and local forms of regulation. The conflict between these norms should be considered a fundamental basis of geographic analysis.

Before the weakening of the current *territorial state*, the scale of the technique and the political scale overlapped. Today these two scales are different and distant from each other. Therefore, the great contradictions of our time emerge when we take the use of the territory into account.

In the democracy of the market, the territory is the support for the networks that transport rules and norms that are utilitarian, partial, partialized, and selfish (from the point of view of hegemonic actors); hence, the proliferation of verticalities. At the same time, horizontalities, though weakened and with limited force, are required to take account of the totality of actors.

The arena of opposition between the market—which singularizes—and civil society—which generalizes—is the territory, in its various dimensions and scales.

For now, the place—no matter its dimension—is the locus of resistance of civil society. However, nothing prevents us from devising ways of extending this resistance to larger scales. In this respect, it is essential to stress the need for a systematic knowledge of reality by analyzing its fundamental aspect, the territory (the used territory, the use of the territory). Foremost, it is necessary to re-envision reality from within, in other words, to question its own constitution at this historic moment. The discourse and the metaphor, that is, the literaturization of knowledge, can and should come later.

The (transnationalized) territory reaffirms itself by way of the place and not only through the new basis of the space, in spite of the new fundamentalisms of the fragmented territory—e.g. new nationalisms and localisms.

It is nevertheless important to remember that, thanks to the miracles enabled by science, technology, and information, the very forces that create fragmentation may, in other circumstances, serve goals precisely opposite to that fragmentation.

The current trend is for places to unite vertically. Everything, everywhere, is being done in favour of this unification. International credit is made available to the poorest countries in order to allow networks to establish themselves in the service of big capital. But places can also unite horizontally, rebuilding a basic common living that is capable of creating local regulations, regional norms...

In the vertical union, the modernization vectors are entropic. They bring disorder to the regions where they settle because the order they create is for their own exclusive and selfish benefit. If they increase horizontal cohesion, it is at the service of the market, though this process tends to erode the horizontal cohesion that serves civil society as a whole.

Yet the effectiveness of this vertical union is always at play and cannot survive except at the expense of strict norms—despite the existence of neoliberalism. In the Brazilian case, these rigid norms to which we have been submitted for ten years¹⁰ come at the sacrifice of the nation.

Meanwhile, horizontal unions can be enlarged by new forms of production and consumption. An example of this enlargement is how farmers come together to defend their interests, allowing them to move from a purely economic form of consumption, necessary to their production, to a locally defined political consumption, which also distinguishes the Brazilian regions from each other. We should bear this in mind when thinking about the creation of new horizontalities. These horizontalities will, from the foundation of the territorial society, find a way to release us from the curse of the perverse globalization in which we are living. They bring us closer to the possibility of creating an other globalization, one capable of restoring humankind to its dignity.

¹⁰TN: It is worth remembering that the text was originally published in 1994. Santos thus refers to the neoliberal governments that came after the Brazilian military dictatorship that formally ended in 1985.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-53825-9>

Milton Santos: A Pioneer in Critical Geography from the
Global South

Melgaço, L.; Prouse, C. (Eds.)

2017, VIII, 165 p. 12 illus., 4 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-53825-9