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Global Social Science: Dislocation of the Abyssal Line and Post-Abyssal Epistemologies and Practices

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Keywords: global social science; colonial sociability; “abyssal” exclusions; denied asylum seekers; “post-abyssal” epistemologies and practices.

Abstract

The essay deals with the hypothesis of a global process of dislocation of the “abyssal line”, adopting the concept of “abyssal exclusions” by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The Portuguese sociologist, inspired in particular by the postcolonial and the decolonial debate, defines abyssal exclusion as a specific type of socio-political “absence” linked to “colonial sociability”, the “invisibilization” of those excluded through a specific process that places subaltern social groups outside the social contract. This perspective proves useful today to frame the development of new forms of social exclusion that reproduce the South within the North. This exploitation is still legitimated by specific forms of “cultural violence”: inferiorization of the alterities and the disavowal of non-western declinations of social order or social justice. This refers in particular to some social experiences that we will analyze, including forms of sociability emerging across Europe between those denied asylum, and situations where forms of exploitation due to colonial sociability live side by side with forms of labor exploitation due to the weakening of social protection in European welfare systems.

But the essay explores how these abyssal absences could also be analyzed as “social emergences”: strategies of existence that manipulate the radical exclusion. Starting from the hypothesis that a dislocation of the abyssal line is underway, the essay proposes a type of research aimed at shedding light on these social experiences through “post-abyssal” epistemologies and research practices.

Introduction

This essay explores the concept of the abyssal line proposed by sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002; 2016; 2017; 2018) in order to analyze the process of “dislocation” of colonial forms of social exclusion within the global North, particularly in Europe. The “abyssal line” is defined as a “border” born with the colonial era that separates forms of metropolitan sociability from colonial ones, and which determines different forms of social exclusion. This line was typically found in colonized territories during historical colonialism, but can now

be observed within territories considered the geopolitical center of the capitalist world-economy¹.

The topics discussed here are based on assumptions of both the post-colonial (among others, Said 1979; Guha, Spivak 1988; Chakrabarty 2000; Bahmbra 2007) and the decolonial debate (among others, Quijano 1991; 2000; Mignolo 2000; Mignolo, Walsh 2018), which, although significantly different in certain aspects, share common theoretical elements fundamental to our analysis. We refer in particular to: (i) the critique of the Eurocentric ideology of modernity; (ii) the close interconnection between the development of a global society, or global capitalism, and colonialism; (iii) an attention to the dynamics that created a hierarchical relationship between human groups and the emphasis on “subaltern” groups; (iv) the persistence of relations of domination, on a global level due to historical colonialism, well beyond the end of formal colonialism; (v) the epistemological critique of Eurocentric thought and the need to look through new lenses (and with new methods) at domination and social exclusion dynamics, as well as at the forms of resistance and struggles for emancipation.

Our analysis is a contribution to the debates surrounding a global social science, highlighting the persistent influence of the legacy of colonialism in the way in which the “global” should be conceptualized. As argued below, the process of modernization and globalization is not a linear historical path of progressive expansion of the values and rights of the modern European social contract, but rather a global experience of exploitation made possible through local processes of inferiorization, dehumanization and invisibilization.

The lines of fracture between geographical contexts and human groups, connected to the process of racialization beginning in the colonial era, led to specific forms of exploitation and social exclusion (Quijano, Wallerstein 1992; Dussel 1995; Maldonado-Torres 2007)². As such, the dynamics of a hierarchization rooted in the colonial experience are vital in understanding the severity of contemporary forms of social exclusion. A key concept of the decolonial debate is the persistence of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000): the end of historical colonialism did not end the inequalities and hierarchies generated by the colonial experience, but on the contrary assumed new forms of coloniality.

Based on research conducted by both ourselves and other researchers, we propose dealing with the social analysis of the contemporary forms of severe exclusion in Europe, evaluating coloniality as an active cultural device. In particular, the essay identifies emblematic processes, such as the reception of asylum seekers in Europe who, having had their asylum requests denied after long waits, become

¹ We refer here to Wallerstein’s world-system perspective (1974; 1979; 1980; 1989; 2011), and to his analysis of the unequal relationships between center, semi-periphery and periphery in the world economic system that began in the sixteenth century. For an analysis of the different interpretation of the concept of world-economy in Wallerstein and Braudel, see Braudel (1977).

² On the centrality of the social construction of race as a constitutive element of the dynamics of hierarchization due to the colonial historical experience, and still acting today, see in particular the works of Fanon (1952; 1961) for the influence they had on post-colonial and decolonial studies, and on Santos’ sociology.

“invisible” even if they are “hyper-visible” (as in the case of refused asylum seekers begging on the streets). We also analyze situations in which forms of exploitation due to colonial sociability live side by side forms of labor exploitation due to the weakening of social protection in European welfare systems.

In the second part of the essay, however, we explore how these abyssal absences can also be observed as “social emergences” (Santos 2018), that is, as strategies of existence that resist and fight the abyssal exclusion. To focus and foster the emergence of such counter-hegemonic practices, a social research practice of a “post-abyssal” nature is needed to build participatory and “non-extractive” knowledge, and to read the “global” as a composition of g-local marginal realities.

1. Representing modernity differently: global social science as a criticism of “trajectorism”

Western rhetoric of modernization was based on the promise of a progressive expansion of the social contract to those who had not yet been included in ownership and consumption: a promise of inclusion to the western proletariat through the implementation of the welfare state (Castel 2003), and to populations of the world periphery. These populations, embracing the western development model, would gradually receive greater “ethical consideration” and that would open the way to possible political balances between universal rights and recognition of differences (e.g, Taylor, Gutmann 1994).

But things haven’t turned out that way. With the end of colonialism, we’ve witnessed new forms of “extractivism” and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), new forms of privatization, a new exploitation of natural and human resources with the use of military force (Mezzadra, Neilson 2017), new global labour slavery and new “social deaths” (Patterson 1982). Things do not move onward: historical modernity seems to betray ideological modernity.

Appadurai refers to this topic as an emerging criticism of “trajectorism” (2013). He presents the ideas of authors who express the cognitive work change the epistemological and ontological habit of assuming that the world’s becoming always has a direction in a cumulative path: «Trajectorism is the idea that time’s arrow inevitably has a telos, and in that telos are to be found all the significant patterns of change, process, and history. Modern social science inherits this telos and turns it into a method for the study of humanity» (Appadurai 2013, 223). Appadurai explicitly talks of a “trajectorism trap”, criticizing the narrative of a global history that projects an ascending trajectory by shifting attention away from leftover individuals, considered as collateral damage within an inclusion process simply postponed.

Trajectorism is strictly interwoven with western capitalist way of thinking, being and doing. Citing Wagner (2001), modernity has to be assumed as a term referring to «a situation, self-created by human beings committed to the modern ideas of autonomy and mastery, in which a certain interpretation of these ideas prevails

over others» (Wagner 2001, 24)³. As stated, the trend of history disavows the great narrative of progress – that gradual enlargement of abundancy through productive technology – and the narrative “starts to fail” (e.g.: Nisbet 1969, Latouche 1991, Wagner 2016).

An increasing number of scholars from different disciplines and orientations started criticizing trajectorism. These scholars distance themselves from the global social sciences that measure the current “level of progress” – from the measurement of humanity based on gross domestic product, individual consumption, income and investment, level of education and so on.

These forms of criticism do not arise from common paradigms of inequality analysis and they can't be placed within a common tradition of analysis rooted in the past. For example, even if each of the scholars we will discuss in more detail is interested in a rereading of the Marx's work, they rarely declare themselves Marxists. On the contrary, their analyses share another core element: a focus on the persistence of the cultural inferiorization processes used to legitimize exploitation – a typical trait of coloniality still present despite the end of historical colonialism.

This is thus the premise to a critical analysis of what happened in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the early years of the new millennium based on the acknowledgment of the plasticity and persistence of the links between colonialism and capitalism. Suffice to think, for example, in Marx's definition of primitive accumulation, about the forms of theft and dispossession that should have been replaced by the new system of modern relations and negotiations between capital and labour, which nonetheless prove to be present around the globe, from Africa to Latin America, and used to expropriate indigenous lands in the name of the best productive use (e.g. Olivares 2014; Van Aken, Ciabbari, Fiamingo 2015). Some facets of proto-capitalism appear fully compatible with its profound change – with globalization we can say – first with the delocalization of industrial production, and then with the expansion of the global working class and the emergence of the financial powers.

In short, the coloniality inherent to the proto-capitalism has changed rather than disappearing. It has given birth to a more complex world-system that we would like to look into in more detail: a world in which, in the former colonies, the local ruling classes become the extractionist agents acting on a mandate from the “center” – going back to Wallerstein's categories – gaining an increasing part of that which is produced and creating a core in former (ex)colonized territories (just think of Brazil or China), while at the same time those fleeing from the peripheries arrive in the center (e. g. in Europe, where forced migrants become new slave laborers). In this scenario, the “center-periphery relationship” as a process of exploitation confirm its importance, even if this relationship finds new geopolitical positions: the center and the periphery coexist in a different way and

³ For in-depth examination of the epistemological roots of modernity, we refer to Borghi (2019) and his analysis about the relationships between infrastructures of experience and the informational basis of policies.

all the more everywhere. Global society is guided by a “developmentalist idea” of Western origin which has multiplied its cultural declinations and spread to new contexts from the original center, while the Western leadership of neoliberal globalization has seen its centrality weaken (Arboleda 2020).

Certainly these processes do not take us back in history, on the contrary they ask for a different representation of history: they shouldn't be represented as a linear historical path of progressive enlargement of the rights set forth in the modern social contract, but rather as an active invisibilization of the exploitation of some to the benefit of the emancipation of others.

2. *The legacy of colonialism in global society: the “abyssal exclusions”*

The global society led by the West, therefore, both in its historical evolution and in its contemporary end point, is far from the promise of progress and inclusion intrinsic to the ideology of western modernization. In our essay, the critical element that interests us most is the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, the inferiorization of those who have been colonized. Because a social construction of hierarchies between social groups, peoples, nations, continents, types of knowledge, values, norms, and traditions are the basis of the most radical forms of social exclusion in contemporary global society, we will analyze these in terms of “abyssal exclusions”.

The power relations born as a consequence of colonial domination did not disappear with the emancipation of the new nation states created by the independence of the former colonies. On the contrary, we are witnessing the continuous reproduction of colonial power relations in economic, political, social, cultural and gender spheres in the global society. As pointed out by Quijano (1992, 14), once colonialism as a political order has been destroyed, *colonialidad* (coloniality) represents the most general way of dominating the world today. The colonality of power is one with global capitalism: race and the division of labour were structurally associated and mutually reinforcing (Quijano 2010). With the discovery of the Americas and the start of European colonial enterprises, the process of Eurocentric modernization as well as the structuring of a modern world-system took alongside the racialization process (Wallerstein 1974; Quijano, Wallerstein 1992; Dussel 1995), with the consequent dynamics of racial exploitation and prejudice produced in Europe and North America by White people committed to an idea of White superiority. Following Desmond and Emirbayer (2009, 336) we use the term *race* as a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, and misrecognized as a natural category. The historical and social process of race hierarchization is relevant in understanding the structural violence inherent to coloniality: violence takes its legitimacy in the devaluation of the human nature of others, assumed to belong to another race, creating another category that is not fully human. As already observed, when it comes to the Latin American debate on *modernidad/colonialidad* and on the processes of

inferiorization of the colonized individual, the “coloniality of being” refers to “the violation of the meaning of human alterity to the point where the alter-ego becomes a sub-alter” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 257)⁴. In this interpretation of human hierarchies and domination we believe the nexus of racialization, inferiorization, material exploitation is useful for understanding contemporary forms of social exclusion. We furthermore maintain that this mechanism is still present today, and is always at the basis of dynamics of social exclusion of an abyssal type, in which violence and appropriation define sociability.

In the wake of the post-colonial and decolonial debate, and of critical theory and alter-globalist movements, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has explored these themes, proposing in particular the concept of an “abyssal line”: a border born with the colonial era that separates forms of metropolitan sociability from colonial ones.

For Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the division made by colonialism has created two worlds of sociability. The first, the “metropolitan one”, is typical of western modernity (and its mainstream representation). It is based on a principle of equivalence and reciprocity, in which all those who are part of it are recognized as fully human, despite the presence of social differences, inequalities, and disparities of power. The tension between social regulation and social emancipation in the mechanisms developed by western modernity – such as the liberal State, the rule of law, human rights and democracy – make social exclusion “non-abyssal”. In metropolitan sociability, a way to inclusion is in principle always possible, because despite the profound inequalities, the different actors and social groups are all considered fully human.

In the second type of sociability, the colonial one, the exclusions are “abyssal”. Colonial sociability is in fact regulated by the tension between violence – whether physical, material or cultural – and appropriation, whether through incorporation, co-optation or assimilation (Santos 2016). In colonial-type social relationships, social exclusion is abyssal because those excluded cannot realistically claim their rights, as they are not considered fully human.

The Eurocentric social theory, created on the basis of metropolitan sociability, ignores colonial sociability or, better, reproduces it as non-being. Taking up a common topic of the post-colonial and decolonial debates, Santos also sees colonial and metropolitan sociability as two sides of the Eurocentric capitalist modernization process. Although born with colonialism, this abyssal line did not end with the end of historical colonialism, on the contrary it remained and it has been forced into western society itself where hegemonic globalization has undermined the promises of progress, freedom and equality inscribed in modernity. The mechanisms of violence and expropriation have evolved over time but they remained structurally similar to those of historical colonialism, involving

⁴ This process of socially constructing human hierarchies has many historical examples from the colonial era (from the treatment suffered by the enslaved Africans, to the massacre of indigenous peoples of the Americas).

violent regulation without the possibilities of social emancipation envisaged by metropolitan sociability.

In continuity with the colonial era, this exploitation is in fact still legitimated by specific forms of “cultural violence”. Following Galtung (1990: 291), cultural violence is defined as «any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form». We refer to legitimized violence based on inferiorization (up to de-humanization) of the alterities and the disavowal of non-western declinations of social order or social justice. Moreover, the abyssal type of exclusion causes a specific type of socio-political “absence”: the invisibilization of those excluded through a process of inferiorization that places subaltern social groups outside the social contract.

Many social groups, in this sense, experience the abyssal line as they cross the two worlds in their daily lives. It is a social dynamic that characterizes the contexts that have experienced European colonization. An example of this daily crossing of the abyssal line takes place in the city of Rio de Janeiro, where the abyssal line separates favelas from the rest of the city (Ricotta, 2017; 2019). A *favelado/a* (an inhabitant of favela) can experience moments of metropolitan and non-abyssal social exclusion, for example the difficulty of connecting with central areas due to a lack of public transport services. This falls within the forms of non-abyssal social exclusion that can be experienced by suburban residents of other cities with spatial inequalities (whether in the western society or not). At the same time, when the military police operate in their favela – during the frequent incursions of an urban guerrilla order – and make use of firearms without respecting the lives of the residents, the *favelado/a* may be injured or killed, by a stray bullet, yet criminal proceeding will unlikely be activated. The slide toward an abyssal exclusion will not give them the opportunity to resort to those tools of emancipation provided in the metropolitan sociability. For the law enforcement institutions, the *favelados* are not the residents in the favela, but a way of being, an ontological property that involves invisibility. The legacy of the colonial experience in Brazil is very present and operates in the type of violent sociability to which the inhabitants of the favelas are subjected.

3. *The global dislocation of the abyssal line*

The two types of sociability that we have talked about coexist in the global postcolonial society in new forms of exclusion that reproduce the South within the North.

While the flow of goods leading to new accumulations of wealth becomes more complex, moving beyond the vector south to north or east to west, the colonial abyssal line seems to reproduce within the North and coexist more stably with apparently opposing ethical-political approaches (for example the “universal human rights” rhetoric within international institutions). This specific coexistence, already internal to colonial ideology, today creates a historical epoch more clearly characterized by the overlapping of different “epochs” – also intended as

representations of the different forms of production – and draws a space-time map in which it is more difficult to distinguish the metropolis from the colony (Mezzadra 2008).

What we are talking about here is not the simple continuation of colonial dynamics, then, but something new: new dynamics manifesting themselves within the center, within Europe, which show a deeper interpenetration between colonial and metropolitan sociability.

A good case study to help us understand the dislocation of the abyssal line is represented by “denied” asylum seekers. These are a multitude of people, mostly from sub-Saharan areas, fleeing contexts in which violence is widespread: permanently unstable nation-states or “failed states” (among others see: Woodward 2017; Chandler 2010) with various neo-colonial influences such as Nigeria, Gabon or Somalia, whose borders have been traced by colonial powers and have separated peoples and ethnic groups, and whose resources are today still managed by foreign governments or multinational companies. These post-colonial imbalances don’t allow African social groups and movements to make significant institutional changes. These people have no chance to escape from the daily violence of the unstable states in which they live, nor from the growing number of environmental disasters that take place there. Emblematic is the migration away from the mouth of the Niger river, now polluted by multinationals’ oil extractions, which has left vast areas of land uncultivable. They have to cross the desert on foot since no safe country provides them with a travel visa (as many authors point out, few citizens of the world can legally move whether for escape, love or work – see Bauman 1998). As such these mass escape routes turn into “tragic paths”. The crossing of space in order to reach safety, Europe, is also made increasingly deadly by the so-called “externalization of borders”, that is the fact that the EU funds the militarization of borders in third countries such as Morocco, Turkey, Libya, and Sudan, leading to the imprisonment, blackmailing and trafficking of migrants in ways and practices analyzed more by militant ethnographies than academic researches (Malakooti 2019; Mixed Migration Center 2019).

The fact that this historical process, so vast and visible, can take place without any forms of cultural or political rejection, without reflexivity or collective self-criticism on the part of Europe, and indeed with complex cultural processes – evident in the alarm over numbers of arrivals and the complete removal of numbers of deaths (Ciabarrì 2020) – demonstrates the presence of that colonial dimension of which we have already spoken. This containment acts thanks to complex processes of inferiorization (dehumanization as migrant humanity “massification”) that produce in turn the invisibility which we have described above (Sossi 2002).

But some of them do manage to arrive in Europe, and somehow enter the reception systems for asylum seekers. As a reference, the Italian reception system, similar to that of other Mediterranean European countries, provides some basic services linked to asylum-seekers’ rights (health services, accommodation, literacy) while claimants are awaiting a response. Even though such systems play a residual role – increasingly reduced to forms of “extraordinary reception” –

restricted to mere board and lodging without envisaging forms of planning, intercultural mediation, or even linguistic translation – these forms of formal reception are in line with the language and thought of the welfare state.

Here asylums seekers meet operators and volunteers, as well as other citizens living near the reception centers with whom they sometimes get into conflict: they are a recognized presence. In conflict with such citizens or with the social services, these asylum seekers cross the line of metropolitan sociability mentioned previously: they become visible in public debate, they are recipients of service provision (health, social and legal services) and they enter the complex inclusion/exclusion dynamics that the welfare state feeds by alternating assistance and containment.

What most interests us for the purposes of our discussion happens next, afterwards: most of them are denied asylum and protection and must therefore leave. But they don't leave. After what is usually a fairly long time – after several years in which they learned European languages, found friends and informal jobs – they are no longer entitled to anything and can no longer be taken into consideration, either by operators or by employers. And here something interesting happens that allows us to speak specifically of a dislocation of the abyssal line. These migrants in fact remain and continue to live in the cities. On the one hand, they are “ultra-visible” – with respect to this, the phenomenon of self-organized begging by denied migrants is very interesting (Accorinti, Dota 2008) – in the squares, in front of the supermarkets, both of large as well as small and elegant medieval cities, stopping hasty citizens on the street in a growing scenario of daily avoidances and tensions; while, on the other hand, they remain “invisible”, and because their status does not change over time their presence-absence becomes part of the landscape, as if that kind of life was their own: «after all it doesn't matter to you, you make a life similar to the one you were making when you were in your own country», was the characteristic way a lady addressed a Nigerian refugee involved in a recent research project (Pellegrino 2018). The most interesting thing about these empirical researches is that – just as the research with *favelados* also shows – these subjects become aware of the abyssal line when they feel they are crossing it forward and backward in different moments and spaces. They feel “only reversibly included” in social negotiation, as one of them says, and therefore they are actually radically deprived of it as non-presences, as inhabitants of the abyssal. As a result, they end up highly exposed to violence and exploitation, are simultaneously present and invisible, and almost constitute a new layer in social stratification.

As a matter of fact, the growing labor exploitation of denied migrants – almost structural in many economic sectors (think of agriculture for example) – leads us to say that this process is truly an example of coloniality that has been dislocated within the center. Here inferiorization is not aimed at excluding from the factual and productive world, at expelling from the system, it is aimed instead at extracting energy and labor while remaining outside the dialectics that belong to metropolitan sociability.

Therefore, abyssal and metropolitan sociability coexist as happened in the colonies, but they do so at the very heart of the regulatory system, at the very heart of the space of law, namely within the center. The current state of emergency connected to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis makes this even more evident. While all attention is focused on having those who have a home “stay at home”, with levels of extremely high collective anxiety, the lives of these people who have no home have remained invisible, or rather “not thought of”: their deaths are not worth as much as those of others, in a very similar way to the deaths caused by stray police bullets in the favelas.

But we would like to add that there is not only one type of abyssality that expands in the metropolis through (former) colonial subjects: this process of dislocation of the abyssal line also concerns other social groups, which Santos himself refers to.

In Europe, in fact, the combination of global migration with the crisis of modern social protection poses anew the question of the racial division of labor at the world-system level (in a new way compared to the question posed by Latin American decolonial studies). This can be observed in specific domains and areas of struggle, in the new forms of labor exploitation and the new conditions emerging from labor market deregulation, for example as is the case with delivery-app workers. In this case, workers are forced to make (phony) entrepreneurs of themselves, providing their own energy and production means in a process in which, if they fail, it is due to their own inability, their own insufficiency, their own lack of knowledge of the world in which it is necessary to “develop”. Within these sectors of work, European citizens *and* migrants are involved: the material element of the exploitation of labor by capital, sits side by side with forms of subordination structured on the basis of the persistence of colonial power. The dislocation of the abyssal line, therefore, is not limited to bringing about forms of colonial social exclusion in Europe, as in the case of denied asylum seekers, but also places human groups with different trajectories and expectations in situations of exploitation. This demonstrates the contradictions of a functional coexistence between forms of work subjected to domination (servitude, neo-slavery) and a wage labor in search of social protection. If metropolitan and colonial social exclusion were separated geographically and/or racially in the historical experience of colonialism in the world-system, today they mix in the heart of Europe in specific work contexts.

This debate on the spaces of colonial sociability of an abyssal type – on migration, the rationalization of the labor market, the invisibility of the subaltern groups in metropolitan sociality – opens up interesting work paths, especially with respect to the hypothesis that the rhetoric used in exploitation is pervasive and in some way contagious. Migrants and precarious workers often work together in new work settings, such as “bicycle delivery services”, without social guarantees, exploited as bodies in a process that distinguishes a new work rhetoric in which the guilt belongs to who gives up, whether physically or psychologically, in which the exploited are exploited *because* of their lacking in strength and intelligence (among others: Armano, Murgia 2017). As is often the case, it is literature and cinema that represent the epochal scenarios which common sense and even social

science has had difficulty seeing. We make reference to Ken Loach's film "Sorry we missed you" (2019) about the fictional story of a self-employed van driver working for a delivery company while taking on all the risks of the business: we watch him working at an unsustainable pace until he becomes exhausted and virtually lets himself die before the helpless gaze of those around him. They are forced to consider his social death as if it were natural, as if it were something inevitable. The characters are caught in the grip of that hegemonic rhetoric that Fisher (2010) has analyzed and called "capitalist realism", starting from the Thatcherian Europe of the late twentieth century, in which growing parts of the population are blamed for their own poverty due to the inadequacy of the metropolis.

This is why so much of the world struggles to stay within the line of metropolitan sociability – which, as we have seen, is in some way the line of "common humanity" – even right at the heart of the global North, which at this point becomes a local South.

4. Sociology of absences and sociology of emergences

In order to focus on and find situations of abyssal exclusion within the global North, Santos proposes overcoming Eurocentric thinking by giving voice to the epistemologies of the South, that "concern the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy" (Santos 2018: 1). . To this end, the Portuguese sociologist proposes a "sociology of absences" and a "sociology of emergences".

With the first, we analyze colonial power, which is material, military and epistemic all at once, and the way it continues to produce abyssal exclusion. As a matter of fact, the sociology of absences aims at understanding how oppression can be reproduced from the point of view of those oppressed. These people are made invisible by the thought that perceives them as radically inferior, non-contemporary forms of social life, and for this very reason a dangerous class, which, at the same time, can be exploited through relationships of appropriation and violence. The goal is to transform absences into presences, observing the diversity and multiplicity of social practices, manifesting in experiences that oppose the destructive elements of globalization.

The sociology of absences focuses its attention on the contexts in which confinement and marginalization are acted out through a rhetoric connected to the superiority of certain knowledge models and lifestyles, to the necessity of production, to the maintenance of the global order in force. Meanwhile the "sociology of emergences" aims at the emergence – or rather at the symbolic, analytical and political valorization – of ways of being and knowing that are present on the other side of the abyssal line in those same contexts. The overall objective of these sociological knowledge processes, therefore, is to focus on the

forms of abyssal exclusion as defined above and on the forms of resistance and struggle to which they give rise.

The connection between the two phases of this sociological process, between the absences and the emergences, is important: if some contexts are identified as places of absence (absence of development, absence of knowledge and for this reason absence of order, as it is for favelas or refugee camps self-managed by denied migrants), and therefore as “not” rational-productive-knowledge places, the “post-abyssal” research process rather emphasizes the inner “yes” of the abyssal worlds, the world visions that are inherent or born from resistance to symbolic and material violence experienced firsthand.

In this sense, these two situations to which we referred when discussing abyssal exclusions, that of the *favelados* and that of the denied migrants, return as examples. In the case of *favelados*, research shows how they conceive security in complex and different terms from those of the “armed security” imagined and implemented by the state: the research shows a desire for community justice based on a self-government of spaces, on the strengthening of health and education services and so on (Ricotta 2019). These social groups, contrary to what the government discourse claims, do not normalize violence but rather aspire to a completely different management of security. In these contexts, the idea of change and development is not absent. On the contrary, development is otherwise imagined.

In the second case, that of denied migrants, several studies show that in survival spaces (improvised camps, illegal villages in the suburbs or near the countryside) there are contexts of self-training, gyms, spaces for dialogue and debate, forms of mutual loan: aspiration, building up livability, endurance, struggle (among others: Nigro et al. 2012; McNevin 2013).

Here lies the specific definition of these situations as “social emergences”, that is, as embryonic realities, movements and tendencies that often indicate a struggle against dominion which is “not yet” overt, neither explicit in discourse nor theorized, but which, through being acted out, search for their discourse and trace new guiding visions. In this sense, these realities constitute, according to Santos, what Ernst Bloch (1954) designated as a historical “not yet”. It is what an increasing number of researchers indicate as subject of study for a “sociology of the possible” (Appadurai 2001; Gallino 2002; Tarantino 2018; Pellegrino 2019; 2020), that is to say a type of social science dedicated to the analysis of ways of escaping from the inevitable homologation to neoliberal production: a sociology which studies the conditions within which divergent visions of redistribution, aspirations, and practices arise, born of the dialectic between the inferiorized and the system.

The interest of these authors is to trace situations in which, from a new perspective, resistance arises against new forms of exploitation and the colonial-type containment of recent decades as described above. Erik Olin Wright (2010) also resumes this idea of social emergences as transversal alternatives present in the world in different contexts. But he considers them from a different

perspective, one more properly internal to the United States, in a work involving mapping practices that share a different idea of globalization which we could call “anti-hegemonic”, in the sense used by Santos, and which he calls “real utopias”. Another example is the global research network from which the recent work *A Post-Development Dictionary* (Khotari et al. 2019) was born, which maps the internal discursive recurrences to different types of indigenous groups, with particular reference to Africa and to Latin America, emphasizing the coincidences in terms of multi-faceted ecologism that opposes the expropriation of lands. Here there is a more explicit idea of a necessary alliance within a g-local South, and therefore of constant intercultural translations among researchers that question the colonial assumptions defining the social hierarchies implicit in the research, as well as to create a re-understanding process among worlds by illuminating common intentions of subtraction from exploitation, even if within different languages, assumptions, imaginations. Here emerges the idea of a more properly connective global social research among g-local experiences, arising from the juxtaposition of different abyssal peripheries located within the space of global metropolitan sociability.

5. *A “post-abyssal” g-local science? Non-extractive knowledge and g-local approaches*

Of course, it is not easy to imagine the questioning of assumptions with which we look at history – to question the colonial matrix trajectorism we’ve discussed – nor, consequently, to imagine a deep understanding of the links between our categories of analysis and the implicit processes of inferiorization that they induce. In other words, it is not easy to imagine that our analytical view of global history is part of a broader political discourse centered on the “lack” of the other (the lack of knowledge of certain groups, the lack of development, of economic resources, rational discourse and so on). All this implies difficult reflexive processes and the necessary reflexivity is not conceivable by individual researchers.

The redefinition of the categories with which to reread modernity must be a “collective task” says Santos (2018), and we add that it must be an institutional (public) and social (collective) effort. Public researchers must imagine an exploration of the spaces of thought that emerges from the forms the inferiorization of which we have spoken, and they should also imagine working to facilitate the emerging discourses in the historical “not-yet”.

In short, in order to abandon the use of consolidated categories of analysis such as those related to nationality or poverty, and to take on different novel ones that are intrinsic to representing the inequality and conflict in the groups we speak of, a social self-reflexivity that legitimizes knowledge in *action* is necessary. The key responsibility for this new critical global social science, then, would be to produce categories *with* the abyssal conditions.

This type of proposal seems to be in line with many other proposals stemming from the existing research constellation of “co-research“, “participatory“,

“collaborative” research, (among others: Alquati 1959; Freire 1985; Whyte 1991; Reason, Bradbury 2001; Lassiter et al. 2005), which, although different from each other, have also presupposed and continue to presuppose sharing the research design with the subjects investigated to co-define the categories of analysis, to co-manage the social life of data and so on. However, this proposal focuses on the decolonization of the imagination with respect to research relations, on the specific process of the “decolonization of our analytical tools” (Connell, 2006; 2007).

Going back to Santos (2016, 2018), the scholar speaks of a research capable of producing post-abysality through appropriate methodological dimensions. In this specific sense, it is all about imagining “non-extractive” investigation processes, that is to say, processes being centered on the positive experience of those who are involved, of researchers both inside and outside, thinking of the ways in which those who investigate and are being investigated can use those cognitive processes in order to carry out their own self-representation more autonomously. As the author says (Santos 2016, 26):

«On the one hand, modern science and, most particularly, modern social sciences advance knowledge by transforming alternative knowledge (vernacular, popular knowledge generated and owned by various social groups) into raw materials for the production of scientific knowledge. Alternative knowledge is converted into information and then processed and transformed into scientific knowledge. This is a form of cognitive extraction having some affinities with the material extraction of natural resources, which is currently the main form of capital accumulation in many parts of the world. On the other hand, the generation of non-extractive methodologies is a very complex and difficult process which, given the absolute hegemony of cognitive extraction, must comprise both epistemological and political dimension».

Other proposals go in a similar epistemological direction and encourage a non-extractive social science. For example, we think of the investigation processes oriented to relationship as reciprocity, as the “co-narrative” of the same circumstances (inside and outside researchers tell parallel and often divergent stories about what happens) or to mutual investigation: “if you speak of my condition from your point of view, I speak of yours from mine”, with a production of knowledge linked to a “crossed glances” mechanism (e. g.: Pellegrino 2009, 2015; Muhammad et al 2015).

Furthermore, Santos stresses the need to “de-monumentalize” written knowledge, that is, to support a social science that goes beyond the exclusive forms of writing, in order to open argumentative spaces. This notion of a de-monumentalization of knowledge recalls some specific methodological dimensions: a focus on the social life of the data produced (the sharing of their diffusion with those investigated)

with an investment in other forms of orality, which could be theatricalized and shared collectively in convivial spaces, for example.

Many young researchers are today willing to accept this proposal by developing a potential new methodological creativity in this sense: from “ethnographic dinners” as open spaces of investigation in which investigated migrants can bring those they wish as self-organization practices (Fontanari, Gaiaschi, Borri 2019), to the spread of tools such as the “mutual self-ethnographic diary”, or self-representation through forms of visual production and so on. The proposal of those authors interested in models of more “emancipatory social sciences”, it requires the involvement of those under investigation in all phases of the research, including the interpretation and the writing of the results as well as the management of the social life of the results themselves, so that the process offers an opportunity for advocacy and the regeneration of a public space for debate on such issues (e. g. Clifford, Marcus 1986; May, Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Gerstl-Pepin, Gunzenhauser 2002; Pennington, Hughes 2016).

Finally, a last epistemological and methodological element of non-extractive social science is of central relevance. If it is true that we need to synchronously frame different abyssal exclusions through the mutual glance between different struggles, that different social groups have to conceive each other mutually, then a sort of “twinning” between these different research contexts will be at the core of this production of knowledge.

“Seeing each other” within different types of marginality helps to understand the individual conditions, that is to say, helps conceive the system that creates subalternity, and so helps in creating a more genuinely global sociological perspective from below. Going in this direction, Santos (2016, 28) states: «the core ideas of the epistemologies of the South: an ecology of knowledges and intercultural translation. Its starting point is the recognition of mutual ignorance and its endpoint is the shared production of knowledge».

To achieve this kind of production of knowledge, a methodological “craftsmanship” is needed – the ability to adapt research questions to the context, the search for specific methods of debate for each field – as well as a cultural translation to create cognitive experience shared by the different groups.

In a similar way, Burg Ceccim refers to g-local “research circles” (Ceccim et al. 2014; Cavalcante et al. 2010), an alliance between groups and movements able to conduct a similar observation in very different places, with an awareness that this helps to relocate the reading of each specific case (the author talks of “immersion in the micro-political” dimensions of local social action) and at the same time capturing the existence of common issues in the sharing of experiences, and therefore conceiving the links between the micro-political action and the global scenarios, finding a new legitimation for the formulation of visions more properly concerning the global space.

This social science then becomes global not because it shares comparable databases, or standardizes data, but indeed quite the opposite, because it involves people located in localized and particular forms of life in the dimension of a global sociological imagination, because it knows how to broaden its vision and

analysis scenarios, to hybridize its categories, and because it finds ways of achieving collective co-research adaptive to local attitudes with cultural translations between them.

Conclusions

Our essay has proposed a critical reading of the representation of modernity – a representation of the historical process of globalization influenced by euro-centrism. We have seen how, in the past, euro-centric social science concerned with global processes, far from integrating different ways of reading society, has instead continued to *measure* societies through its categories. As such, the rest of the world has been investigated by measuring its distance away from a given idea of individual and social development (what we have called *trajectorism*). This considered the marginalization conditions a result of temporary exclusion deriving from the lacking belonging to the subaltern groups themselves (a lack of training, production equipment and so on).

We have assumed that this way of reading and representing history is an expression of a persistent coloniality: the cultural inferiorization of certain groups has allowed the concealing of exploitation, while increasingly widening the gap between the inclusive (or metropolitan sociability) and colonial abyssal sociability that we have mentioned.

We have put forward the hypothesis that the last decades of global history – with the expansion of new forms of abyssal exclusion even within the heart of the global North, with the dislocation of cultural and epistemic violence and its expansion to other social groups first internal to the metropolis – have brought a growing number of authors to a critical position regarding the coloniality inherent in western categorizations. This new attitude opens the way to a new production of knowledge, namely post-colonial, decolonial but also “post-abyssal”, whose epistemological and methodological assumptions have been shown.

What we need then is to explore new definitions of a “global path forward” which can emerge within processes of subtraction from inferiorization, within the relationship between different contexts of abyssality that come into contact with each other, and that find in social research a useful device for self-representation. In these processes of “counter discursiveness” it is possible to imagine a certain degree of emancipation from “defect” (from a lack of development and knowledge seen as guilt), and therefore to understand the production of knowledge as an act of resistance to abyssal exclusion.

The authors mentioned in this essay refer to this new phase of “non-extractive” global social science, focused on systematic g-local co-research procedures. Within these epistemological, methodological, ontological paraphernalia, these authors return to the idea of a global science completely different from that of a “collector” of standardized data stored in databases without taking into account the social relationship with abyssality. On the contrary, they discuss processes of collective knowledge that are based on the translation of concepts of

“subtraction”, “class”, and “advancement” as it is given within subalternity conditions, and which are based on the facilitation of paths of mutual understanding between different types of exclusion and on the cognitive alliance between “twinned research contexts”.

Finally, our analysis shows how perhaps the proposal of a global social science as a network of “inside” and “outside” researchers is taking shape, through researches who define in a g-local way the common instances of investigation, using terms and methods that stem from the social spaces of “those who do not keep pace”, adopting a common set of non-extractive cognitive practices based on reciprocity (questioning and being questioned) and on the participatory governance of the knowledge produced, and speculating on a new conceptualization of modernity to come.

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