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# The many geographies of Milton Santos

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I write this piece to introduce a collection of responses to the new English-language edition of *For a New Geography* (Santos, [1978] 2021) not on behalf of its author, Milton Santos, who died in 2001, but as his translator. Translating can be an intense and isolated process. The relationship between the author of a text and its translator is, most of the time, a private one. A very particular and idiosyncratic kind of knowledge of a book emerges from translating it. My thinking about *For a New Geography* is marked by months spent among Santos' references and footnotes, trying to work out which edition of a book, in which language, he has taken a quotation from (at times without a page number or an accurate bibliographical reference). This engenders a kind of parochial intimacy with the development of his thinking which is at times powerful, and at times futile. It is therefore a great pleasure to have been part of putting together these reflections on *For a New Geography*. It has re-situated my own ideas about the book and given me the opportunity to see the forest of Santos' intellectual project once again, and not just the fungi under the bark.

The pieces collected here reflect the multi-faceted qualities of that project, drawing on insights from scholars who are deeply familiar with Santos, to those who come to *For a New Geography* as one of their first meetings with him. One of the former is Mariana Lamego, whose response to this translation emerges in the context of her deep research on the history of Brazilian geography and the quantitative revolution (Lamego, 2022). Through outlining her own long relationship with the book, she shows

how *For a New Geography* speaks to the diverse elements of Santos's wider geographical project and how it has influenced Brazilian geographers over the four and a half decades since it was first published.

Santos's book, written in 1978, remains, however, profoundly current. As I am writing, the polls suggest that the November 2022 Brazilian elections are in the balance. They may see an end of the Bolsonaro presidency, and a return of Lula, but Brazilian electoral politics are nothing if not fluid. Whichever candidate wins, the political system in Brazil sits atop and alongside a fragmented, divided, structurally racist society. This is the *Real Geography of Brazil* in which Rafael Sanzio Araújo dos Anjos embeds the importance of Santos's work (Araújo dos Anjos, 2022). Dos Anjos is a leading scholar of Brazilian Black and Afro-diasporic space, territory, and cartography. His essay shows how the brutal residues of the slavocratic system persist in Brazilian territory, and that now as much as ever Santos's work is vital to our understanding of the spatial dynamics of Brazil's colonial past and present.

Santos's work continues to reveal the Brazilian contemporary conjuncture because the political, economic, and ecological contradictions which he analysed in Brazilian territory have continued to deepen. Yet he wrote, of course, in a very particular historical, personal, and political context. *For a New*

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Geography is one of his earliest books, and marks the beginning of the long high point of Santos's career at the forefront of Brazilian geography. From another perspective, it can be read as the end of his itinerant ascent of the 1960s and 1970s. It is this trajectory that Alex Ratts returns us to, analysing how For a New Geography emerged out of intellectual and Santos's trajectory through intellectual and political exile across four continents, from France, to Tanzania, Canada, and Venezuela. Ratts concludes by placing Santos at the forefront of a flourishing of Black Brazilian geographies that began in the 1990s and continues to gain strength today.

Hannah Neate, in her reflection (Neate, 2022), draws out the significance of Santos's lifepath in how the book – and in particular this translation of the book – is read today. Santos's biography is, as Neate notes, aptly captured in the acknowledgements, in which Santos thanks colleagues and scholars from across his global, Third Worldist intellectual network. Neate argues that the networks that the book's acknowledgements, citations and bibliography suggest are complemented by the gaps and omissions that they reveal. In particular, Neate notes how Santos largely overlooked the applied geography that was emerging in academic departments in decolonising African countries in the 1960s and 1970s. His project, rather, was avowedly tied to a critique of quantitative and colonialist geography, and deeply interconnected with the emergence of anglophone radical geography.

Kanishka Goonewardena attends, in his essay (Goonewardena, 2022), to the Marxist curiosity and theoretical ambition of Santos's work. His 'fantasized' conversation between Santos and two 'Sri Lankan Marxist political economists concerned with prospects of socialist post-colonial development, S. B. D. de Silva (1982) and G. V. S. de Silva (1988)' is precisely the kind of creative and historical intellectual work that this project of translation hopes to make possible. English – as well as being the hegemonic language of the unequal global knowledge industry – can function as a meeting ground for diverse, radical communities of knowledge. Re-connecting and re-igniting intellectual histories across the history of tricontinentalism and radical geography certainly goes beyond Milton Santos, but it just as certainly must go through him.

As Goonewardena rightly points out, another key figure in that story – to date surprisingly under-analysed in Anglophone geography – is Jean-Paul Sartre. The significance of Sartre to Santos is profound, but the implications of that significance remain, I think, to be fully understood. For a New Geography is a key starting point for that question. The end of Chapter 13, for instance, 'Space as Social Order', finds Santos moving quickly from Sartre to Lefebvre, in order to identify what he calls the *differentia specifica* of space. He quotes Lefebvre's idea that '(social) space is not a thing among other things [...] the outcome of a sequence and set of operations [...] the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur' (115). Yet this notion of space relies on his reading of Sartre, from whom he draws the idea that 'through space, history becomes structure and form' (114), as praxis and historical divisions of labour are inscribed in materiality. Indeed, it is through Sartre that the division of labour became intrinsic to Santos's conception of the production of space, and the development of geographical concepts such as roughness and used territory.

For a New Geography is Santos's most explicit and detailed reckoning with the European and North American geographical traditions, but in it he also engages deeply with European social theory and francophone philosophy. He finds hope, and a path forward, in the meeting between a Third Worldist practice of geographical research and a heterodox Marxist spatial philosophy. The significance of Santos's engagement with Sartre is also suggestive of how we might read Santos today, in anglophone geography. That he was one of Brazil's leading Black thinkers of the twentieth century is beyond question, and Ratts's essay here shows how he is a vital precursor for contemporary Black geographies in Brazil, and a major part of the rich and inspiring tradition of Black Brazilian social theory as a whole (Ratts, 2022). Ratts emphasizes that to understand Santos's work in full requires us to recognise that Santos was writing as a Black intellectual in an academic system built on white supremacy. Santos sustained long interests in African decolonisation and Third Worldist politics, and these commitments underpinned his thinking about urban geography and geographical method. Yet as Goonewardena

puts it, throughout his career he manifested an ‘utter disinterest in claiming any automatic epistemic privilege premised on national, cultural or any other such essentialist identity’. The ongoing effort to ‘decolonize’ anglophone geography is one backdrop for how readers might come to Santos’s work in the second decade of the 21st century, but if Santos is to be read within that context it is as a universalist thinker, not as a representative one.

Together, these five essays offer a broad and open view of *For a New Geography*, its emergence, its relevance, and its points of reference. I hope it will take readers back to the book itself, to find new paths for contemporary geography in the stirring extent of its scope, and the depth and erudition of its committed scholarship.

### Author’s note

Archie Davies is also associated with the Department of Geography and Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK.

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