

*Third Letter of the Collective of Victims on the Recent Positions of  
Boaventura de Sousa Santos*

**WITHOUT TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONCRETE ACTS OF ABUSE  
COMMITTED, THERE IS NO SELF-CRITICISM**

We present ourselves as a collective of women who have suffered different types of violence as a result of the pattern of abuse of power that was naturalized in the work teams led by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and considered inevitable by the people who occupied positions of authority in the Centre for Social Studies (CES) for many years. Our initial letter is attached below. Since we started to share our reflections, the number of people has increased. We have been in contact with other women who have experienced stories similar to ours. The abuse experienced is not limited to inconvenient moments promoted by a man incapable of understanding that the world has changed. It is very difficult to believe that a professional sociologist, internationally recognized as one of the greatest left-wing intellectuals, cannot understand the changes in society and adapt to them. Despite all the privilege and power that Boaventura has always had at his disposal and although his studies have always drawn attention to patriarchy as a form of oppression, Boaventura has ignored what he has written and has not adapted to the demands of a less oppressive world. His behavior with his teams, co-workers, students, and mentors was not a cultural reflection of the times, but a conscious choice.

Our experiences allow us to state that the evident contradictions between Boaventura de Sousa Santos' theory and the power relations normalized in his work culture could never be problematized, because maintaining hierarchies, with their patterns of exploitation and abuse, guaranteed him clear advantages that he was not willing to give up. A person who is willing to be self-critical must recognize from the outset that he has received advantages as a result of the unequal relations he has consciously or unconsciously promoted. In our group, some women have accumulated traumas related to their working relationship

with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, with serious consequences for their careers. The first set of questions we ask is: Does Boaventura, who is now self-critical, admit that he was highly privileged within the culture of unequal relations he promoted? What privileges does he acknowledge? What damage and harm did he cause to the women with whom he had a working relationship or privilege in an academic hierarchy? Generic self-criticism does not undo harm or overcome inequalities. We have to take responsibility and do it concretely.

Our collective is pushing for a commission that focuses on protecting the victims and not defending the perpetrators. That is our goal. We do not want to cancel people; we want a full investigation of the facts and respect for the rights of the victims and their stories of pain and suffering. We want justice! The necessary investigation of the cases must ensure a space where victims can testify without fear of retaliation. We know that power is unequally distributed and that is why many women are silenced. It is essential that the Commission be established and that its absolute independence from the Centre for Social Studies (*CES*) be guaranteed. Since our first letter to the *CES*, although we received a quick response and expressed concern about guaranteeing the rights of victims, nothing has changed. What we have seen is that Boaventura is using the power he has to secure airtime and air his version of the facts to the fullest, while we wait and hope that the procedures of the *CES* are correct and guarantee that our rights will be respected and that we will be welcomed in a safe context to present our stories along with the evidence we have gathered. It is therefore worrying that the news we are getting about the Commission is coming from the media and creating uncertainty about how it will actually work. In one place, it is stated that the Commission will consist of one *CES* member and two external persons. In another place it is said that the Commission will be completely independent. Our second set of questions is: When will the terms of operation of the Commission be known to the public (its mandate, the guarantee of its autonomy and independent functioning, its objectives, the ethical rules it is bound to follow, the rules of confidentiality it will have to follow, the rules the

*CES* will have to follow for the selection of its appointees)? Does the *CES* intend to present a minimum set of public commitments regarding the Commission and its functioning, as well as a timetable that will ensure a careful selection of professionals and guarantee when the work will begin and how it will be carried out?

We were not convinced by the response that Boaventura de Sousa Santos circulated in response to the accusations made by Mapuche Indigenous activist Moira Millán. It is surprising to see how Boaventura, an intellectual activist for progressive causes, including feminism, following the strategies of demoralization of the victims and the argument of lack of denunciation when the violence occurred in the context of a structure in which he had very high hierarchical power and influence over the career and universe of work or activism of his victims. We responded to the letter on April 27, although it had little visibility, especially in the Portuguese media (link: <https://sol.sapo.pt/artigo/797956/boaventura-sousa-santos-coletivo-de-mulheres-vitimas-de-assedio-responde-a-argumentos-de-professor>).

The latest text published by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, despite its title, is not a self-criticism. Once again, Boaventura follows the playbook: after demoralizing the victims, he makes an empty self-criticism exercise, that is just another attempt to convince the public of the alleged injustice he is suffering and that he is not responsible for the acts of which he is accused, even though there is an increasing number of women who corroborate the information. To illustrate the pattern Boaventura uses in his responses, we reproduce some excerpts from the statement given by Harvey Weinstein in response to allegations of sexual harassment: *I came of age in the '60s and '70s when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the culture then. I have since learned it's not an excuse, in the office - or out of it. To anyone. I realized some time ago that I needed to be a better person and my interactions with the people I work with have changed. I appreciate the way I've behaved with colleagues in the past has caused a lot of pain, and I sincerely apologize for it.*

Instead of an analysis of his own privilege, Boaventura presents a superficial and generic reading of the social scenario resulting from the transformations that have taken place in modern societies as a result of feminist struggles and the challenges we face today. In his statement, he argues that much of what is unacceptable today was acceptable in the era from which he comes. As it happens, human rights - and women's rights in particular - were central to the sociology he developed and the commitments he made to social movements. It is difficult to accept ignorance or lack of awareness as an excuse after so many books written; so many lectures, so many classes, so many workshops, so many forums on heteropatriarchy. The text ultimately proves how Boaventura has selectively learned the lessons of feminist social struggles and human rights according to his interests. For example, he has not learned what accountability means. Self-criticism without accountability is just another step taken by those with power to control the narrative. The human rights movement has shown for years that accountability means taking concrete responsibility for the acts committed, acknowledging the violence of the acts and the harm caused, and making reparations to the victims. A third set of questions is again addressed to Boaventura: The inappropriate acts, which he attributes to culture rather than to himself, were committed against whom? What kind of situations were they: bullying or sexual harassment or both? What measures has Boaventura taken or intends to take to provide reparation to the victims of his harmful actions? Or are you just talking about harmless inappropriate acts that caused no harm or suffering to anyone? If they did not cause harm or suffering, why is there a need to be self-critical?

The answers need to be concrete. We have our stories to demand real accountability. We know that what we suffered was not a harmless case of a professor standing still in time, unaware that the world has moved on. We are talking about a systematic pattern of abuse that has been reproduced with different women, in different situations. Boaventura's latest text contradicts its own intention, it does not advance one millimeter in the recognition of feminist struggles and women's rights, although in it Boaventura feels surprisingly

comfortable dictating rules on how procedures should work in cases of harassment of which he has never been a victim.

We know that Boaventura has a deep understanding of how power relations and forms of domination work in society. He understands how patriarchy works so well that he has always been able to use it in different ways. He understands the power of social struggles so well that he has used women who were willing to sacrifice themselves because denouncing him would always be used to undermine all the struggles that these women publicly defend and that are truly important to us.

Even if the excuse of ignorance could be acceptable, lamenting the discomfort caused to the victims is at the very least insufficient and, in our opinion, offensive. We do not want to talk about the discomfort we have always learned to deal with, which wears us out but does not defeat us. We want to talk about a normalized pattern of abuse that has become too obvious to ignore. We want to talk about traumas that have been silenced; about careers that have been interrupted, stalled, or severely sacrificed; about the persecution that has resulted from an arbitrary distribution of power that has served him. There can be no justice without the truth about what happened, and no acquittal without an effort to repair the damage.

As long as the *CES* does not set up the promised commission of inquiry, it is Boaventura who will benefit, because he has the power to control the narrative. While he prepares his crisis communication without acknowledging a single concrete mistake, our careers and our lives continue to be shaken, with no end in sight. Inequality continues to weigh on us, and our letters are not published at the same speed and in the same number of social media outlets. We are still here, reliving the traumas and relying only on each other. Our healing has yet to take place.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.