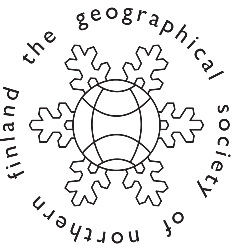
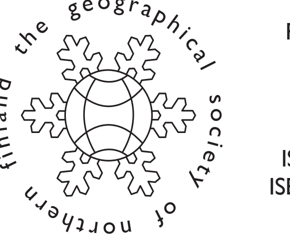
The concept of the Anthropocene has – perhaps like no other – captured contemporary thought on evolving planetary unsustainability. However, by accepting the Anthropocene as the predicament of our epoch, we also legitimate the idea that history has come to an end. That there are no alternatives to contemporary Modernity. Unsettling the Anthropocene requires that we learn to listen to those historically oppressed by the project of Modernity and learn about their emancipatory struggles and alternatives that constitute the pluriverse. This theme issue presents four research articles, an interview with Arturo Escobar, a polemic intervention by Jason W. Moore, and following commentaries by Federico Luisetti, Japhy Wilson, and Carlos Tornel, to discuss the opportunities and challenges set forth by pluriversal politics. The collection of texts calls for a dialogue between schools of thought studying the entanglements of environmental and political struggles. This theme issue seeks to engage with these radical possibilities that constitute the pluriverse by providing a rich set of examples that seek alternative visions for politics and political agency, calling for the recognition of differences and specificities of socio-environmental struggles.

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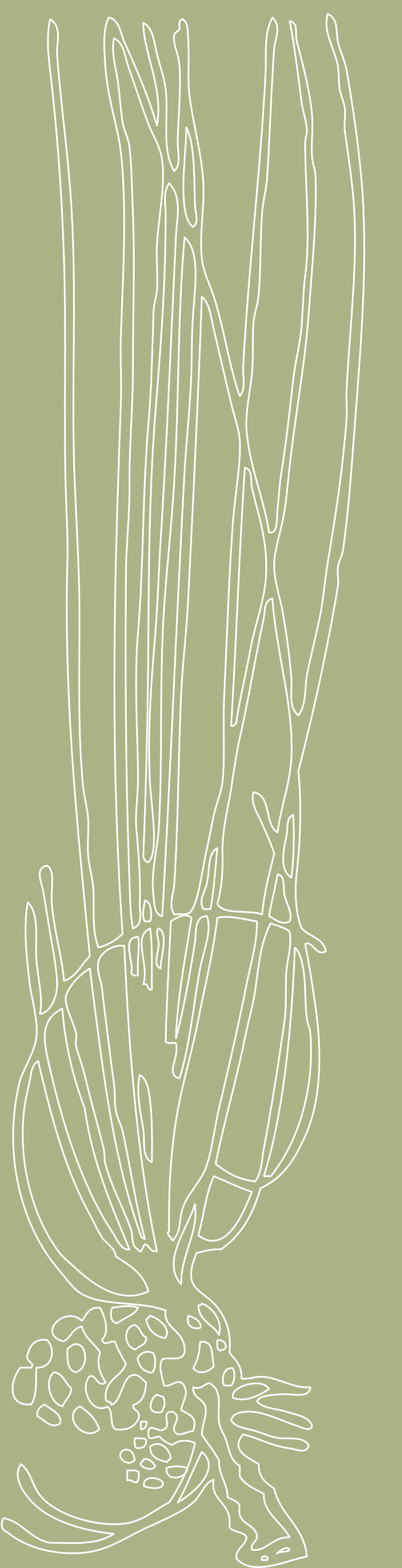

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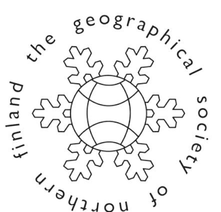

Editorial

Editorial to Re-worlding: Pluriversal Politics in the Anthropocene

Carlos Tornel[a] and Aapo Lunden[b]

> *"The first fact about the contemporary world is accelerated growth".*
> *Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016)*

> *"Imagination also enables us to do things together politically: a new way of seeing the world can be a way of valuing it - a map of things worth saving, or of a future worth creating".*
> *Jedediah Purdy (2015)*

In describing the world experiencing accelerating change and multifaceted overheating, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016) portrays contemporary times through powerful endings like the end of cheap nature, the end of traditional political thought and of overarching generalizations. The exhaustion brought about by neoliberalism, and the double bind that emerges from a relentless pursuit of economic growth and sustainability is leading to increasingly tangible forms of social and environmental unsustainability (Eriksen 2021). Therefore, there is an impending urgency not only to move away from the traditional pursuits of economic growth as we know it, but for broader civilizational changes and transitions (Escobar 2015; Kallis *et al*. 2020).

Such a transition has been expressed through multiple discourses, aiming to unsettle the model of Western capitalist modernity. Seen from this perspective, the Anthropocene not only disrupts the Nature/Culture divide and highlights the impossibility of maintaining these realms as apart (Chakrabarty 2009; Descola 2013; Purdy 2015), but it simultaneously is configured as an ahistorical narrative that celebrates the apotheotic rise of the *Anthropos*, whose story of conquest and hubris is built on the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist forms of exploitation over the last 500 years.

Moving beyond modernity's apotheotic and ever-expanding faith in forms of technological and market-based fixes (Harvey 2001; Temenos & McCann 2012), or "solutionisms" (Morozov 2013), reveals how the concept of the Anthropocene remains in its core a conceptualization prone to anthropogenic propositions that continue to reinstitute modernity's separation of nature and culture, through the exploitation of class, race and gender as a form to obtain cheap labour and access to land (Wolfe

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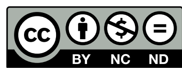

2006). Moreover, the Anthropocene signifies the emergence of geo-power: a series of technocratic environmental interventions accompanied by geo-knowledges rooted in the imperial ecologies of the nineteenth century, now expressed in Earth system sciences, and geoengineering (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2016: 87–90). These forms of power are rooted in a form of geo-constructivism that

> *exploits the capability of recycling the project of scientific modernity consisting of becoming 'masters and possessors of nature' (Descartes), while simultaneously solving the environmental disasters intrinsically associated with the same conquest (Neyrat 2018: 3).*

As such, the Anthropocene celebrates promethean approaches in the form of managerial, technocratic, and market-based solutions to respond to civilizational crisis shifting from traditional bio-power to a broader form of control over biological and non-biological processes (Luisetti 2019).

The concept of the Anthropocene has – perhaps like no other – captured contemporary thought on contemporary planetary unsustainability in several forms. On the one hand, the Anthropocene opens a scientific and geologic debate over the primacy of humanity as a species and the impact humans have had on the biosphere and the lithosphere. This, as Lorimer (2017) argues, entails simultaneously a scientific question, an ideological provocation across the political spectrum to understand how humanity arrived at the Anthropocene, and the emergence of new ontologies of environmentalism enabling a politically differentiated model of geological subjects. On the other hand, the popular Anthropocene, the one that Jason W. Moore (2016: 4) refers to as the result of "Green Arithmetic" where "Human Action" plus "Nature" equals "Planetary Crisis", has given rise to a popular term that has captured the imaginations of humans after "the end of nature" (see, McKibben 1989). This position has sparked a profitable industry in science fiction dealing with the collapse of societies and the imaginaries of possible futures (see, Tornel & Lunden 2020) which tends to dominate the discussion from academic writings to the pages of the New York Times. This conception of the Anthropocene normalizes a particular view of society and nature. In a very similar way to Hobbes, who led to a normalization of anarchy as the default characteristics of human societies, the Anthropocene normalizes neoliberal capitalism. It roughly tells the story of a humanity, transgressing planetary boundaries and the proposal to rapidly accelerate technological innovation to mitigate the excess done by humanity. In the process, productivist societies remain afloat, increasing economic growth and mitigating social inequalities (Dryzek & Pickering 2018; for a critique see Moore, this issue; Luisetti, this issue).

As Jason W. Moore writes, "the abstraction Nature/Society historically conforms to a seemingly endless series of human exclusion – never mind the rationalizing disciplines and extremist policies imposed upon extra-human natures. These exclusions correspond to a long history of subordinating women, colonial populations, and peoples of color" (Moore 2016: 2, emphasis added). Moore (2011) articulates the notion of cheapness as the strategy that has shaped capitalism since 1450. A process that follows the Marxian logic of primitive accumulation is the enclosure of the commons, of taking advantage of people (cheap labour) and nature (cheap nature) to produce, in means such as accumulation by dispossession, that to this day engulfs modern capitalist thought. As Moore (2016: 5) argues, the Anthropocene sounds the alarm, but it cannot answer how these alarming changes came about. If we accept the Anthropocene as a way of understanding our current epoch, then we are legitimating by default the idea that history

has come to an end and thus, that we cannot and should not expect the emergence of any resistance to the modern-human project (Barca 2020). In other words, the world is what Eurocentric modernity has made it to be. Here, the common "we", is an *Anthropos* that is to be understood as

> *an abstraction based on a white, male, and heterosexual historical subject in possession of reason (qua science, technology, and the law) and the means of production, by which tools it is entitled to extract labour and value from what it defines as Other (Barca 2020: 5).*

Unsettling the Anthropocene and its one-dimensional *Anthropos*, forces us to, on the one hand, understand the Anthropocene as a form of "ideology by default" (Malm & Hornborg 2014), where natural scientists extend their worldviews to society and attribute to *Homo sapiens* the responsibility for these changes. From this perspective, *Humanity* then becomes the doom-bringer, but also the saviour: it is through the newly formed hope of creating a planetary stewardship in modern technology and science that humanity can overcome these huge challenges (Neyrat 2018: 59–67). On the other hand, this forces us to look at those whose alterity is actively denied by this project, and whose very existence has been historically oppressed and actively made invisible by a particular ontology.

New political subjectivities are thus emerging in the resistance of this master narrative, that is, the hegemonic discourse or the ruling ideas that present humans and nature as separate, whose only purpose is to be put to work for capital to constitute the Anthropocene. Through what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) called the sociology of absences, a process that brings forth those forms of existence that have been rendered as non-existence, as non-credible alternatives to what exists (Santos 2014: 15), it then becomes possible to articulate the multiple forms of resistance that are unsettling this narrative. Form the interaction of feminist workers and strikes (Gago 2021) to the emergence of a pluriversal politics (see, Escobar 2018; Kothari *et al.* 2018), the Anthropocene must then be seen as more than an event or an epoch-defining characteristic of humanity, but as the ultimate form (or the apotheosis) of racist, colonial, patriarchal Western-modernity. In other words, the Anthropocene has been adopted as the hegemonic or ruling idea or common sense, that cannot be reduced to a simple epoch-defining characteristic (Barca 2020).

While we see the debate associated with the multiple names given to the current epoch (e.g., *Capitalocene, Plantatiocene, Chthulucene*) as relevant, this issue is interested in their contributions as *methods*, that is, how these notions can help us formulate and construct a political subjectivity of the ongoing civilizatory/planetary crisis. We echo the notions that present the Anthropocene, both theoretically and ontologically, as 'patchy' (Tsing *et al.* 2019), or in other words, we see no such thing as totalizing the Anthropocene, instead we see possibility at the margins of this discourse. We see class, gender and racial struggles taking shape as capitalism struggles to maintain the forces of reproduction at its disposal, as more and more alliances between those that have been historically oppressed become more evident (see, Arboleda 2020).

Marisol de la Cadena (2019) calls the *Anthropo-not-seen* a neologism which signals

> *the world-making process through which heterogenous worlds that do not make themselves through the division between humans and non humans —nor do they necessarily conceive the different entities in their assemblages through such a division—are both obliged into that distinction and exceed it.*

Others, like Arturo Escobar (2020; this issue), refer to this condition as *radical relationality* which is meant to show this radical form of interdependence between what is often separated by modern thought as nature and culture. Collapsing this separation has become the go-to tool of both post-modern and post-colonial thinkers. For most, the collapse signals a need to look beyond the traditional ways of framing politics and focusing instead on those other forms of understanding of the world that have been traditionally left out, obscured and or suppressed by modern thought. The bottom line is that modernity has reached a conundrum from which it cannot escape: the civilization crisis is in its essence a crisis of energy, food, institutions, democracy, and perhaps most relevant of all, meaning (Escobar 2015, 2020). The search for alternatives or revolutionary subjects in the face of these multiple crises has academics scrambling to find answers.

The inspiration for this theme issue originated in the search for a scalar conceptualization of global- and local-level interactions, specifically trying to address how it is that those local solutions can lead towards global transformations? Are the efforts (mainly coming from the academy) to name our epoch any good for actual revolutionary strategies? If we are facing a civilizatory crisis, then what tools for emancipation that we are familiar with are still useful or effective in our current epoch? While we do not presume to answer these questions in full, the Theme Issue offers a series of propositions and debates that can, in our view, begin to lay the groundwork to answer these questions.

For the issue, we drew inspiration for the work from the theme of pluriversal politics (Escobar 2015). In brief, pluriversal politics means engaging with multiple dialogic methods to

> *enhance appreciation of multiple ways of knowing and being in the world (...) that decentres models of science and development that have been portrayed as universally true and good (Paulson 2018: 85).*

Concepts like conviviality, *Buen Vivir* and *Comunalidad* in Latin America, *Ubuntu* in Africa, Degrowth in Europe and North America and a struggle for the commons elsewhere have highlighted these modes of transition beyond the Anthropocene towards a cosmopolitan or pluriversal process of re-worlding (Salleh 2020). As remarked by Karin Amimoto Ingersoll (2018: 301):

> *[Too] much of the world proceeds without memory, as if the spaces we inhabit are blank geographies, and thus available for consumption and development.*

In this light, the problems of our time are not based on a lack of development, progress, or economic growth,

> *but in the conception of development itself as a linear, unidirectional, material, and financial growth, driven by commoditization and capitalist markets (Kothari et al. 2018: xxii).*

Drawing on indigenous placed-based examples including notions such as 'grounded normativity' (Coulthard & Simpson 2016), these alternatives to development point towards a need to recognize the differences and specificities of socio-environmental struggles. These forms of ethical frameworks are provided by the thought and praxis of those that have historically experienced modernity as an imposition, effectively

becoming *the victims of modernity* (Dussel 2015). Their experiences of distress due to loss of livelihoods, identities and ecological functions from environmental changes points towards an agenda with multiple paths towards transformation, emancipation and definitions of justice.

Theme issue contents

This theme issue brings together scholars working in different fields highlighting the historical conversations and growing number of convergences between critiques to capitalism and critiques to modernity and Eurocentrism, emerging from the Global North and South (with a particular emphasis on Latin America). The main goal of the issue is not only to highlight the importance of a continued dialogue between these positions, but to address the apparent theoretical contradictions that are often formulated against one another. The issue presents four original contributions seeking to address: a) political ontology, b) methodological contributions to engage with those subaltern or *repressed knowledges* (Foucault 2003), c) a systematic account of the grassroots struggles and political innovations in Latin America and d) the understanding of ecological conflicts seen as cultural misunderstandings (Viveiros de Castro 2006). These contributions enable us to identify the emergence of what Escobar (this issue) along with Marisol de la Cadena calls *Pluriversal Contact Zones* (PCZ).

In the first original article, Tim May addresses the ontological nature of an ecological disagreement over a wastewater collector in Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. His analysis presents the contradictory nature of ontological disagreements, furthering the case for establishing differences through ontological politics. May shows how the perceived environmentality that guides the Friends of the Lake organization presents the collector as a benefit for the local population. However, May's work shows how such arguments are mixed with historical references to colonial politics and a manner that disregards local inhabitants' meanings and relation to the lake. The article highlights the importance of looking at environmental conflicts beyond the traditional gaze of political economy and political ecology. Instead, May approaches the different meanings and stakes in the conflict from the perspective of Political Ontology. Seeing these as ontological disagreements shows how the environmental conflict in the case of Lake Atitlán transcends the taken-for-granted framings of nature, either as resources or conservation units. Ultimately, his article shows how

> *a more nuanced approach, inclusive of ontological ambiguities is necessary to better understand extractivist conflicts and to move abstract discussions closer to the dynamic and entangled realities of Indigenous lives (May, this issue).*

In *Listening-with the subaltern: Anthropocene, Pluriverse and more-than-human agency*, António Carvalho and Mariana Riquito present a novel and provocative methodological approach to navigate the Anthropocene and its entanglements. For the authors, the Anthropocene presents more than a geological timescale or a geopolitical event reflecting the dominant ontological model – the modern "one-world world" perspective (Law 2011). Their analysis draws on several methodological practices that, while speculative at this stage, point towards directions that are needed to listen-to or learn-from those that have been oppressed or silenced by the Master's discourse, the subaltern. This specifically refers

to those that have been historically oppressed by this ontological understanding of the world based on development and capitalist imaginaries. Drawing from a rich theoretical background, the authors show how the debate of the Anthropocene cannot be reduced to a modernist framework of development, progress and economic growth. Instead, the article signals an exhaustion of modernist solutions, and the need to turn focus to those who have been historically silenced in conceptualizations of the Anthropocene. Carvalho and Riquito propose a way forward by presenting a series of methodological proposals towards politicization as we continue to navigate the modernity-spawned civilizatory crisis.

Following this article, Marina Wertheimer presents a case study of La Ribera de Bernal, a neighbourhood in Buenos Aires. Here, the development of an urban settlement in Nueva Costa del Plata is presented as a form of urban extractivism. Wertheimer argues that the controversies between locals, environmentalists and developers is based on a form of 'cultural misunderstanding and ontological disagreement'. Drawing on the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2006), Wertheimer sees the environmental conflict over the new settlement to be based on cultural – often insurmountable – misunderstandings. As pointed out by Escobar (in this issue), *common* interests may be shared among multiple actors, but they are *not the same* interest due to different ontological understandings of the place, resources, and nature-culture relations. Wertheimer's case study shows precisely how pluriversal politics appear in a context in which other forms of being in the world are uncovered or revealed by highlighting common but different understandings of the conflict and its stakes between environmentalists, developers, and local inhabitants. She argues that attempts to bring environmental concerns to local inhabitants are often considered as exported epistemologies, even as a form of violence, where scientific knowledge, "ingrained and naturalized as a habitus, ends up imposing a superior epistemological position" (Wertheimer, this issue). Ultimately, Wertheimer's article shows how the use of conservationist's discourses served to legitimize environmentalist groups in public debates.

In the fourth article, Erandi Maldonado-Villalpando and Jaime Paneque-Gálvez present a review of the multiple forms of thought and territorial struggle emerging in Latin America. Reviewing both academic and grey literature on grassroots innovation, post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatismo, the authors seek to map the alternatives to development emerging from several communities' defence of their territory and ways of living. A process that, as they argue, often incurs in the design and the construction of alternatives to the hegemonic and imposed form of development by states or markets. The authors show how grassroots organizations and community organizing are not only seeking alternative forms of development in the Global South but are generating innovative processes and practices to create other possible worlds.

The theme issue then presents two special contributions. First, we present an interview with Arturo Escobar to reflect on how his work on the pluriverse and its relation to the contemporary civilizatory crisis. We focus on his theorization of pluriversal politics based on the idea of thinking and designing politics in *a world where many worlds fit*. This includes notions like terricide, pluriversal contact zones, community entanglements, entanglements of concepts and neologisms that have given birth to a new language and the possibility of imagining something beyond the apotheosis of modernity in the Anthropocene. These are viewed through what Escobar calls the axes for civilizatory transitions, presented as possible alternative approaches to the Anthropocene and the ontology of separation that constitutes it. We also discuss his more recent work on radical relationality and the impact of Sylvia Wynter and *transhumanity* on his thought,

before finally touching on his long-lasting work on development, post-development, and its relation to the current development agenda of Sustainable Development Goals.

Following the interview, we introduce the discussion section with an intervention by Jason W. Moore. In it, Moore argues that the notion of the pluriverse is in reality "a flight from World-history". For Moore, the idea of the pluriverse presents an ahistorical understanding of the current civilizational crisis. Instead, he argues that contrary to the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene acts simultaneously as a solution to ahistorical narratives, and as a method to disentangle how world-ecology resulted from capitalism's interaction with climate change and civilization projects. The article claims that political ontology frameworks are limited, by highlighting the importance of returning to the mechanisms of class struggle and world history to interpret our current civilizatory crisis. Moore's intervention sets the groundwork for a quite interesting and fruitful debate over the long-standing tensions between post-colonial and decolonial thinkers on the one hand and Marxist thought on the other. The juxtaposition of these two fields of study has in the past resulted in a series of critiques that often foreclose rather than expand on the possibilities for cross-fertilization.

In response, Federico Luisetti argues that indeed, the cross-fertilization of materialist and decolonial concepts is not yet over. Drawing on the point of origin of the birth of contemporary capitalism and colonial relations, Luisetti sees in the coalescence of both narratives the possibility of multiple ways of providing an alternative to the Anthropocene consensus that legitimates and normalizes neoliberalism and its conception of nature as a form of common sense. According to Luisetti (this issue),

> *a pluriversal politics of nature can reverse the ecocidal imagination of the capitalist energy transition by promoting alliances of movements centred on "'little-e' energies" and liberation ecologies in urban centres and agricultural lands, indigenous territories and Western enclosures.*

Drawing on the possibility of a multiplicity of universalisms such as Wallerstein's *A Thousand Marxisms*, it becomes possible to question *"the way that incommensurability operates within struggles, values and practices of energy, life, and justice across extra-human natures"*, and to identify some open gaps that Marxism and political ontologies can address.

Japhy Wilson presents a response to Jason Moore, arguing for a project that reformulates the abstract Eurocentric universalism, towards a multiplicity of insurgent universalities. Drawing on the examples of the Haitian Revolution at the end of the 19th Century and the contemporary Ecuadorian Amazon, Wilson makes a distinction between a homogenizing universalism in the abstract, to the actual struggles that constitute the possibility of emancipation. As he argues, by looking at the margins or the edges of the extractive frontiers, it becomes possible to see how universalism is not always a totalizing project exported from the outside, but it constitutes a form of lived reality, or an "insurgent universality", which creates a space of struggle *"in which the universal dimension emerges like a flash of lightning, simultaneously exposing false universals and transcending closed identities"* (Wilson, this issue). Wilson argues that the colonial past is present in most of these places and is palpable in the struggles emerging in today's conflicts. Therefore, the pluriverse itself reduces subalterns' struggles to a form of universality that forecloses any emancipatory potential from the margins.

Finally, Carlos Tornel offers a possible space for dialogue between political ontology and Marxist thought. Drawing on the decolonial school from Latin America, emerging from several movements and thinkers, the commentary shows how the debate between traditional Marxism continues to discount Marx's questions and contestations of his

own teleological assumptions by the end of his life and work. Tornel claims that while the debate has shifted from whether the subalterns can speak (which indeed they can!) to how can we learn from those Others that have been historically discounted or 'cheapened' by global capitalism and eurocentric-modernity over the last 500 years. Tornel argues that there are numerous possibilities for a dialogue to emerge between these two fields, but that the main aspect that we can learn is to follow how indigenous, peasant and other grounded communities are reinventing their struggle against capitalism, development, the traditional ways of organizing society and nature relations under colonialism and patriarchy.

These commentaries offer the beginnings of a dialogue that we see as fruitful and important in the field of both Marxist thought and Political Ontology and, more broadly, a discussion that needs to be sustained as we continue to understand pluriversal politics and revolutionary subjectivities in an age of generalized crises.

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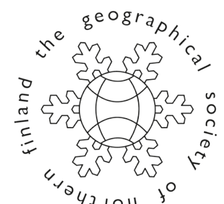

Research article

Friends of the Lake? Ontological Ambiguities and the Megacolector Conflict

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Abstract
There is growing recognition that radical ontological difference underlies Indigenous communities' opposition to extractivist development within their territories. Scholars writing from a political ontology (PO) framework excitedly posit the possibility of the pluriverse emerging from the 'ontological openings' (de la Cadena 2015a) that these struggles are forming in the project of modernity. While such accounts are useful in elucidating how such struggles are more than 'mere resource conflicts' (Coombes *et al.* 2012a), they also risk reifying ontological difference and losing sight of the power asymmetries which shape its pragmatic and strategic articulation. More than just a matter of academic debate, overstating the ontological difference of Indigenous opposition to extractivism is a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek 2016) that has the potential to limit Indigenous communities' particular aspirations for self-determination. As a consequence, this article suggests a way forward can be found in 'ontologizing political economy' (Burman 2016) whilst also paying closer attention to the contingent nature of worlding, as well as ontological ambiguities and 'partial connections' (de la Cadena 2015a). This article fleshes out these theoretical concerns through drawing upon my ethnographic research about an ongoing 'resource' conflict in Guatemala. Over the last few years, the Maya Tz'utujil community of San Pedro la Laguna has been strongly opposing the 'megacolector' – a wastewater megaproject being advanced as a solution to Lake Atitlan's contamination by the environmental NGO 'Asociación de Amigos del Lago de Atitlán' (Association of Friends of Lake Atitlán). Through engaging with a range of Pedrano community members, I reflect upon the usefulness of a PO framework for understanding the megacolector conflict's ontological dimensions and the motivations of San Pedro's opposition movement.

Keywords: Guatemala, Lake Atitlán, extractivism, political ontology, decoloniality

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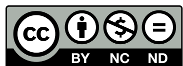

Introduction

Across Latin America, Indigenous territories are increasingly threatened by extractivist development (Rivera Andía & Vindal Ødegaard 2019; Schorr 2019; Villareal & Muñoz 2020). This assault is not limited to classic extractive activities like mining, but rather involves 'the accelerated pace of natural resource exploitation at an industrial level and the construction of mega-projects and infrastructure intended to make full use of natural resources' (Raftopoulos 2017: 388), including for instance the expansion of hydroelectric projects and agribusinesses.

In Guatemala's case, this new wave of extractivism emerged as a result of a worldwide commodity boom and its coincidence with the series of neoliberal policies implemented following the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords (Mash-Mash & Gómez 2014; Way 2016; Urkidi 2011; Yagenova & Garcia 2009). This extractivist expansion has been accompanied by state policies of militarisation and criminalisation (Global Witness 2020; Masek 2021; Sieder 2017). Indigenous defenders of territory are the principal victims, and they are frequently convicted through anti-terrorism legislation (CIDSE 2021). The onslaught has been so brutal that it has been labelled a 'Fourth Invasion' (Batz 2017; Chivalán Carrillo & Posocco 2020), and the most significant attack on Indigenous communities' way of life since the military's scorched earth campaigns of the early 1980s (CEH 1999; Dearden 2012).

Worldwide, Indigenous communities have increasingly turned to a 'rights of nature' discourse to defend their territories (Kothari *et al.* 2017), whether this be from extractivism, industrial contamination (Surma 2021), state intrusions (Muller *et al.* 2019) or climate change policies (Ulloa 2019). In such disputes, lakes, rivers, mountains, and forests have publicly emerged as much *more than* (de la Cadena 2015a) 'mere resources' (Coombes *et al.* 2012a), and as sentient beings and subjects in their own right. Scholars writing from a political ontology (PO) framework have eagerly utilised such instances to make their case for the pluriverse, arguing that the radical ontological difference visibilised by these struggles is forming 'ontological openings' (de la Cadena 2015a) in the project of modernity. Political ontologists refer to this modern world as the 'One-World World' (OWW) (Law 2011), that is a world 'that has arrogated for itself the right to be 'the' world, subjecting all other worlds to its own terms' (Escobar 2016: 15).

The OWW manifests in various hegemonic beliefs, such as rationality, modern science, economic growth. Philosophically, the OWW is rooted in a Cartesian separation between humans and nature, and its anthropocentric outlook has facilitated nature's subordination for human gain through short-sighted extractivism. Political ontologists recognise that the OWW and the universalising nature of modern knowledge not only threatens Indigenous lives and territories, but also their relational worlds. In these worlds, humans are understood to be mutually constituted through their horizontal relations with other life forms, with the assumption that 'the relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves' (Wildman 2006: 6). Due to this understanding of humanity's co-dependency on other living beings, Indigenous relationality is rooted in an ethics of care and reciprocity. In this way, the OWW and Indigenous non-modern ontologies are diametrically opposed on ethical, political, and social grounds. As several Pedrano interviewees put it, the former promulgates a 'culture of death', the latter a 'culture of life'.

Although the OWW remains dominant, political ontologists posit that its hold is weakening. They suggest that when Indigenous communities resist extractivism through recourse to their relationality, they are forming ontological openings 'to the

consideration of other ontologies as plausible and viable alternatives to the modern one' (Blaser 2013a: 556). As Blaser (2013a: 557) states:

> *forty years ago, opposing mining, oil extraction, or the increase of agricultural land because indigenous ways of life would be profoundly disrupted would have been seen as sheer irrationality by most citizens in a Latin American country; not so now. The promise of modernization no longer appears as persuasive.*

The ecological and social planetary crises of the 'Anthropocene' are similarly acting to erode modern hegemony, if not its dominance (Escobar 2016). As a result, the OWW is increasingly reliant on coercion rather than persuasion – hence the recent upsurge in violence to enforce extractivist policies. These crises provide both the context and the rationale for PO (Blaser 2013a), which principally seeks to shed light on the 'conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other' (Blaser 2009b: 877).

PO sits within the broader 'ontological turn', in which social theorists have aimed to 'break away from the normative divides, central to the modern regime of truth, between subject and object, mind and body, reason and emotion, living and inanimate, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic' (Escobar 2018: 63). In particular, PO evolved as a critique of political ecology's failure to adequately address the ontological dimensions of environmental conflicts. As Bonelli *et al.* (2016: 85) criticise, from a political ecology perspective:

> *the differences at stake in environmental conflicts correspond to 'cultural differences', or 'cultural beliefs', or even to differences in the 'languages of valuation' of one world 'out-there'. In short, 'Nature' remains singular, culture remains plural.*

Political ontologists have argued that the multiculturalist approach of political ecology reduces nature to a matter of 'resources' (Karlsson 2018) and misses the deeper significance of 'resource conflicts' (Blaser 2009a; Coombes *et al.* 2012a). For this reason, Mario Blaser (2009a, 2009b, 2013), Marisol de la Cadena (2015a, 2015b), and Arturo Escobar (2016, 2018) developed PO to push political ecology's intent further and take different ontologies seriously (Blaser 2014).

While PO analyses are indeed pushing academic debates in a more ontologically expansive direction, this article argues that they also risk reifying and overstating ontological difference at the expense of losing sight of the power asymmetries which shape its pragmatic and strategic articulation. As I will illustrate, this presents a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek 2016) that has the potential to limit Indigenous communities' particular aspirations for self-determination. To counter it, I suggest that researchers concerned with ontological multiplicity should take a more nuanced approach with greater consideration for ontological ambiguities, as well as individuals' worlding practices and the contingent and fluid nature of ontological difference. This article will flesh out these theoretical concerns through the case study of the 'megacolector conflict' – an ongoing dispute over Lake Atitlán's future.

Methods

This article draws upon the nine months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted (May 2021a) between November 2017 – August 2018 around Lake Atitlán, mostly in the town of San Pedro la Laguna. During this time, I interviewed a range of 145 individuals on both sides of the megacolector conflict – Indigenous community leaders, elders, fishermen, farmers, spiritual guides, artists, activists, scientists, NGO and governmental employees. I also participated in a variety of community meetings and assemblies, as well as NGO-led events and scientific conferences.

More specifically, this article includes quotes from ten separate interviews conducted with eight Indigenous and two non-Indigenous participants, as well as written and visual material obtained from my online discourse analysis of each side of the megacolector conflict. I further discuss various texts (poetry, hip-hop, and a children's book) to explore Pedranos' relationship with Lake Atitlán. Throughout the article, I also make several self-reflections on the realisation of my essentialist tendencies, exploring how this constrained my initial interpretation of the megacolector conflict's ontological dimensions. I do so to draw attention to a rarely discussed tension in academia – the pressure on young researchers to positively reinforce the theories of established academics. As I posit later in the article, PO's prioritisation of ontological difference is a result of researchers' neglect of ethnographic complexities. In other words, it is a methodological issue, and I include my self-reflections as a caution against the projection of theoretical ambitions on Indigenous peoples.

Bringing to light my ethnographic erasure of Indigenous voices is also an important aspect of decolonising my research. I position myself as an activist researcher attempting to decolonise my work through entering into a deeper relationship of reciprocity with my Indigenous research participants. Since leaving the field, I have maintained contact with members of the Indigenous opposition movement, and above all, I have sought to 'walk with' (Sundberg 2014) Pedranos through aligning my work with their cause. To this end, following the submission of my PhD, my first move was to expose the modern/colonial dynamic of the megacolector's imposition through collaboratively writing an article with Pedrano community leaders (May & Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2021).

The Megacolector Conflict

As the sun rose, with a bow, women would descend
passing on sands cleaned by your movement.
Before taking your waters they raised their gaze
to ask permission from the mother of life without equal.

Our grandmothers and grandfathers said that you are a gift
because a woman came from above with a fine jar
that suddenly fell, spilling the water that it carried
and you were born beautiful grandmother Lake Atitlán.

Grandmother Lake was considered a sacred jewel,
by those who with faith believed that you came from on high;

so that the favoured creatures did not suffer thirst,
without selfishness I mean the Mayan descendants.

Lake Atitlán is a reason for permanent struggle,
of those who love you and respect you with conscience,

Extracts of the poem 'Lago Atitlán' (Quiacaín Sac, n.d.) written by Don Salvador Quiacaín Sac - Pedrano elder and community leader. [Author's translation from Spanish]

Lake Atitlán is Guatemala's premier tourist attraction and the deepest lake in Central America. It is also arguably the most beautiful, surrounded by an array of volcanic peaks in the rugged Western Highlands, the Indigenous heart of the country (INE 2018). However, the lake is threatened by increasing levels of contamination. A leading cause is the basin's rapid population rise, having reached around 300,000 people (INE 2018). As a result, large volumes of nutrient-heavy pollution currently enter the lake through the combined effects of soil erosion, wastewater, and chemical fertilizer inflow (Chandra *et al.* 2013).

The lake's pollution has encouraged processes of eutrophication, which in turn produced massive cyanobacterial algal bloom events in 2009 and 2015 (Rejmánková *et al.* 2011). These blooms significantly impacted local livelihoods (Bájan Balán 2016; Valladares 2010), and although they proved not to be toxic, this remains a distinct possibility in the future. This is especially concerning for those communities which depend upon the lake as their sole supply of drinking water. These communities already face significant health risks of diarrhoea due to wastewater pathogens in their water supply.

In recent years, the lake's contamination has become the focus of a social conflict between the lake's Indigenous communities and a local environmental NGO, AALA - 'Asociacion de Amigos del Lago de Atitlán' (Association of Friends of Lake Atitlán) (Aburawa 2021; Esswein & Zernack 2019). The latter has been attempting to impose a wastewater megaproject known as the 'megacolector' on the lake's Indigenous communities, advancing it as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination problem. Plans for the megacolector were first conceived in 2013 by engineers from Guatemalan and American universities based on a similar project at Lake Tahoe (USA). They discounted the possibility of wastewater treatment plants as viable a solution for Lake Atitlán due to the purported high cost of construction and a lack of available space in the steep-sided basin (AALA 2021). The megacolector was presented as an alternative measure to prevent the wastewater from entering the lake through instead exporting it outside of the basin. This would involve two principal projects – the construction of sewage systems in each lakeside town, and then a huge, submerged tube connecting these systems together (AALA 2021). The wastewater would then be pumped southwards to a treatment plant for further processing.

The estimated construction cost of just the main tube of the megacolector is estimated at a whopping $215.6 million (AGN 2018), and this is without factoring in high maintenance costs. There is still much speculation as to how the project would be financed, but the megacolector's proponents claim various strategies would be implemented to make the project economically sustainable, including the exploitation of hydroelectricity and biogas (AALA 2018a). Most significant is the plan to sell its nutrient-rich wastewater as liquid fertilizer to agroindustry (African palm, banana, sugar

cane, and coffee) on the south coast, where it is estimated to sustain the production of around 5,000 hectares (AALA 2018a; Bordatto 2019). It is this latter detail that hints at the extractivist dynamic beneath the megacolector's innocuous framing as just an 'environmental' project.

Over the last few years, the lake's Indigenous communities and their ancestral authorities have mounted a growing opposition movement to the megacolector (Alcaldía Indígena de Sololá 2019; Comisión Ciudadana por la Transparencia de Santiago Atitlán 2019). Notably, in 2018 'Ajpop Tinamit' - an alliance of the lake's ancestral authorities formed to defend the lake. They frequently stage press conferences to denounce the megacolector and communicate the lake's value as a sentient being (Ajpop Tinamit 2019, 2021). The strongest opposition however has come from San Pedro la Laguna, a Maya Tz'utujil town of 14,000 inhabitants on the lake's southern shore. It is San Pedro which has spearheaded the opposition movement and thrust it into national attention. In September 2019, Pedrano community leaders delivered an *amparo* (legal injunction) to Guatemala's Constitutional Court claiming that AALA has violated their right to consultation as guaranteed by the ILO-169 Convention (Figure 1) (Ramírez 2019). After a hearing in 2020 (Corte de Constitucionalidad de Guatemala 2020), the Constitutional Court finally delivered its verdict in 2021, rejecting Pedranos' claims. However, this has done nothing to diminish Pedranos' determination, and they are now looking to take their case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Figure 1. Pedranos deliver their *amparo* (FGER 2019).

In 2019 Pedrano community leaders formed a movement – Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' to unite diverse facets of community organisation (the municipality, the Elder Council and cocodes) under one cohesive umbrella. Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' is the main platform of Pedrano opposition to the megacolector, and they coordinate anti-megacolector activities (Red K'at 2021), and frequently publish denouncements of the megacolector on their Facebook page. Through their strategic efforts, anti-megacolector sentiment has seeped into almost every aspect of San Pedro's public life (May 2021a). Consequently, the majority of Pedranos now perceive the megacolector as a serious threat to their community, the lake, and to life itself.

The lake's Indigenous communities object to the megacolector for many reasons, such as their exclusion from decision making and AALA's reliance upon various colonial strategies to push its agenda (May & Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2021). They also argue that the megacolector fails to sufficiently address the multifaceted nature of the lake's contamination (Ajpop Tinamit 2018; Romero 2014; Skinner 2016) and that it poses a catastrophic risk in the likelihood of its rupturing during an earthquake (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b). However, the Indigenous opposition are most concerned with the megacolector's extractivist dynamic – the sale of wastewater to agroindustry.

Unfortunately, in Guatemala *finqueros* (plantation owners) are responsible for diverting rivers and leaving many communities without water (Alonso-Fradejas 2018; Pomadreda García 2018), and in light of a drying climate and the government's plan to industrialise the south coast (CNDU 2014), it is feared that *finqueros* see the megacolector as a means to securing a long-term water supply (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019a, 2019b). This likelihood is compounded by the fact that AALA is an elite organisation run primarily by oligarchical family networks, and whose membership includes many powerful corporations, including construction and agro-industrial firms (Aviña Escot 2020).

AALA actively plays down these connections and obscures the megacolector's intended sale of wastewater to *finqueros*, but this lack of transparency only exacerbates the opposition's suspicions. They have analysed in detail how such a water grab could occur, articulating their concerns in a recent report entitled 'The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán' (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b) (Figure 2). Within it, it is argued that the privatisation of Lake Atitlán is likely to follow the French model of privatisation, whereby the state retains a 51% stake so as to maintain an appearance of public-private partnership (PPP). It is expected that the government will fund the megacolector through external loans from banks such as BCIE - Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica, fears which have been evidenced by meetings between BCIE and the government's Finance Minister (AGN 2018; Gordillo 2018). As their report outlines:

> *This model seeks to take water from the lake, convert it into a good and to then sell it to whomever can buy it, damaging the lake itself and its people and townships, since the sanitation and treatment of the lake will increase the cost of water for the people that depend upon it. (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b: 12-13) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

During my fieldwork, a number of key stakeholders confirmed that the megacolector could indeed be a means to privatise the lake's water for elite interests as the opposition fears (May & Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2021). Despite being led by an environmental NGO, the megacolector is thus representative of a new covert form of extractivism, whose extractivist dynamic is camouflaged by AALA's multicultural virtue signalling and their insistence on the megacolector's emancipatory promise. Such morally ambiguous

conflicts seem to be occurring with increasing frequency worldwide. As the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014: 6) notes, it is in the contact zones between the Global North and the Global South where the discrepancy between principles and practices tends to be highest:

> *more and more frequently we witness the massive violation of human rights in the name of human rights, the destruction of democracy in the name of democracy […] the devastation of livelihoods in the name of development […] The ideological investment used to conceal such a discrepancy are as massive as the brutality of such practices.*

The growing political prominence of human rights, 'green growth' and sustainable development has been accompanied by corporate virtue signalling and greenwashing initiatives which seek to co-opt and divert sympathetic energies to profit a corporate agenda (Baletti 2014; Morgenstar 2019). Take the $7 billion megaproject 'Mayan Train' which is planned to promote the 'sustainable development' of south-eastern Mexico (Uranga 2020). Like the megacolector, it too is less about the straightforward extraction of resources, than laying out the infrastructure for their future *control* (Ye *et al.* 2020). This is a worrying trend, and one complicated by a distorted media landscape of smoke and mirrors where it is increasingly difficult to discern the discrepancy between principles and practices that Santos (2014) highlights.

Figure 2. The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b).

An Ontological Conflict?

Despite its innocent environmental rhetoric, Lake Atitlán's Indigenous communities credibly see the megacolector as an extractivist threat being advanced by private interests. These circumstances go some way in explaining their motives for resisting the megacolector, but not entirely. Take for instance the contrasting statements below from AALA's website and Pedranos' *amparo* against the megacolector:

> *LAKE ATITLÁN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE* **WATER RESOURCE** *IN GUATEMALA.*
>
> *Lake Atitlán is a cultural and natural icon that inspires everyone who visits. It is one of the most symbolic destinations in the country and a source of water for over 300,000 people that live on its shores […] It is undoubtedly the most important natural attraction in the country and is* **one of the main economic sources***, as it attracts national and worldwide tourists.*
>
> *(AALA 2019)*

> *Our legal action seeks to depart from the vision of the world that considers certain human beings the centre of the universe, and place on the discussion table* **that the Lake/water is alive, that it makes claims, that it has rights and requires valorisation, respect and protection**. *Without this recognition, any project can threaten Lake Atitlán.* **Our Lake is much more than water, it is a living being**.
>
> *(Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019a: 2) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

While AALA values the lake as an economic resource, Pedranos claim the lake as a living being, a disparity which hints at the deeper ontological complexities of the megacolector conflict. As Blaser (2013a: 548) states, ontological conflicts involve 'conflicting stories about what is there', and the contrasting statements above suggest that the megacolector conflict is also an ontological conflict over what the lake actually is. As well as in public communications, these ontological dimensions could be discerned in my interviewees' statements. Take the words of Eduardo Aguirre, the megacolector's project manager:

> *What's really going to happen if there's no more lake, [do] you know how much it represents to Guatemala? One third of all international tourists say they would come to Guatemala because of Lake Atitlán […] So if you do your math […] that's 400 million dollars that comes to Guatemala because of Atitlán […] so that's at stake for the whole country.*

In person, Eduardo Aguirre mirrored the language of AALA's website through emphasising the economic value of Lake Atitlán for the tourist industry. In contrast, when I questioned Pedranos about the lake's significance, they typically responded that 'el lago es vida' (the lake is life). Take the statement below by a young female activist:

> *Atitlán is the force that keeps us alive, it is as if you had no air, you cannot survive. For us, it is like that. If the lake is not there, we could not survive, it is a vital element. (Maggie Garcia – Indigenous activist) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

These contrasting valuations of the lake are striking. In fact, when I first encountered them during my fieldwork, they led me straight into the arms of PO. As Cepek (2016: 632) states, 'Many Westerners are quick to wish for and accept the "truth" of any indigenous statement that describes the earth and its features […] as sacred, agentive beings', and in my case, I had entered the field enthused with de la Cadena's (2015a) notion of 'earth-beings', that is, the Indigenous understanding of mountains as selves in their own right. As a result, I initially set out to prove Lake Atitlán's existence as a similarly 'other-than-human' entity, and the megacolector conflict as a straightforward clash of rival ontologies. I was drawn to Pedrano public discourse presenting the lake as a sentient being, and older Pedranos' references to the lake as 'Qa Tee' Ya" - 'Nuestra Madre/Abuela Lago' (Our Mother/Grandmother Lake):

The lake to me is sacred, she is a very great mother who cares for us and gives us life. (Manuel Chavajay, Pedrano contemporary artist) [Author's translation from Spanish]

However, over time as I interviewed a larger range of Pedranos, it became evident that this earth-beings hypothesis grazed against the ethnographic reality of San Pedro. Some Pedranos referred to the lake in explicitly Christian terms, whilst younger Pedranos would usually describe it as a modern resource:

These days youngsters don't see [the lake] as the mother, they see it as a lake, a beautiful lake yes, to look after it, yes. But not like in previous years. (Carlos Francisco- 18-year-old photographer and shop worker) [Author's translation from Spanish]

I will be very sincere about the lake. The lake for us is a resource to generate money […] For me, I think of the lake as if it were a product to generate money for the town. (Otoniel - young graphic artist) [Author's translation from Spanish]

Conversely, the lake was not so clearly a modern resource for all of the megacolector's proponents. AALA's Indigenous employees for instance expressed a relational view of the lake, and even some of its non-Indigenous employees described the lake as something more than a resource for tourism:

For me, the lake signifies peace, life, it signifies tranquillity, and above all, it gives me energy. (Haydee Marroquín González – non-Indigenous AALA employee)

Such examples unsettle PO's favoured notion of a neat divide between a non-Indigenous modern ontology and an Indigenous relational ontology (Law & Lien 2018). As Killick (2017: 5) states, approaches focused on 'ontological difference are undermined by their inability to move beyond the distinction that they draw'. Ontologists often end up reifying the boundaries between modern and non-modern worlds in their 'rush to reclaim truly different difference' (Bessire & Bond 2014: 443–444). This issue has been criticised by the recent work of a number of scholars who have instead stressed the fluid and contingent nature of ontology (Bovensiepen 2021; Cepek 2016; Mézáros 2020), as well as its hybrid forms in everyday living (Killick 2017; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012).

I first realised the significance of ontological ambiguities when I encountered Rudy, a 24-year-old Pedrano municipal trash collector. During our interview, he was quick to declare that his generation had entirely abandoned ancestral understandings of the lake.

However, when I asked him whether the lake was dying as is often reported in the media (Felipe & Julajuj 2017; Sáenz 2016), his answer left a different impression:

> *Me: Is the lake dying?*
>
> *Rudy: I would say no, because we cannot see life of a grand power that the spirit or the energy has allowed. We cannot see the life of that lake so big, simply it's God that knows […] Imagine that I am not able to see how long you will live, that maybe you will live a lot longer and I won't. Between us, we are both people, but we still can't tell. [Author's translation from Spanish]*

While Rudy may not understand the lake as a mother/grandmother, he expresses a reverence for its vitality (through the medium of Christianity) implicating it as something *more* than a modern resource. A relational understanding can be detected in his comparing of the lake's unknowability to the lifespan of a person. In attempting to categorise Rudy's ontological perspective as either modern or relational we see the limitations of focusing on ontological difference. His more ambiguous perspective fails to fit into either ontological category neatly.

These circumstances find congruence with some recent analyses of ontological multiplicity in other parts of the world. For example, in Mészáros's (2020) research on Sakha relationality with lakes in Siberia, he describes a 'fuzzy, messy and incongruent' local ontology, a mixture between modern and traditional ontologies. As he states, 'Contemporary practices and enactments at lakes cannot be squeezed into a single ontology' (Mészáros 2020: 15). Likewise, in Timor Leste, Bovensiepen (2021) highlights how individuals would express the significance of their spiritual connection with the land in one context but doubt and scepticism in another.

Focusing on individuals like Rudy suggests ontological boundaries should not be overstated (Cepek 2016). Owing to this variation between individuals, in reality there is no such thing as a 'Pedrano relationality' with the lake. At most, there are recognisable trends within certain segments of the population, with younger Pedranos leaning more towards a *modern* ontological ambiguity and older Pedranos towards a more *relational* ambiguity. My research thus supports Bovensiepen's (2021: 39) claim that PO 'does not sufficiently theorise how conflicting ontological assumptions co-exist within the same context, group, or individual'. This is not to say that we should avoid highlighting ontological difference, but it should not be overstated.

There is, however, a concept within PO itself which can help address such ontological ambiguities. De la Cadena (2010, 2015a, 2015b) introduces the notion of 'partial connections' to describe the connections which exist between different worlds in spite of ontological disagreements, describing them as 'a complex formation, a historic-political articulation of more than one, but less than two, socionatural worlds' (de la Cadena 2010: 347). Despite its usefulness, this concept of partial connections is under-utilised by de la Cadena herself, and I agree with Bovensiepen's (2021: 30) contention that PO's emphasis on multiple worlds 'nevertheless leads to an analytical over-prioritization of difference'.

Similar circumstances apply to PO's central concept of 'worlding', that is the process of enacting a world/ontology (Blaser 2014; de la Cadena 2015b). This concept is rooted in the notion that ontologies are 'done and enacted rather than observed' (Mol 1999: 77), and it is useful because it helps account for the fluid nature of ontology. Its utilisation enriches analyses of ontological conflicts through shifting emphasis away from abstract

declarations of ontology to concrete worlding practices. For example, when applied to the megacolector conflict, it allows us to interrogate the ontological claims Pedranos make about their relationality with the lake.

This relationality can be understood as being worlded into being through respectful acts of devotion to the lake. In the past, this occurred through very obvious ritualised interactions, as the Pedrano elder below describes:

> *On approaching the lake they would offer a great respect, including before touching, taking or carrying the water home, the elders would ask for permission from God and mother nature, kneeling and kissing the lake. (Don Feliciano Pop – sculptor and former mayor, aged 91) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Such worlding practices have since disappeared, making Pedranos' relationality with the lake less discernible, and as one Pedrano criticised, more easily falsified:

> *Our grandparents […] were respectful. When they wanted to cross the lake, they had to ask for permission first, and they kissed the lake. Nowadays many say, "Our Mother Lake", but what do they do? Where they got that term from, I don't agree, it's an invention of many people to go through the motions, or just for protagonism. (Juan Quiacaín Navichoc –employee of the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Juan's cynicism is well justified, as I will explore in the next section, Pedranos do strategically politicise their relationality with the lake in the megacolector conflict. However, the loss of these former worlding practices does not necessarily imply the disappearance of Pedranos' relationality with the lake. Worlding simply takes place in new and sometimes less obvious 'transmodern' (Dussel 2012) forms. As Dussel (2012: 43) emphasises, transmodernity is not hostile to modernity, but rather seeks to assume its 'positive moments' along with 'critical elements' adopted from the non-modern cultures themselves in order to create a 'rich pluriversity'

A notable example of this is the children's book 'The Goddess of Lake Atitlán' (Figure 3), written by a Pedrana for a regional literary competition. The book tells the story of a little girl who is cured by the lake, implying that the lake needs to be respected and protected from harm. Within the book, the ancestral mother/grandmother lake has been transformed into a Disney princess-like character to appeal to young children's modern sensibilities. This modernisation is only superficial, as the lake's personhood as a life-giving being remains intact. Another example exists in the form of Sanick, a young Pedrano rapper who I saw perform the song 'Ati't Ya" - 'Grandmother Water' (Sanick 2017) at a festival in Quetzaltenango (Figure 4). The song is a call to action for people to change their attitude and start respecting the lake. Within it, the lake's personhood shines through, as Sanick repeatedly addresses the lake directly, subject-to-subject. Afterwards, Sanick explained to me that the lake instructed him to write the song in a dream, thereby implicating 'Ati't Ya" as a song not *about* the lake, but *of* the lake. Despite being a globalised modern import, hip-hop is the transmodern vehicle by which Sanick enacts a radically different world.

On a wider community level, the most notable example of Pedranos' continuing relationality with the lake occurred during the massive cyanobacterial algal bloom event of 2009. In response, hundreds of Pedranos gathered on the shore to cleanse the lake - physically pulling out algae with baskets, and burning *pom* – a type of incense, as Juan's anecdote relates below:

Figure 3. 'The Goddess of Lake Atitlán' (photo by author).

Figure 4. Sanick (Juun Ajpu 2019).

People began to put incense around the lake in boats. They started to conduct Mayan ceremonies, and the cyanobacteria disappeared. Why? […] Pom is like a natural ingredient, we can say in Western terms, it was the medicine for the lake. The lake, for the first time in a long time, sensed the scent of the connection. It's the first time that I saw San Pedro united. The community joined together and began to use pom around the lake. Everybody, including Evangelicals. (Juan Quiacaín Navichoc –employee of the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala) [Author's translation from Spanish]

The act of collective cleansing that Juan describes can be understood as a 'worlding event' (de la Cadena 2015a) in which Pedranos, when confronted with the threat of the algal bloom, demonstrated a continuing relationality with the lake. In spite of the

community's modernisation, they rallied to its defence through a sense of kinship and social obligation:

> *[The bloom] was very sad, I was frightened. I thought that it was the end of the lake. At the same time, I knew that the lake had life, the lake was a being, it needed help. That year everyone was* **obliged** *to cure the lake. For my part, I went with a group of women to clean it. I participated in many ceremonies, calling on the positive energies to cure our lake. (Clara – middle-aged homemaker) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Bovensiepen (2021) suggests that threats of this nature do not just reveal the ontological difference, but that they actually produce it through a sort of 'defensive animism' as the spiritual potency of a place in crisis is accentuated. The same situation may be true of the megacolector's ongoing threat to the lake, as the community comes together to protect it from private interests. As Bovensiepen explains, during extractive conflicts the performances that groups stage to show who they are 'momentarily fix people's assumptions about "what is"', and in turn, this 'informs how actors want to be seen by others – even if such representations are not necessarily stable' (Bovensiepen 2021: 11). Accordingly, even Pedranos with a more modern ontological outlook could come to recognise the lake's personhood as a result of their participation in the opposition movement. The opposition movement may be a worlding event in its own right.

Blaser (2013a: 551) claims that ontology is a storied performativity which is 'always in the making', but both he and PO analyses more generally have been accused of neglecting cultural change and the processes by which worldings are reproduced and adapted by younger generations (Revilla-Minaya 2019). Blaser (2013a: 558) points out that 'Radically different worlds are being enacted in front of our noses, even if they now involve computers and the internet', but this is not something he chooses to focus on. Nor does de la Cadena's (2015a) account, which neglects young people's perceptions of earth-beings and the effects of the recent development of shamanistic tourism (Hornborg 2017).

Both Blaser and de la Cadena have attempted to defend themselves from accusations of essentialism, stressing that their ontological accounts are drawn from particular experts and are not representative of social groups as a whole. Blaser (2013a: 553) emphasises that ontological attributions 'go hand in hand with specific practices and not with a specific group'. Even so, I agree with Revilla-Minaya's (2019) assertion that their ontological claims sometimes appear to extend beyond their informants. Blaser's (2009a) 'non-modern Yshiro ontology' is for instance based only on Yshiro traditionalists (Bessire & Bond 2014), whereas de la Cadena (2015a) relies on just two male ritual specialists to construct her entire earth-beings hypothesis (Canessa 2017).

The issue here is that when ontologists 'cut and paste' complex contexts for use 'as building blocks for grand theories' (Ramos 2012: 488), Indigenous peoples have little agency over their own representation. Instead, 'the intrinsic incoherence of indigeneity is reduced to a telos of order imposed […] by authorized nonindigenous experts' through 'a targeted erasure of ethnographic evidence and an artificial standardization of alterity itself' (Bessire & Bond 2014: 443). This process risks fixing Indigeneity and obscuring its dynamic processes of cultural change (Hunt 2014; Revilla-Minaya 2019). As Chandler and Reid (2020: 12) state, through such representations 'Indigeneity is transformed into a fictive way of being and knowing that has nothing to do with the

rich plurality of the lived life of Indigenous groups, and everything to do with the imagination of its white Western author'.

In terms of my own research, it took me a while to recognise how my essentialist pursuit of radical difference had led me to erase the messy contractions of the megacolector conflict. It was only on later reflection that I realised how my commitment to PO had clouded my understanding of the megacolector conflict and led me to 'interpretive excesses' (Ramos 2012). Although I doubt de la Cadena and Blaser ever intended for their ideas to be adhered to in this way, the tendency toward 'vulgar replication' (Ramos 2012) of academic heavyweights is nonetheless a temptation for inexperienced doctoral students when confronted with the daunting prospect of ethnographic research.

This is not to negate the usefulness of ontological concepts like 'earth beings' as heuristic devices for thinking through complex realities. Yet, their utilisation should not come at the price of ethnographic integrity (Vigh & Sausdal 2014). As Ramos (2012: 489) states, 'the more extensive and deeper ethnographic knowledge is, the less arrogant we become and the more clearly we perceive the folly of projecting our theoretical ambitions on indigenous peoples'. When I rewrote the second draft of my thesis, I attempted to undo my earlier 'cutting and pasting' by reinserting the ethnographic complexities and dissonant voices which unsettled a clean ontological narrative. This also required a closer examination of how ontological difference was being mobilised in the megacolector conflict. As Cepek (2016: 625) states, 'Pragmatic functions and performative context are neglected when anthropologists distil alterity-affirming content from their collaborators' statements. Indeed, Revilla-Minaya (2019) contends that both Blaser and de la Cadena ignore the possibility that the Indigenous ontologies they describe are a form of strategic representation, assumed as a homogenous image in order to pursue political goals.

Mobilising Ontological Difference

In the case of the megacolector conflict, in various instances during community meetings, I became aware of how Pedranos community leaders were strategically essentialising their own relationality with the lake for political advantage. This was something that I was initially reluctant to draw attention to, given the possibility that my discussion could be used to undermine the ontological basis of Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector. However, to blindly accept Pedrano public discourse without paying attention to their pragmatic function would, as Cepek (2016: 625) suggest, fail 'to relate to our subjects as critical intellectual agents whose analytic capacities are just as powerful, vexed, and complex as our own'.

Still, when discussing strategic essentialism, it is critical to consider power relations. As Blaser (2013a: 558) states, 'many indigenous politicians find few avenues to contribute to […] protecting their worlds other than through the use of ("our") widely available categories and symbols of alterity'. This is certainly the case for Pedranos, who are constrained by the state's multicultural neoliberal governance which places strict limits on Indigenous economic and political aspirations (Hale 2006; MacNeill 2014). Framing their opposition to the megacolector around their relationality with the lake is thus a savvy strategy to appear less threatening. Furthermore, Pedranos are well aware of the efficacy of the cosmopolitical 'rights of nature' discourse on the

international stage. Indeed, Bolivia's 2010 'Law for Mother Nature' (Vidal 2011) often entered discussions during community meetings. Articulating their opposition to the megacolector through an essentialised Grandmother Lake narrative thus appeals to outsiders' multicultural sensibilities, and the identity expectations of the global audience (NGOs and international media etc.) that yearns for "authentic" cultures (Coombes *et al.* 2011).

AALA have also played on Indigenous relationality with the lake promote the megacolector to the public. Through a strategy of 'cosmetic multiculturalism' (Bastos 2012), the megacolector's communication campaign and marketing material often stress the lake's sacred role as a mother (AALA, 2018b; Jaguarpromociones 2019). AALA have additionally hired several Indigenous promoters to conduct Mayan ceremonies for the megacolector and speak about the lake's sacredness during public events. Yet this stands at odds with the modern rhetoric at the heart of AALA's advancement of the megacolector. The clearest demonstration of this occurred with the megacolector's relaunch in October 2017 when AALA organised a massive scientific conference and press event in Guatemala City called 'Xocomil Cientifico' (Figure 5). In this space, non-modern ways of knowing the lake were completely side-lined by AALA's overwhelming emphasis on the megacolector's Western scientific expertise:

> *AALA [has] worked to deepen the proposal together with several local and international universities. In 2017, together with additional* **world experts** *on the subject, they celebrated Xocomil Cientifico that concludes in* **a great technical/scientific consensus** *(AALA 2021).*

Figure 5. Xocomil Cientifico – 'The most renowned scientists on the planet with only Atitlán in mind' (AALA 2017).

To counter the megacolector's modern rhetoric, the Indigenous opposition too have sought out Western scientific experts (Ajpop Tinamit 2018; COCODES & Elder Council 2018). They have utilised their expert knowledge to support their alternative solutions to the megacolector, suggesting that dry-sanitation technology (biodigesters and dry latrines) would be a more appropriate solution for the lake's contamination. The resulting dispute thus occurs not between AALA and the Indigenous opposition, but rather between AALA and the opposition's intermediary scientists. In this discursive space, the lake's agency as a sentient being is totally absent. Instead, arguments are articulated in wholly modern terms, with each side disputing whose technology is the most 'advanced'.

Such instances reveal the ontological ambiguities hidden beneath the ontologically rigid public discourses exercised by each side of the megacolector conflict. Model A in Figure 6 below depicts this simplistic clash of ontologies, whereas Model B takes account for its truer complexity. As I have demonstrated in this article, the ontological positions of Pedranos and AALA are not homogenous. Accordingly, whether the megacolector is an ontological conflict depends very much upon the individual you speak to. On the one hand, many Pedrano community leaders do adhere to the notion of the lake as a sentient being, and their public discourse always refers to it as such. However, many younger Pedranos see the lake as a modern resource, and there are also those more ontologically ambiguous Pedranos who sit somewhere in-between both positions in a 'partially connected' state (as represented by the 'ch'ixi' grey in the model (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012)). Similarly, AALA always references the importance of the lake as an economic resource in its public discourse, despite the relational or more ontologically ambiguous views of some of their employees.

There is also AALA and Pedranos' respective mobilisations of ontology to consider. Pedranos rely on the support of scientific experts who oppose the megacolector on modern grounds. Conversely, AALA relies on a strategy of 'cosmetic multiculturalism' (Bastos 2012) and their employed Indigenous promoters to indicate the megacolector as mindful of the lake's personhood. The strategic mobilisations of each party thus

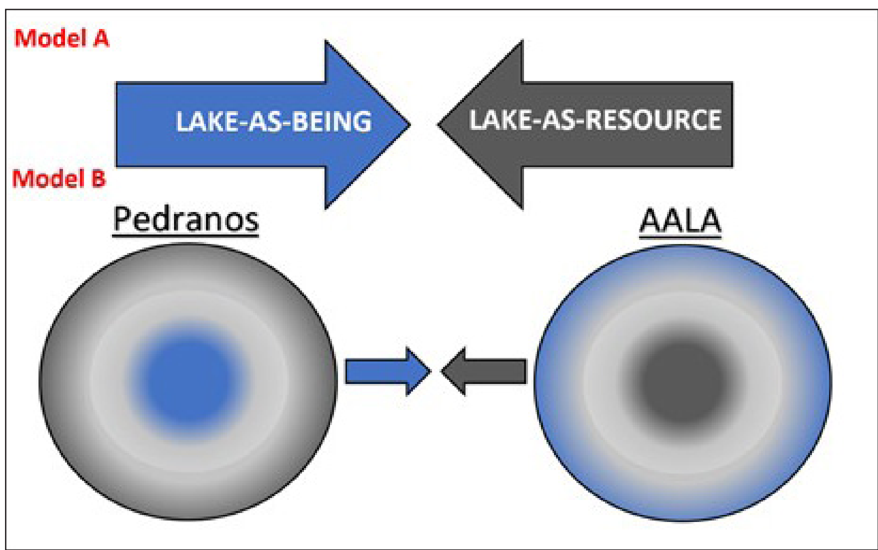

Figure 6. The ontological dimensions of the megacolector conflict.

provide an ontological coating at odds with their core ontological discourse. Under closer examination then, my research suggests that Model B is a more accurate conceptualisation of the ontological dimensions of the megacolector conflict than Model A. However, it is important to recognise that Model B was drawn largely from the opinions that individuals expressed during interviews, but more important than what an individual *professes* is what they *do*. A stated opinion does not necessarily align with an individual's performance, and this performance 'is the key process we must attend to in evaluating whether we should treat a conflict as ontological or not' (Blaser 2013b: 25).

Finally, since the ontological difference is produced as well as revealed in extractive encounters (Bovensiepen 2021), ontological conceptualisations of the lake may also shift as the conflict progresses. For this reason, the ontological dimensions of the megacolector conflict should be understood as fluid, and Model B should only be read as a snapshot in time. The reason why the megacolector conflict is more easily recognisable as Model A rather than Model B is due in no small part to Pedranos' strategic essentialism, which manages to obscure some of the ontological ambiguities which I have outlined.

The Coloniality of Reality

In this article, I have shown the importance of the wider political context in influencing the mobilisation of ontological difference in the megacolector conflict. However, as Yeh and Bryan (2015: 539) argue, 'some ethnographies of indigenous ontologies seem to ignore or downplay situated histories and geographies of war, capitalist penetration, colonialism, state policies, development, and trade to define an abstracted indigenous ontology'. Hornborg (2015) likewise argues that apolitical musings of multiple ontologies obstruct the urgent theorizing of capitalism and global power inequalities. For this reason, some researchers avoid the PO framework altogether. In his ethnographic analysis of the Palawan in the Philippines, Theriault (2017) for instance rejects PO on the basis that we must 'avoid treating the world-making practices of state interventions as separate from or impervious to those of Indigenous peoples' (125).

While I sympathise with Hornborg and Theriault's concerns, I am more inclined to agree with Yeh & Bryan's (2015: 539) contention that 'attention to different worlds need not elide an analysis of state power or capitalist extraction'. Furthermore, as Bovensiepen (2021: 29) points out, 'political ontologists are arguably better attuned to the importance of politics, history and emergence than their more metaphysical ontological cousins'. A role model, in this case, is Burman's (2016, 2017, 2019) proposal to investigate the 'coloniality of reality' through ontologizing political economy and politicising the ontological turn, thereby providing the critical tools necessary to challenge ontological *and* political/economic power asymmetries simultaneously. In his own words:

> *critical attention to power asymmetries as expressed for instance in unequal ecological exchange within the capitalist world-system may be fruitfully combined with a critical attention to the ontological power asymmetries, that is, the coloniality of reality, underpinning such unequal material flows, since the former are a condition for and a justification and naturalization of the latter, and the latter are a material expression of the former (Burman 2016: 92).*

Advocating closer attention to the coloniality underpinning ontological conflicts beneficially 'reveal[s] dynamics of colonial domination that go deep into the very nature(s) of reality and being(s)' (Burman 2016: 77). In the case of my research, it allowed me to see how Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector connects to wider processes of revindication, that is efforts to reclaim San Pedro's epistemic and political autonomy. Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' is a clear example of this. Although it was founded to oppose the megacolector, it has become much more than a single-issue organisation. It has also coordinated community efforts against COVID-19, as well as recent anti-government protests (May 2021b). It has in effect 'becom[e] the center of communal action against the State and other agents, as well as the space from which the community imagines its future' (Bastos Amigo 2020: 10).

Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector cannot be isolated from the wider process of Indigenous resurgence currently unfolding across Guatemala (CODECA 2021). In recent years, numerous ancestral authorities have been re-established throughout the country (Abbott 2020), including San Pedro's own 'Council of Elders' in 2017. These ancestral authorities are highly active in the growing Defence of Territory (DOT) movement, and in 2021 they led national strikes demanding greater Indigenous self-determination and a Plurinational Constituent Assembly (Batz 2021; May 2021b).

A closer examination of Pedranos' actions in response to recent developments also demonstrates how their ambitions extend far beyond the megacolector's opposition. In 2012 the government drafted a bill, 'Iniciativa (Initiative) 4526' (Congreso de Guatemala 2012), to legally establish Lake Atitlán as national heritage. Nothing came of it at the time, but in February 2020 the bill was once again debated by the government. In response, Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (2020a) immediately published a press statement outlining their opposition to the initiative. Since then, Pedrano community leaders have been working on their own draft law to protect the lake from threats like the megacolector.[1] In this draft, they mirror the wording of their *amparo* against the megacolector, claiming to recognise the lake 'as a sacred and life-giving grandmother'. In this sense, they are performing an 'ontological disobedience' (Burman 2016) to the state's modern ontological conceptualisation (and valuation) of the lake as a resource through Iniciativa 4526.

In drawing Grandmother Lake into the political debate in this way, Pedranos strain the state's multicultural limits and oblige lawmakers to acknowledge the *otherwise*. In doing so, they also provide an ontological opening 'to the consideration of other ontologies as plausible and viable alternatives to the modern one' (Blaser 2013a: 556). The lake thus emerges as the ontological site for political negotiation, and this 'ontological disjuncture' (Yates *et al.* 2017) grows with every press statement and news article which visibilises the lake as being *more than* just a resource (de la Cadena 2015a). In this sense, Pedranos' draft law is ontologically radical, but it is important to recognise that it is also significantly anchored in a modern human rights discourse. It appeals to both the ILO-169 Convention and the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as various articles within Guatemala's constitution and cases of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In this way, their draft law appears as an instance of 'border thinking' (Grosfoguel 2011), a transmodern blending of ontologies.

Most importantly, the draft law appears to be primarily motivated by the issue of political exclusion. The law demands the creation of a new state-community authority that would be responsible for the lake's protection and restoration. It seeks to replace the existing governmental body – AMSCLAE – 'Autoridad y Manejo Sustenable de la

Cuenca del Lago de Atitlán y su Entorno' (Authority for Sustainable Management of the Lake Atitlán Basin and Surrounding Areas) with a more representative form of governance, since none of the lake's Indigenous communities are currently represented on AMSCLAE's board of directors. This is a point which Pedranos' also raise explicitly in their report 'The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán' (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b: 10):

> *AALA and CAMTUR [Association of Tourism] are two private structured organizations that have a seat, voice, and a vote within the structure of AMSCLAE, […] But […] the people living in the towns and communities around the lake [are not allowed] to voice their opinions and concerns; they are left without participation. [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Owing to my essentialist tendencies, when I first read the draft law, I was immediately drawn to its alterity-affirming content to the neglect of this more mundane political context. Yet this political context is key, since the defence of San Pedro's sovereignty is what unites *all* Pedranos, whereas their relationality with the lake only motivates *some*. Cepek (2016: 625) warns against focusing on 'the bare content of abstract propositions while paying little attention to their pragmatic function'. With this in mind, it is notable that within the law, Pedranos' claims are made less on the basis of an ontological difference than a modern discourse of rights.

Conclusion

With the draft law and Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector more generally, one is immediately drawn to Pedranos' emphasis on their relationality with the lake. But Pedranos also *always* condemn their exclusion from decision-making. Beyond preventing the megacolector, it is clear that their other main goal is to be included in the lake's management (Figure 7). Accordingly, overstating Pedranos' ontological opposition to the megacolector risks understating the extent to which they 'are enmeshed in the very systems that oppress them, and lack the means to put alternatives into motion' (Copeland 2018: 17). It is a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek 2016) which could elide the pragmatic functions of Pedranos' opposition, most notably their pressing desire for political inclusion and self-determination.

As Copeland (2018: 16) states, 'Discourses that ignore spiritual connections to territory […] lose sight of a valuable organizing principle and rhetorical tool'. Pedranos have realised this and capitalised on their relationality with the lake to defend their sovereignty. There are however dangers to their essentialist strategy. As Coombes *et al.* (2011: 475) caution, 'Indigenous peoples are not always able to control the outcomes of their activism…self-identification as "authentic" can sometimes miscarry and its benefits are indefinite'. Pedranos have made their claims for political inclusion contingent on a *fixed* notion of relationality with the lake, but if this becomes a normative standard (Killick 2021), there is potential for Pedranos to be politically disenfranchised (Conklin & Graham 1995; Hope 2017; Pieck 2006). The megacolector conflict is likely to continue for many years, and whilst many community leaders currently understand the lake as *Qa Tee Ya'* (Grandmother Lake), the situation of the younger generation is quite different. Strategic essentialism is useful now, but it could prove an oppressive straitjacket in the future (Tănăsescu 2020). As Coombes *et al.* (2012b: 693) state, 'rather

Figure 7. 'THE HEALTH OF THE LAKE is discussed with the people, not with a club of friends'. Facebook post of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2020b).

than romanticising their connections to nature and community, it is Indigenous peoples' negotiation of the hybrid present which offers cause for optimism'.

In this article, I have shown how the prioritisation of ontological difference can obscure the very power asymmetries fundamental to shaping its articulation in the first place. Consequently, my research proves the importance of keeping ontological analyses grounded in ethnography, and putting them into closer conversation with political economy, that is to 'ontologize political economy' as Burman (2016) suggests. My research findings support an emerging trend in the ontological literature advocating for greater consideration of individuals' (often transmodern) worlding practices, and the contingent and fluid nature of ontological difference (Bovensiepen 2021; Cepek 2016; Killick 2021; Mézáros 2020). The concepts to achieve this already exist in PO's toolkit, but they must be more comprehensibly applied. A more nuanced approach, inclusive of ontological ambiguities, is necessary to better understand extractivist conflicts and to move abstract discussions closer to the dynamic and entangled realities of Indigenous lives.

Endnotes

1. This was shared with me privately and is not yet publicly available.

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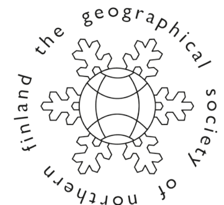

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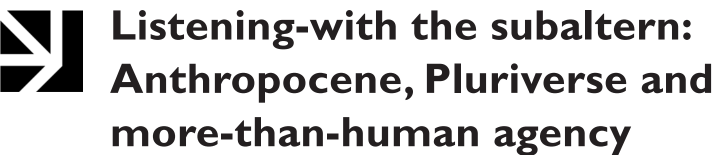

Listening-with the subaltern: Anthropocene, Pluriverse and more-than-human agency

António Carvalho[a] & Mariana Riquito[b]

Abstract
The Anthropocene brings to the fore the need to foster ontologies that reject the modern “one-world world” (Law 2015) model, characterized by extractivism, dualism and human exceptionalism, requiring the enactment of pluriverses (de la Cadena & Blaser 2018) that recognize the heterogeneous clamor of human and non-human agency. As an attempt to listen-with those oppressed and silenced by the modern extractivist paradigm, in this paper, we propose the mobilization of relational, dialogic and non-dualistic methodologies that attend to subaltern and more-than-human worlds. Drawing on a variety of sources – such as the Parliament of Things, the Council of All Beings, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, meditative and artistic practices –, our article speculatively engages with affective, situated, hybrid and counter-hegemonic methodologies that articulate contemplative practices, the arts, more-than-human agency and local communities, recognizing that politics, aesthetics and affect are intimately entwined. Our experimental endeavour is centred on three case studies that encapsulate some of the socio-political and technological tensions of our current zeitgeist – wildfires, geoengineering, and lithium mining –, speculating on how pluriversal methodologies can bring to the fore the many worlds silenced by the modern “one-world world”.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Pluriverse; Subaltern; Speculative Methodologies; More-than-human agency; Affect

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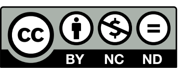

Introduction

In her seminal book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson warned us about the "sudden silencing of the song of birds" (Carson 1962: 103), drawing our attention to the grim environmental consequences of the chemical industry. The silencing of the subaltern is one of the main tenets of modernity, as nature and non-dominant humans have been silenced in the name of progress, profit, growth and empire. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014) would say, nature has been turned into a mine, rendered passive, lifeless and disenchanted. Modernity and its obsession with control and domination are fuelled by the silencing of the world, and this has backfired – climate change, pandemics, and industrial disasters have shown that we can no longer ignore the plethora of human and non-human voices silenced by modernity. In this sense, the Anthropocene should be seen as more than simply a geologic epoch or a geopolitical event: it is a reflection of the dominant ontological model – the modern "one-world world" (OWW) model (Law 2015). Therefore, as Morgan argues (2019: 252), the Anthropocene "is an opportunity to embrace a new ontology".

This article speculatively engages with a set of methodologies that disrupt the dominant ontological model of the Anthropocene – the modern OWW –, thus attempting to bring to the fore the pluriverses of human and non-human voices that have been systematically silenced by modern dualist and extractivist ontologies. Inspired by Spivak's (1998) earlier interrogation – *Can the subaltern speak?* – we now ask, in times of profound ecological, climate and social crises: *how to listen-with the subaltern?* Listening is fundamentally relational: it is "listening-with" — *with* each other, *with* other species, *with* other worlds. Listening-with attends to more-than-human entanglements and pays tribute to Haraway's idea of "sym", "together *with*". We must be-with, make-with the subaltern.

As the literature around the "Anthropocene" is inherently interdisciplinary, we are inspired by authors stemming from the environmental humanities, decolonial studies and science and technology studies alike. Building on this literature, the aim of this article is twofold: on the one hand, we aim to contribute to current debates around the ontological politics of the Anthropocene; on the other hand, we propose a set of speculative methodologies capable of *listening-with the subaltern oppressed by the OWW*, i.e., capable of engaging with those who have been silenced and rendered invisible by modern ontologies and the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. In other words, this article's contribution is to merge existing conceptual debates on the controversial nature of the "Anthropocene" with methodologies capable of considering those theoretical postulates.

The methodologies explored in our paper include a vast array of examples that support us in the disruption of the OWW, such as the Parliament of Things, the Council of All Beings, the Theatre and Pedagogy of the Oppressed, contemplative practices, and the arts. In addition, we engage with three case studies that display some of the socio-political and technological tensions of the dominant ontological model of the Anthropocene – wildfires, geoengineering and lithium mining. These case studies do not stem from empirical-based research; instead, they are introduced to assist us in speculatively imagining how pluriversal methodologies could bring to the fore human and non-human actors systematically silenced by modern ontologies – such as local communities, elemental forces, forests, oceans, the stratosphere and algae –, combining and recognizing the interdependency between politics, aesthetics and affect.

A pluriversal critique of the "Anthropocene"

The term "Anthropocene" was coined at the beginning of the century by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen and the American biologist Eugene Stoermer to designate our current geological epoch, characterized by climate change and extreme weather events, calling our attention to the inseparability between human activities, earth systems and biophysical and geological processes. In doing so, this concept announces a new "socio-geo-physical era", one where 'humans' have acquired bio-geophysical agency, placing the 'human' species as a planetary deep-time geophysical agent in geo-history (Latour 2014; Swyngedouw & Ernstson 2018) and elevating it to a biospheric supremacy (Malm & Hornborg 2014).

Nonetheless, while the Anthropocene puts the 'Anthropos' at the centre of geological narratives, it also sheds light on the life-threatening consequences of human actions to human and non-human actors alike, highlighting the vulnerability of the human species in the face of a plethora of risks (Chaplin 2017). As such, the Anthropocene puts a dent on long-standing illusions of human exceptionalism, a key pillar of the modern political project. Western Modernity's ontological architecture is based upon a set of "visible and invisible divisions" (Santos 2017: 71), which structure social reality in hierarchical dualisms – human/nature, man/woman, civilized/savage, reason/emotion. Historically, this dualist ontology has served to justify oppressive relations with those who are deemed as "inferior" because they are (constructed as) "close(r) to nature", "feminine", "savage" and/or "emotional/irrational" – namely, women, indigenous and traditional communities, racialized populations, the proletariat, the Global South, nature and non-humans.

The ontological politics (Mol 1999) of modernity, thus, are fundamentally rooted in a particularly violent relationship with subaltern subjects – those who have been systematically silenced, dominated, *not accounted for*. Our current socioeconomic system is fundamentally ingrained in this violent-exploitative ethos. Capitalism depends on the endless exploitation of "natural resources" and has historically relied on the exploitation of the subaltern who performs the unpaid – or precariously paid – labour needed to pursue capitalist's goals of infinite growth (Mies & Shiva 2014; Moore 2016; Barca 2020). Analysed through this perspective, the current ecological crisis is a grim illustration of the consequences of pursuing infinite growth in a limited world at the expense of "othered labour" (Salleh 2017). That is why critical authors have been denouncing the depoliticizing character of the concept "Anthropocene" (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2016; Swyngedouw & Ernstson 2019) because it ignores that not all humans – nor countries – have been equally responsible for the current socioecological degradation nor do they suffer its consequences evenly (Malm & Hornborg 2014; Moore 2016).

Consequently, alternative concepts have emerged: Moore (2016) proposes the term "Capitalocene", drawing our attention to how capital accumulation is a way of organising nature and the fundamental driver of environmental degradation. Similarly, Malm (2016) exposes the historical links between carbon emissions and capital accumulation, showing how the 'development' of industrial capitalist modernity was only possible by burning fossil fuels. Armiero (2021) introduces the term "Wasteocene", stressing the contaminating nature of capitalism's inherent drive for profit and accumulation, leaving behind indelible traces of toxicity. Hornborg (2015) advances the term "Technocene", highlighting how modern technological devices have been the backbone of industrial capitalism. Raworth (2014), taking as an example the dominantly male composition of the Anthropocene Working Group, suggested "Man-thropocene" as a more appropriate

concept, reflecting the gender imbalances in positions of power. Similarly, Solón (2019) proposes the term "Plutocene", pointing out the uneven distribution of power in the hands of a global economic, financial and political elite as the main culprit of the climate crisis. These concepts emphasize the destructive logic of industrial extractivist techno-scientific capitalism, highlighting its unequal consequences. In terms of class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. –, and showing how the "Anthropocene", understood as a geologic epoch, is also a geopolitical one, as its causes and consequences are inextricably linked to the power relations underpinning social, economic and political systems (Riquito 2021).

However, as Haraway points out, it is important to recognize that "no species acts alone" (2015: 159). Industrial capitalism relied on the discipline of plants and humans alike to 'develop' and 'prosper'. The capitalist way of growing food – the plantation – has historically entertained an intense relation with *exterminism*, both of human and non-humans, namely plants, animals and microbes (Haraway & Tsing 2019). This was – Haraway and Tsing (2019: 5) argue – a "system of multispecies forced labour". Thus they propose the term "Plantationocene", drawing our attention to the *interspecies entanglements* that compose (compost) life on earth. In Haraway's words, "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense" (2015: 162), and this is why it is about time that "we all started thinking about our situation in a way that includes plants, animals, microbes, and more before we destroy them all" (Haraway & Tsing 2019: 14).

Following this line of reasoning – which takes issue with human exceptionalism –, Haraway announces another concept: the "Chthulucene". This term is composed of two Greek roots: *khthôn* (meaning 'beneath the earth') and *kainos* (meaning 'now'). For Haraway, their combination names "a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2016: 2). The "Chthulucene" rescues the multiple "earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things" and is an invitation to make together sym-chthonic, i.e., to "make-with—become-with—compose-with—the earth-bound" (Haraway 2015: 160–161), becoming a framework to *think-with* the more-than-human.

These conceptual proposals, thus, indicate that the "Anthropocene" is a controversial concept because the term itself overshadows the dominant political, economic and ontological narratives and structures that have generated unprecedented levels of ecological and climate destruction. These many alternative "scenes" denounce that it was the universalizing march of capitalist modernity – based on its "technopolitical fixes" (de Castro 2019), "market-based solutionisms" (Morozov 2014), human exceptionalism and patriarchal norms (Riquito 2021) – that has generated the climate and ecological crises. In other words, we are witnessing a crisis of a particular *way-of-doing-world* (Escobar 2018; Krenak 2019), i.e., the OWW model. Or, as put by Santos (2002: 13), we are currently "facing modern problems for which there are no longer modern solutions". The OWW metaphysics reduces difference, devours the Other (i.e., the colonized subaltern subjects, both human and non-human) and assumes there is only one single reality (Law 2015), silencing non-dominant and subaltern ontologies. This ontological "master model of humanity" (Barca 2020) is at the roots of the planetary crisis we face. To dismantle the master's house, we need to bring alternative ontologies to the modern, extractivist and speciesist project – i.e., *pluriversal ontologies,* which recognize the multiplicity of realities and the interconnectedness of all life on earth.

Pluriversal ontologies draw inspiration from the Zapatistas' struggle and their practices of democracy, aiming to construct "*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*"[1]. This

motto, argues Salleh (2020), is the very definition of pluriverse. In opposition to the globalizing civilizational aim of the OWW, pluriversal ontologies recognize a "World of Many Worlds" (de la Cadena & Blaser 2018). The pluriverse is both an "epistemological stance and a dialogic method to enhance appreciation of the multiple ways of knowing and being in the world" (Paulson 2018: 85) and a useful tool to conceive "ecologies of practices across heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds" (de la Cadena & Blaser 2018: 4).

The "pluriverse" entails an active commitment to getting involved *with* and thinking *from* ongoing territorial struggles (Kothari *et al.* 2018; Escobar 2018). According to Escobar, socio-environmental resistances are "ontological struggles" because they "interrupt the globalizing project of fitting many worlds into one" (2017: 239). By inaugurating non-dualistic relational political ecologies and ontologies, pluriversal epistemic-ontologies are entwined with the ontological turn in social sciences. According to Escobar (2017: 241):

> *What defines this turn is the attention to a host of actors that deeply shape what we come to know as 'reality' but which the academy rarely tackled — things like objects and 'things', non-humans, matter and materiality (soil, energy, infrastructures, weather, bytes), emotions, spirituality, feelings, and so forth. What brings together these very disparate list of items is the attempt to break away from the normative divides, central to the modern regime of truth, between subject and object, mind and body, reason and emotion, living and inanimate, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, and so forth. This is why this set of perspectives can be properly called post-dualist. […] What we are witnessing with post-dualist, neo-materialist critical theories is the return of the repressed side of the dualisms — the forceful emergence of the subordinated and often feminized and racialized side of all the above binaries.*

The ontological turn recognizes the need to pay attention *to* and value the knowledge *of* the subaltern. Marisol de la Cadena refers to them as the "Anthropo-not-seen". This concept highlights their historical invisibility: "they simply cannot be — therefore they are not-seen, not-heard, not-felt, not-known" (2019: 482). The subaltern – those who are "less than humanized" (Salleh 2020), not accounted for in the "master model of humanity" (Barca 2020) and removed from official representation in hegemonic narratives (Swyngedouw & Ernstson 2018) – although irretrievably heterogeneous, carry the possibility of re-politicizing the dominant version of the Anthropocene through alternative ontologies departing from human-centred productivist-oriented hegemonic narratives. Pluriversal conceptualizations emphasize the importance of thinking within those configurations of life that escape the ontological occupation of the OWW (de la Cadena 2015). In making visible the subjects which were once invisible, in listening to those who have been silenced, the pluriverse *defies* Western Modernity's epistemic violence[2] (Spivak 2010; Dotson 2011; Brunner 2021) and its "practices of silencing" (Dotson 2011), *proposing* alternatives to its OWW model.

While this body of literature has put forward various theoretical frameworks to *make sense* of the "Anthropocene event" (Blok & Jensen 2019), very few scholars have focused on *how to listen-with the subaltern oppressed by the OWW*, i.e., how to engage with the clamour of human and more-than-human voices that the modern hubris has systematically silenced. Based on this literature review, in the following section we will speculate on pluriversal methodologies, exploring nonmodern (Pickering 2010) and hybrid devices that couple more-than-human agency, affect, politics and the arts to listen-with those historically subordinated by the dominant ontological logos.

Pluriversal methodologies: a tentative sketch

In this section, we explore methodologies that could be characterized as pluriversal. They attempt to bring more-than-human and non-dominant voices to the fore, putting forward alternatives to modern dualisms. We assume that methodologies are performative, as they enact particular forms of reality as well as specific invisibilities – "method assemblage does politics, and it is not innocent" (Law 2004: 149). Indeed, their effects can range from the reinforcement of the OWW model to the enactment of pluriversal entanglements between a wide range of heterogeneous actors and voices. The various examples unpacked in this section include Latour's Parliament of Things; the "Council of All beings"; the articulations of meditation, affect and environmentalism; couplings of art, more-than-human agency and the Anthropocene; as well as Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and Augusto Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed".

The Parliament of Things

In his book, *We have never been modern*, Latour (1993) outlined the idea of a "Parliament of Things", an alternative to the Modern Constitution, bringing non-humans into the sphere of political deliberation by resorting to human representatives/mediators. The traditional mechanism of political deliberation - the Parliament - opens up to the plethora of pluriversal voices:

> *Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represents the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions; let still another speak in the name of the State […]. The imbroglios and networks that had no place now have the whole place to themselves. They are the ones that have to be represented; it is around them that the Parliament of Things gathers henceforth (Latour 1993: 144).*

Later, he developed this project in greater detail, identifying a series of roles for human representatives of "things", such as politicians, managers, scientists, economists and moralists (Latour 2004). The presence of these experts would allow for the construction of a *quasi-object* (we could call it a pluriversal object) where, through deliberative processes, a specific sociotechnical conflict would be unfolded through the continuous production of propositions. The presence of different "sides"/"actors"/"parties" would allow for the continuous re-constitution of the pluriversal collective.

Latour's proposal was put in place in May 2015 at the Théâtre des Amadiers in Paris. Attempting to create a more-than-human/pluriversal alternative to the COP 21, Science Po students and foreign delegations were invited to dramatize a "Parliament of Things" to deliberate on the climate crisis (Latour 2017). The different delegations represented entities such as state and non-state actors, transnational actors, issues, territories and non-humans to negotiate a common world (Latour 2017). According to Latour (2015), this experimental theatre had four main goals: pedagogical (training students in negotiations of controversies); social science research (experimenting with ways of representing non-humans); natural science research (developing an alternative epistemology for matters of concern); and artistic (art and culture as scientifically and aesthetically relevant). For the French sociologist and philosopher, the theatre is a beneficial model to operationalize the Parliament of Things, highlighting the role of

culture, arts and imagination in the enactment of a common world, suggesting that the performance of pluriversal politics inevitably requires particular methodological arrangements combining politics, affect and more-than-human agency (Latour 2017).

It could be argued that the Parliament of Things espouses a "flat ontology" that does not sufficiently attend to the differences between heterogenous non-human entities. Another limitation concerns the fact that Latour's proposal still depends on the role of "human experts" and may also reproduce dominant versions of "language" assenting on the hegemony of the "rational argument". Moreover, the role of affect seems to be ignored by Latour's proposal. As we will see in the following section, it is key to engage with more-than-human agency, as representation and subjectification are inevitably entwined.

The Council of All Beings

The Council of All Beings is a communal ritual developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed, two deep ecologists. It consists of a set of practices to overcome anthropocentrism, contributing towards a symmetrical relationship between humans and non-humans:

> *The name "Council of All Beings" has come to be used in two ways. In the narrower sense, it refers to a ritual form, a council circle of one-and a-half or two or three hours, where people gather to speak on behalf of other species. The term is also used more inclusively to refer to a longer process, one that runs from one to several days and includes exercises and activities leading up to and flowing from the ritual proper. (Macy & Fleming 1988a: 97)*

Their proposal couples contemplative and shamanic practices, more-than-human agency and environmentalism. The workshops aim to allow participants to abandon their skin-encapsulated ego, i.e., the modern self, ideally assisting participants in reshaping their engagement with non-humans and developing resilience in the face of environmental degradation. It draws on the reconfiguration of human subjectivity to better respond to the environmental and climate crisis.

The Council includes three phases: mourning, remembering, and speaking from the perspective of other life-forms (Seed 1988: 14). Initially, one should be able to hear the earth's cry – mourning usually involves displaying sorrow and compassion towards the destruction of the environment. The second stage involves remembering, as participants should realize that they are deeply entangled with non-humans, becoming aware of interconnectedness. Various methods are mobilized, including a process called "evolutionary remembering", where participants lie down or sit in a comfortable position, going through a guided meditation on the origins of the Universe and the evolution of life (Macy & Fleming 1988a: 106). Finally, the Council includes speaking for a non-human entity. Before doing so, one meditates to identify with a non-human. After the being has emerged, one practices meditation to "merge" with the non-human. When this process is carried out, participants (ideally wearing masks) are assembled, and the ritual begins:

> *Humans! I, Mountain, am speaking. You cannot ignore me! I have been with you since your very beginnings and long before. For millennia your ancestors venerated my holy places, found wisdom in my heights. I gave you shelter and far vision. Now, in return, you ravage me. You dig and gouge for the jewel in the stone, for the ore in my veins. Stripping my forests, you take away my capacity to*

hold water and to release it slowly. See the silted rivers? See the floods? Can't you see? In destroying me you destroy yourselves. (Macy & Fleming 1988b: 87)

After some rounds of interventions, the ritual leader thanks the entities for expressing themselves and asks them to share their powers with the participants – for example, the far-seeing eye of the condor, the fragrance of the wildflower, etc. (Macy & Fleming 1988b: 88-89). This ritual is not perceived as an end in itself, but as a way to form environmental activists, providing them with alternatives to anthropocentric ways of being and thinking. The Council, thus, is expected to trigger real-world impacts, providing a "larger context for action" (Seed 1988: 15), becoming an integral dimension of environmental activism and propelling real change. Furthermore, this methodology is a potent illustration of the articulations between affect, more-than-human agency and pluriversal ontologies, allowing human participants to feel empowered and supporting their environmental actions.

However, it could be argued that one of the limitations of the Council of All Beings is the attempt to "channel" or "represent" non-human entities, translating them into the socio-political sphere through humans, thus reproducing anthropocentrism. Another criticism concerns its emphasis on emotional and inner aspects, with humans being "empowered" by more-than-human agency, which could be understood as an expression of new-age spirituality. However, this approach allows us to reflect on possible ways of engaging with more-than-human agency, recognizing the need to reshape the modern self and emphasizing the role of subjectification devices to listen-with the subaltern.

Meditation, environmentalism and affect

Although the articulations of mindfulness, neoliberalism and capitalism are concerning (Purser 2019), it has been argued that the ontological politics of meditation are multiple (Carvalho 2021) and that certain practices may offer counter-hegemonic pluriversal alternatives to dominant modern forms of subjectivity, supporting ways of engaging with more-than-human agency. The mindfulness tradition of the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, the leading promoter of engaged Buddhism, for example, is informed by the ontology of Interbeing (Hanh 2001), illuminating the entanglements between humans and non-humans, living and non-living. The mindfulness practices of Thich Nhat Hanh rely on associations between performances, environments and non-humans to foster nonmodern forms of affect (Carvalho 2014). These practices – as well as shamanic and indigenous techniques or rituals – foreground ways of disassembling the modern self (Pickering 2010), allowing humans to embrace ontologies of interconnectedness, generating pluriversal alternatives to dualist forms of subjectivity, thus offering new ways of engaging with more-than-human agency (Carvalho 2017).

The emphasis on interdependence and the explicit engagement with specific elements (such as water and air) present in these meditation practices may allow humans to merge with pluriversal intensities, often neglected by the dominant ontological and political narratives. In this sense, they may constitute forms of ontological theatre (Pickering, 2007) that disrupt modern separations between people, things and the environment. That is why mindfulness has been explored as a potential research method to enhance intersubjectivity and to trigger relational forms of affect (Whitehead *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, some scholars argue that certain forms of meditation can reinforce environmental values (Wamsler & Brink 2018), and Schmid and Taylor-Aiken (2021)

have recently advanced that mindfulness practices play a role in grassroots environmental movements by enacting alternatives to the modern self.

The arts and more-than-human agency

We have witnessed several collaborations between social scientists and artists for the past decade, fostering dialogues between science, academia, and the arts (Davis & Turpin 2015; Engelmann 2015; McCormack 2014). These synergies suggest that the arts are a powerful way of reconfiguring the methodological and expressive repertoire of social sciences, engaging with non-human and elemental forces (Latour 2017; Saraceno *et al.* 2015; Wolfe & Whiteman 2016; Jackson & Fannin 2011). Indeed, art can foreground the emergence of "alien agency" (Salter & Pickering 2015), generating instances of ontological theatre that provide clues on how to address the challenges of our current zeitgeist, combining politics, affect and aesthetics. For example, Landau and Toland (2021) argued that political action is stimulated when the senses are galvanized through artistic engagement. Moreover, within non-representational theory (Thrift 2004) there has been increased concern with the articulations of ethics and aesthetics, often turning to the arts and the sensate (Harrison 2000) to identify "new modes of ethical and aesthetic inhabitation" (McCormack 2002: 473).

Two emblematic examples that illustrate performatively engaging with more-than-human agency are the Museo Aero Solar[3] and the Coral Empathy Device[4]. The Museo Aero Solar was developed by Tomás Saraceno and is made of used plastic bags with new sections added each time it flies. The assembled plastic bags become artificial clouds engaging in nomadic patterns of flight. According to the artist, this device can be understood as a new way of inhabiting the earth, where civilization is moved by solar power and freed from the earth's surface. Kat Austen developed the Coral Empathy Device, and its goal is to translate the Corals' "Umwelt" (Von Uexkull 2010) into human experience, generating (human) empathy towards these non-human beings that are affected by plastic and acoustic pollution. In practice, the Coral Empathy Device, which has the form of a sphere, is worn over the head, allowing humans to hear sounds of the ocean near coral reefs in Norway. With this experience, the artist generates an immersive experience that disrupts conventional ways of engaging with the world, suggesting that art forms can support the development of empathy towards non-humans, allowing us to imagine ways of listening-with those silenced by the dominant narrative.

The Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed

The "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is an adult literacy method developed by the Brazilian pedagogist Paulo Freire. Freire (1967) calls the hegemonic teaching method "banking education" because the student is merely perceived as a "recipient" of information", reproducing "knowledge" without developing critical thinking. Alternatively, Freire proposes a critical method, which allows humans to develop "*conscientização*"[5], suggesting that education should be coupled with socio-political engagement. Freire advocates articulating knowledge and students' lifeworlds, requiring teaching methodologies that adapt to their particular situations, concerns and aspirations. Freire's method explicitly relies on students' situatedness to guide the learning process, resorting to "generative words" stemming from their local contexts with significant social and practical

meaning (Freire 1970). The Brazilian pedagogist was a strong apologist of dismantling the teacher/student hierarchy, promoting an "ecology of knowledge" (Santos 2007). Students would share a series of local practices and experiences, thus decentring epistemological authority from teachers. His pedagogical approach is dialogic, explicitly integrating local knowledges and practices, geared towards the development of social and political consciousness, allowing students to become aware of their situatedness as "oppressed" (or, put differently, "subaltern") and to develop epistemological tools to overcome oppression well beyond literacy.

Freire's methods have been implemented in other disciplinary settings, leading, for instance, to developing the "Theater of the Oppressed" by the Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal, mobilizing situated publics in the resolution of social and political issues. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a political-theatrical method whose aim is to *transform* the actors and the spectators and, more broadly, the socio-political structures they are part of. This method is a tool for social emancipation: its main objective is to raise "conscientização" about oppression, empowering participants to act against it (Boal 1979). Boal's technique blurs the boundaries between actors and spectators – the latter being considered "spect-actors" – as a means to engage everyone in the theatrical process.

Freire's and Boal's proposals are beneficial to bring to the fore "ecologies of knowledge" (Santos 2007), especially in intercultural contexts involving local and indigenous communities and the Global South, recognizing that all epistemologies are politically situated.

Pluriversal methodologies in practice

In this section, we speculate on how pluriversal methodologies can be mobilized to listen-with the subaltern oppressed by the OWW in the Anthropocene. Drawing on the assumption that sociotechnical controversies are performatively assembled through the mediation of methodologies, we mobilize the approaches unpacked in the previous section, allowing us to imagine ways of unfolding pluriverses related to wildfires, geoengineering and lithium mining. Our situatedness decisively informs these three examples as Portuguese academics: wildfires and lithium mining are ongoing national controversies, and we have recently conducted public participation exercises with geoengineering. We have associated each case study with a specific natural element: fire, air, water and earth. This section is highly experimental and couples methodology, art, politics and affect, speculatively engaging with heterogeneous pluriverses.

These methodologies are performative, i.e., they aim to tentatively engage with alternative ontologies that may bring to the fore those voices, experiences, entities and forms of affect undermined by the OWW. They attempt to "listen-with" the subaltern, thus exploring the possibility of enacting nonmodern ontologies through methodological speculation. This speculative exercise is also deeply entwined with our own personal and institutional situatedness. Our research centre has historically attempted to promote "ecologies of knowledge", engaging with ontologies and voices from the Global South to imagine alternatives to modern hegemonic epistemologies. In the past, we have engaged with counter-hegemonic methodologies – such as Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Boal's Theater of the Oppressed – to produce alternatives to dominant approaches regarding public engagement with emerging technologies (Carvalho &

Nunes 2018). Moreover, Author 1 is a researcher in the field of Science and Technology Studies and a long-term meditator, with interest in the potential of contemplative and artistic practices to engage with sociotechnical controversies and non-human agency more broadly. Author 2 is both a political scientist and a feminist anti-capitalist activist who is currently deeply involved in resistance against lithium mining in Portugal.

Drawing on current debates within speculative design (Broms, Wangel & Andersson 2017), the various exemplars that are put forward in the following sections can be understood as [methodological] prototypes, i.e., speculative attempts to trigger nonmodern ways of engaging and listening-with the subaltern, exploring the possibilities - the "what-if" – emerging from heterogenous articulations of affect, futures, fiction, the arts and non-human agency. These prototypes will be unpacked with case studies that reflect our situatedness as Portuguese academics – wildfires, lithium mining and geoengineering.

Fire: wildfires

Fire has been considered the flagship element of the Anthropocene (Clark 2020), reminding us of the Promethean hubris to dominate and adapt the natural world to human will through science and technology, often with negative consequences. Wildfires, thus, are frequently pointed out as one of the extreme weather events that best illustrate the disastrous consequences of climate change.

The 2017 wildfires in Portugal caused 119 human casualties, and 442.000 hectares of forest burned (ICNF 2017). Two significant wildfires occurred: June 17th severely affected the Municipality of Pedrógão Grande, with 66 deaths and 204 injured people, and the wildfires of October 15th affected mainly the centre and northern regions, killing more than 50 humans and at least half a million animals (Simões 2017). The 2017 wildfires are the most devastating natural disaster in Portugal's recent history, illustrating a tension between elemental forces, forest management, non-humans (including introduced invasive species such as eucalyptus) and human collectives with different visions, aspirations and interests. Stakeholders include a plethora of human collectives such as paper companies (with a vested interest in growing eucalyptus, a highly profitable – yet flammable – species), environmental associations, landowners, politicians, local communities, trees, soils, wild animals and ecosystems.

This controversy is particularly interesting to speculate on how to develop pluriversal politics to attend to this multiplicity of subaltern human and non-human voices. We propose three methodological approaches: an experimental parliament informed by the Parliament of Things and the Council of All beings, a contemplative practice geared towards engaging with wildfires and non-human agency, and an artistic device to engage with the forest.

The first methodological endeavour is inspired by the Parliament of Things and the Council of All Beings. With the provisional title "The Parliament of Fire", this parliament could take place in Pedrógão Grande to deliberate on tackling wildfires. Potential participants could include members of associations created following the 2017 wildfires (Associação de Vítimas de Pedrógão Grande; Associação dos Familiares das Vítimas do Incêndio de Pedrógão Grande); representatives of environmental groups and grassroots movements involved in reforestation campaigns; representatives of paper companies; local politicians; representatives of non-humans (such as biologists, geologists and geographers). This experimental parliament could lead to a

nordia geographical publications

set of – potentially contradictory – propositions on wildfire governance, illustrating the heterogeneity of wildfire pluriverses and the diversity of human and more-than-human forces.

The second methodological experiment consists of a meditative practice centred on wildfires, illustrating how this sociotechnical controversy can be articulated with nonmodern types of affect. Within Buddhism, some forms of meditation involve fire in various forms. Still, the experimental practice we propose focuses specifically on wildfires, aiming to enhance embodied awareness of the heterogeneous assemblages mobilized by this particular phenomenon. This would involve four different stages: first, participants would practice concentration to slow down the flow of thoughts (*samadhi*), focusing on the breath to bring their minds and bodies to the present moment; the second stage would involve bringing to mind all the suffering caused by wildfires, including images of charred human and non-human bodies, destroyed ecosystems, burned down houses, and the human and non-human panic created by these events; later on, participants would come back to their bodies, evoking images of landscapes and soils regenerating, trees growing back, rivers flowing, and wild animals and local populations living symbiotically with the natural world; finally, this practice would involve metta or loving-kindness meditation, with participants sending positive energies to all humans and non-humans affected by wildfires.

Finally, we propose the development of artistic and performative practices. Here, we draw inspiration on the Coral Empathy Device and on the work of the Polish-Brazilian artist Frans Krajcberg, who created sculptures resorting to burnt tree trunks to give voice to Amazonian trees destroyed by fires, logging and monocultures (Vieira 2021). We propose the development of an installation combining immersive environments, virtual reality and specific sensations to allow participants to think [and feel] like a forest (Kohn 2013). With the provisional title "Becoming Forest(s)", this device could be installed in a native hollow tree in the centre region of Portugal. Participants would enter this tree feeling the various sensations caused by their bodies touching wood, breathing deeply and embodying the mossy atmospheres of the forest. Simultaneously, participants would wear a VR headset playing a video depicting different aspects of forest worlds – trees, wild animals, wildfires, and regenerative practices – throughout different seasons. This would allow for the emergence of an experience of impermanence, Interbeing and rootedness, with the tree providing, in an embodied way, the natural support to overcome the suffering and destruction caused by wildfires. This experiment would merge natural and technological worlds, illustrating how human and more-than-human agency can be coupled to trigger nonmodern forms of affect.

Air and water: geoengineering

Geoengineering refers to the technological manipulation of earth systems to avoid the disastrous consequences of climate change, and there are two primary forms of geoengineering: Solar Radiation Management (SRM) and Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR). SRM involves reflecting solar radiation back to space to counterbalance the heat triggered by greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (Szerszynski *et al.* 2013: 2809). CDR aims to directly remove CO_2 from the atmosphere, resorting to technologies that increase the natural capacity of carbon sinks (plants, oceans and soil). Geoengineering is thus entwined with manipulating air, water and the earth alike. Here we focus on technologies that manipulate two of these natural elements: air and water. Geoengineering

– including its definition – is a highly controversial topic (Hamilton 2013, 2014; The Breakthrough Institute 2018), and in the Global North numerous public engagement exercises have been organized over the past ten years (Bellamy & Lezaun 2015; Buck 2018; Cox *et al*. 2020).

In order to bring to the fore the pluriverses of geoengineering – whose potential stakeholders may include the whole planetary populations, both human and non-human –, we will speculate on two different experimental methodologies: the creation of utopian/dystopian scenarios as a way to foster future-oriented social imagination; and exercises inspired by meditative practices.

Geoengineering is an emblematic illustration of the OWW, as it assumes that the atmosphere and the ocean can be manipulated to curb the negative consequences of extractive capitalism (Carvalho *et al*. 2021). It has thus been argued that the subaltern should be the ones engaged in geoengineering discussions (Whyte 2018). More recently, there have been attempts to use fiction as a qualitative research method (Marsh *et al*. 2017), challenging the realist and representational undertones of social sciences. Combining these two concerns, in May 2021 we organized a deliberative event on geoengineering with "situated" publics – activists, representatives of environmental groups and science communicators. Participants faced dystopian and utopian scenarios involving geoengineering and were asked to deliberate on how to govern specific SRM and CDR applications in 2030 and 2050. These exercises involved citizens who are often absent from decision making, allowing them to discuss technological applications with a potential future impact, drawing on their subaltern situationality to deliberate on geoengineering, thus opening the pluriverses of these applications.

Meditative practices inspire the other proposed methodologies, and they were thought of as a way of listening-with the potential subalterns of the two main geoengineering applications: SRM and CDR. With the provisional title "the SRM Dance", the first one is inspired by Sufi Whirling, a practice belonging to the mystical branch of Islam where participants attain altered states of consciousness through dance, articulating movement, repetition and spirituality. "The SRM Dance" would mimic the choreography of sulphate particles and their engagement with the atmosphere[6] and multiple human and non-human beings. It would consist of an active meditation where humans, through movement, rhythm and kinaesthetic awareness, would enter a state of trance, contemplating SRM interactions with air, plants, humans, non-human animals, and the oceans throughout time and space. The other speculative methodology we suggest is developing a device combining guided meditation and immersive environments, with the provisional title "Becoming Algae", because some CDR proposals may, in the future, rely on genetically modified algae to optimize ocean carbon sinks (Singh & Dhar 2019). Isolation tanks, which often disrupt normal states of consciousness (Lilly 1972), could be filled with algae to generate an affective atmosphere evocative of CDR ontologies. After entering the tank, human participants would progressively attain a state of Yoga Nidra induced by a guided meditation. The instructions would then emphasize the sensory engagement with water and the slimy touch of algae, inviting participants to imagine how these non-human bodies were re-engineered to better absorb the CO_2 generated by human civilization. "Becoming Algae" would allow humans to be embraced and cared for by algae in a safe affective environment, evoking how the couplings of humans and non-humans in a state of suspended animation can illustrate how more-than-human agency is mobilized – and reshaped – to care for the human collective in a pluriversal nonmodern way.

Earth: lithium mining

In the northern mountains of Portugal lays one of the world's most coveted natural resources: lithium. This metal is key to supporting the European Union's (EU) energy transition towards carbon neutrality, as lithium batteries can be used for electric vehicles and renewable energy storage. The Portuguese government aims to exploit its national reserves because lithium mining is imagined as an opportunity to give the country a leading position within the EU.

As we write this article, in September 2021, lithium mining is approaching the northern regions of Portugal by leaps and bounds. The largest lithium exploration project in Western Europe has reached the final stage of approval in July 2021[7]: the Barroso Mine project. To be developed by Savannah Resources, a British multinational – this project contemplates a concession area of 593 ha. The average lithium extraction from the mine is expected to approach 1,450,000 tonnes per annum for 11 years (Carballo-Cruz & Cerejeira 2020). Covas do Barroso is an agricultural village dominated by livestock production and crops typical of mountainous regions – its 262 inhabitants preserve traditional ways of working the land and treating animals. In 2017, Covas gained the classification of World Agricultural Heritage, given by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN. This green landscape, where pristine water flows in abundance and the air is pure beyond compare, is now threatened by the EU's first and most extensive "green mining" project.

This controversy perfectly illustrates the paradoxes of the EU's Green Deal, justifying intensively extractivist practices in the name of tackling climate change. We argue that Barroso – and its human and non-human populations – are being turned into a "sacrifice zone" (Lerner 2010; Klein 2014) or, more accurately, into a "green sacrifice zone" (Zografos & Robbins 2020). "Sacrifice zones" are geographical areas that have been environmentally razed through industrial-technological interventions for the sake of capitalist development, generally in very isolated territories populated by already vulnerable communities. In the energy transition context, we argue, along with Zografos and Robbins (2020), that these territories were turned into "green sacrifice zones" since their plunder is justified in the name of the 'green' transition.

Lithium mining is particularly interesting to speculate on developing methodologies that allow us to listen to subaltern stakeholders. Human stakeholders include the mining company, the Portuguese government, mining lobbies, and the EU, on the one hand, and local communities, local anti-mining associations (Associação Unidos em Defesa do Barroso; Povo e Natureza do Barroso), national environmental associations, and climate justice activists, on the other (subaltern) hand[8]. Soils, water, air, dust, animals and ecosystems are the non-human forces at stake. The three examples we propose include a poetry workshop; a "Theatre of the Oppressed" session to listen-with local communities; and experimental artistic practices engaging with soil, caring for it, contrasting with the "technoscientific timescape" (de la Bellacasa 2015) of the mine.

First, a poetic inquiry could be developed in Barroso, allowing local inhabitants to tell stories about their territories, past generations, recalling oral legends and myths. In times of profound ecological sorrow, recalling and paying tribute to our ancestral memory is a way to defy the accelerated rhythm of destruction (Krenak 2019). Then, this oral exercise would pay homage to Barroso's populations' way of living, their past and present relationship with each other and with non-humans, allowing them to reflect on how these dynamics would be disrupted if the project goes forward. Poetry supports geographical research because of its "affective power, […] which is

helpful to express particularly emotional aspects of spatial experience and to promote empathy across difference" (Paiva 2020: 1). Poetry can generate affective atmospheres that couple sensations, insights, emotions, and imagination, supporting the collective recognition of local experiences and narratives. In Barroso, this would be a useful method to de-materialize their territory, recognizing the importance of sensory and affective geographies in ongoing territorial struggles and fostering more-than-human forms of affect.

A Theatre of the Oppressed exercise could be held at Covas do Barroso. Ideally, actors would be local associations members against lithium mining and environmental associations/collectives; the "spect-actors" would be the rest of the local population and neighbourhood communities. A first enactment would represent a future reality, i.e., the construction of the mine and its likely impacts: the environmental, climate and social damages for Barroso and its populations, on the one hand, and the financial and economic prosperity for the mining company, on the other hand. Later on, "spect-actors" would replace the actors, re-staging the scene until they reached a consensus on their desired future. This event would empower the local (subaltern) community, exposing them to the factors of their oppression while giving them the tools to react against it.

The third methodological experiment is inspired by Andy Weir's work: the *Pazugoo* art project, a constellation of 3D-printed figures proposed as a demonic personification of nuclear waste (Weir 2016). Weir's work navigates between sensory experience and more-than-human scales of deep time, turning art into a means to listen-with more-than-human agency. Drawing inspiration from *Pazugoo*, local artists could collaborate to create and design artistic pieces engaging with non-human and organic forces, such as soil, water, air, dust, etc. The project proposed by Savannah Resources is an open-pit mine, which means that lithium extraction would interact with soil and impact the quality of the water and air. On the one hand, artists could also develop a sensory experiment that would embody the pain, distress and ache of these elements; or, as Weir does, they could present an art installation in which these non-human forces would *turn against* humans, or in which these non-human forces would make a surge in a demonic figure, rendering humans wary of the future consequences of present actions.

On the other hand, artists could engage in *caring* practices. As a counterbalance to the mining project, which views soil as a "resource" to be commodified and exploited, artists could develop projects where the soil is portrayed as a living more-than-human community. These practices would make visible what was once invisible, namely the timescales of non-humans, which fundamentally differ from the productivist rhythms of the mine. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2015) suggested, making time for these deeper-earth timescales is a form of "care time" that should be seen as a regenerative practice in times of ecological breakdown. These artistic practices resonate with Haraway's (2015) suggestions of further extending our kin ties, to make-*with* and become-*with* the earth-bound.

Conclusion

This article was a provisional attempt to imagine ways of disrupting the OWW, engaging with pluriversal methodologies to bring to the fore a wide range of human and non-human voices that modern ontologies have systematically silenced in the

Anthropocene. To listen(-with) the subaltern, we engaged with a set of practices that couple politics, affect, territories, the senses and more-than-human agency. Drawing on the case studies of wildfires, geoengineering and lithium mining, we speculated on how to bring to attention human and non-human subaltern, imagining various ways of engaging local communities and a wide range of non-humans, such as elemental forces, algae, trees, soils and the stratosphere.

We argued that pluriversal methodologies are ways of countering modern, hegemonic and extractivist versions of the dominant ontological model of the Anthropocene. They allow us to *listen-with* and be performatively affected by the agency of collectives systematically subordinated and silenced by OWW ontologies, paving the way for the emergence of nonmodern, pluriversal politics that disrupt modern narratives and structures. These methodologies are ways of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016), triggering forms of affect that contrast with modern ones – they disrupt and reconfigure our senses, allowing our bodies to resonate with more-than-human suffering, eliciting ways of coping with a world falling apart. The different forms of experience linked to these exercises may indicate that to listen-with the subaltern our affective architecture should be reassembled, thus decolonizing our bodies and selves from dominant OWW devices of subjectification. The aim of these methodologies is not to reach some form of closure but to allow the clamour of pluriversal forces to resonate with human and non-human bodies. In doing so, they reshape politics, affect and modern illusions of control, enabling more-than-human agency to guide us into a time *yet to come*, "as if the stranger or foreigner held the keys" (Derrida 2000: 121).

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Endnotes

1. Usually translated as "a world where many worlds fit".

2. Spivak (1998), in her seminal essay Can the Subaltern speak?, uses the term "epistemic violence" to designate the silencing of marginalized groups. This term sheds light on colonialism's long-lasting consequences – not only socio-politically but also epistemologically. Indeed, colonialism has dismissed and downgraded, for centuries, other, non-western knowledge. For more debates on this matter, see Spivak (1998; 2010), Dotson (2011), Brunner (2021).

3. The following website provides some pictures of Saraceno's project: https://www.estherschipper.com/exhibitions/282-anthropocene-monument-with-tomas-saraceno.

4. https://katausten.wordpress.com/the-coral-empathy-device/.

5. Often translated as “conscientization”.

6. SRM often involves the injection of aerosols into the stratosphere that would then disperse and create a protective shield against solar radiation.

7. Savavannah Ressources has delivered its Environmental Impact Study (EIA) to the Portuguese Environment Agency (APA). The APA then placed the EIA in public consultation, for about 2 months. During the public consultation period, APA revealed that it received around 170 participations. This period ended in July 2021, and the APA’s final decision has since then been awaited.

8. This is an ongoing and recent controversy. As such, aside from the pro-mine developers and the mine opponents, there are some stakeholders (namely, political parties and climate justice groups) who still haven’t developed a public and clear stance on the issue.

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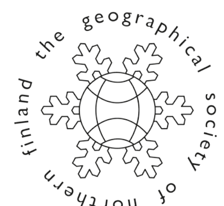

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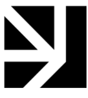

Environmental conflicts and cultural misunderstandings in a Buenos Aires wetland settlement

Marina Wertheimer[a]

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the politics of reclaiming the commons and resisting extractivism, drawing on a case of environmental conflict and ontological equivocations in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. On the south of the City of Buenos Aires, the Techint Group plans to build a real estate project by promising *progress* and *development* for an area affected by numerous environmental problems. This project spurred social mobilizations led by neighbors and local organizations, who denounced the environmental and housing impacts. Drawing on an anthropological approach, I investigate what happens when a consensus cannot be reached regarding the solution to — or even the very nature of — an environmental "problem." Finally, I reflect on the need for a new cosmopolitics that can transcend the cultural misunderstandings that arise from the fact that "the various collectives that populate the world do not really understand the fundamental questions that engage other collectives" (Descola 2012).

Keywords: Urban extractivism, wetlands, environmental conflicts, cultural misunderstandings, ontological equivocations

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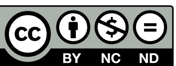

Introduction

This article addresses environmental conflicts in the face of urban renewal projects in coastal areas (particularly, in the south of the city) of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the period between 2004 and 2019, as well as the various constructions around "nature" in the city. In 2004, the riverside area of Buenos Aires underwent a process of land valuation, led by Techint Group, which proposes a large-scale real estate project, Nueva Costa del Plata, in an area of a deactivated landfill. Since then, local environmentalists and social activists have mobilized against Techint Group's actions to protect the local environment, adopting a socio-environmentalist position. To oppose the development of Costa del Plata more successfully, they have been trying to establish a line of communication with the residents of a low-income settlement next to the deactivated landfill. In doing so, they hoped to build a common framework of understanding regarding the relevance of preserving the delicate wetland ecosystem. Nevertheless, this dialogue –between the collective and the residents– has yet to flourish since these different social actors have not agreed on shared demands or concerted collective action.

The methodological approach tackles social phenomena from the social actors' own perspectives, exploring the beliefs, norms, values, and conceptions of the world on which they base their practices. In addition, we adopt an interdisciplinary and sociocultural perspective (Svampa 2001; Girola 2006). Besides being a typical case of environmental conflict between powerful economic and political actors, on the one hand, and self-organized communities, on the other, this case also illustrates diverging ontologies. It allows us to reflect upon the fact that, when it comes to reclaiming the commons and resisting extractivism, a new cosmopolitics is needed, one capable of transcending cultural misunderstandings, which "result from the fact that the various collectives that populate the world do not really understand the fundamental questions that engage other collective" (Descola 2012).

The structure of the article will be as follows. In section two, I present the case study, the social and environmental characteristics of the territory where the conflict takes place, the main actors and their logics of intervention in the territory. I also offer a brief historicization of how the Bernal-Quilmes coast became a territory object of real estate valuation, previously being the "backyard" for the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Section three presents the main concepts to frame real estate valuation processes, urban extractivism, environmental conflicts, and cultural misunderstandings. Section four develops the main arguments with which political and private actors sought to legitimize the implementation of urban extractivism on the Bernal coast. I also present the resources and strategies used by an environmental collective to resist this process. Finally, section five focuses on the particularity of this conflict: the emergence of cultural misunderstandings when trying to forge common demands to oppose the installation of a real estate megaproject coast.

Figure 1. Ribera de Bernal. Source: Author, based on OpenStreetMap data.

Background

Case study presentation: La Ribera de Bernal

Just south of the City of Buenos Aires, along the Quilmes coastal area, stretches the low-income settlement of La Ribera de Bernal (see Figure 1). This neighborhood was originally made up of small agricultural estates and vineyards, which persevered until the 1970s while the surrounding city became more industrialized. During the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), the farmers and inhabitants of what today is the Ribera de Bernal were violently evicted to make way for what became, at that time, the largest sanitary landfill in the country: the Villa Domínico landfill, managed by the state-run Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado (CEAMSE henceforth).

Nowadays, La Ribera de Bernal is a low-income settlement repopulated by the survivors of the eviction. The neighborhood currently consists of about 120 dwellings. It is surrounded by the Buenos Aires-La Plata highway, the Río de la Plata, the (now defunct) Villa Domínico landfill, and a water treatment plant. This settlement is seated within the Selva Marginal Quilmeña, the southernmost manifestation of the Amazon Rainforest, which runs parallel to the Río de la Plata (Ringuelet 1955). In the 1990s, this area was declared a natural reserve. However, no budget was allocated, and no institutional mechanisms were implemented to guarantee its protection. La Ribera de Bernal stands on a wetland, a depressed, swampy, and flooded area that serves an important environmental function. Houses in this neighborhood are elevated on stilts, allowing the river water to ebb and flow freely.

Since the eviction in the 1970s, the neighborhood has largely remained on the fringes of urbanization. Unlike other informal settlements in Greater Buenos Aires, La Ribera de Bernal is not overcrowded and cramped. Instead, it is a peaceful neighborhood, covered in lush, green vegetation and foliage. Children play on dirt roads and ride horses, and according to the residents, no one locks their door at night (interview conducted in 2015). Moreover, La Ribera de Bernal has access to a large, sandy beach on the Río de

la Plata coast. This is one of the few coastal landscapes along the entire Metropolitan Area that has not been tampered with or artificially replenished.

The CEAMSE landfill

The CEAMSE sanitary landfill was created in 1977 to replace waste incineration. Sanitary landfills were usually set up in wetlands, which were spoiled areas of little value according to the dominant idea of the time. By burying waste there, the land would rise by 4.5 meters, so forests and green spaces could then be planted on top. The technology behind sanitary landfills followed basic regulations for soil waterproofing, with a layer of clay and a high-density polyethylene membrane. Once the desired height was reached, the terrain was "sealed" with a two-foot layer of soil (Carré & Fernández 2013).

For the installation and management of the Villa Domínico landfill, the CEAMSE awarded the construction contract to Techint Group, a multinational conglomerate of Italian and Argentine origin. It is currently the largest engineering and construction firm in Argentina. The contract was signed in 1978, and it established a 20-year term. During this period, the company had to plant forests, lay down roads, and build recreational and sports infrastructure along the 1500 hectares of the Río de la Plata coast. Techint would receive one-third of the recovered land as payment for these services. After a series of amendments during the 1990s, the company was unburdened from these obligations. It acquired additional land – not previously affected by waste disposal but rather 230 hectares along the Río de la Plata basin, all covered by rainforest, the *Selva Marginal Quilmeña*. In 2004, after continuous protests, local organizations achieved the definitive closure of the Villa Dominico landfill, holding the CEAMSE responsible for the irreversible environmental damage. Decades of persistent waste disposal had left behind a polluted landscape, from the atmosphere to the soil, the wetlands, and the surface and groundwater.

A polluted riverine ecosystem

Two main features define and organize riverbank life. The first is the actual river. For Ribera de Bernal settlers, the river possesses an almost omnipresent and all-mighty character. It determines the stability of the dwellings and how long people can live in them. During a *sudestada*[1], the river "grows"[2] and swells. Its waves can destroy houses and crops and put people's lives at risk. The following interview with two residents of La Ribera clearly illustrates the above:

Respondent 1: When there was a sudestada in 2002, and we were there, I almost died.
Respondent 2: Our house was taller than that one over there. You know what the river did when it grew really big? The river went nearly up to the floor and started crashing against the house, breaking the front walls and the floor.
Respondent 1: The waves were huge! They reached the window and touched the ceiling!
Respondent 2: And began to crack the floor.
Interviewer: So what did you do?
Respondent 1: I lay down and covered my head. I was so scared! I cried, and I cried, and I cried, you know? That's the truth. What can I say?

Respondent 2: And the walls began to crack. Made out of wood, they are.
Interviewer: So what did you do then?
Respondent 1: He was calm, I was scared.
Respondent 2: Yeah, I was worried about her. As for me, I can swim. But we were going to die together. I wasn't about to run away and leave her behind—poor girl. I mean, I could have swum off, but…
Interviewer: And how long were you flooded in?
Respondent 2: Not long. The river grows for maybe three or four hours, and then it drops back. But those three hours, while the river's really big, you have to hold on, you understand? And you know what else? You have the waves. They surge and break everything. And I mean everything!
Respondent 1: You have to hold on for dear life. And besides, you lose all you have. We lost all we had. After the waters rolled back, we had nothing left. Not to brew mate[3], not even to cook (Interview conducted in 2015).

Another Ribera de Bernal inhabitant similarly referred to the river:

So, we went to keep this girl company, right? And I almost got sick because it was horrible seeing her like that. Her belly was big (...) It was this big. And she was in pain all through the night. And then two or three days later, she gave birth in her house. And the water kept crashing into her bed. It was incredible how the baby kicked inside of her. The water kept coming, and the baby was so happy. It didn't know any better. The girl was eight months pregnant by then. And the baby kicked, and the mother got so anxious. The contractions started that night. It must've been the water, the fright… (Interview conducted in 2016).

Another resident explained: "Sometimes, when we're angry with the river, we're just tired, we want to leave…" (Interview conducted in 2016). Nevertheless, this same person then affirmed: "There's no way I'm leaving the riverside!". Despite the constant threat of flash floods, no one has left the neighborhood because of them. Not even after the most severe *sudestadas*, which occur every 10 to 15 years.

In the Ribera de Bernal, life moves at the rhythm of the river tides. The river can be captivating and threatening at the same time. Riverside settlers attribute a certain human character and a given degree of *intentionality* to it. The river, they say, "floods and destroys everything." During a *sudestada*, the river "grows" and swells. Its waves can destroy houses and crops and put people's lives at risk. It "rises" and "swallows the land." Its waters "grow large," break into houses, and prevent people from leaving until they decide to fall back. The second ubiquitous feature of riverside life is waste. Since the closure of the Villa Domínico landfill, the Ribera de Bernal has become a kind of "backyard" for the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Trucks enter illegally to dump demolition debris and "fill in" the lower, swampy areas[4]. The area's proximity to the former landfill and numerous polluted rivers and groundwaters conspire to expose the settlement to various contaminants. It does not help that, when the river floods, its waters pick up the waste strewn around the city, carrying it down fluvial channels and surface runoffs that lead directly into the Río de la Plata.

When the waters recede after a *sudestada,* residents find plastic bags clinging to bushes, trees, and house fences. They also find many other plastic objects, from bottles to empty containers, flip flops, or broken toys. Each time this happens, the residents must clean up the area, which may take several days. Sometimes, however, they recycle and give a second life to these found objects. This shows the *metabolic cycle* (Swyngedouw 2006)

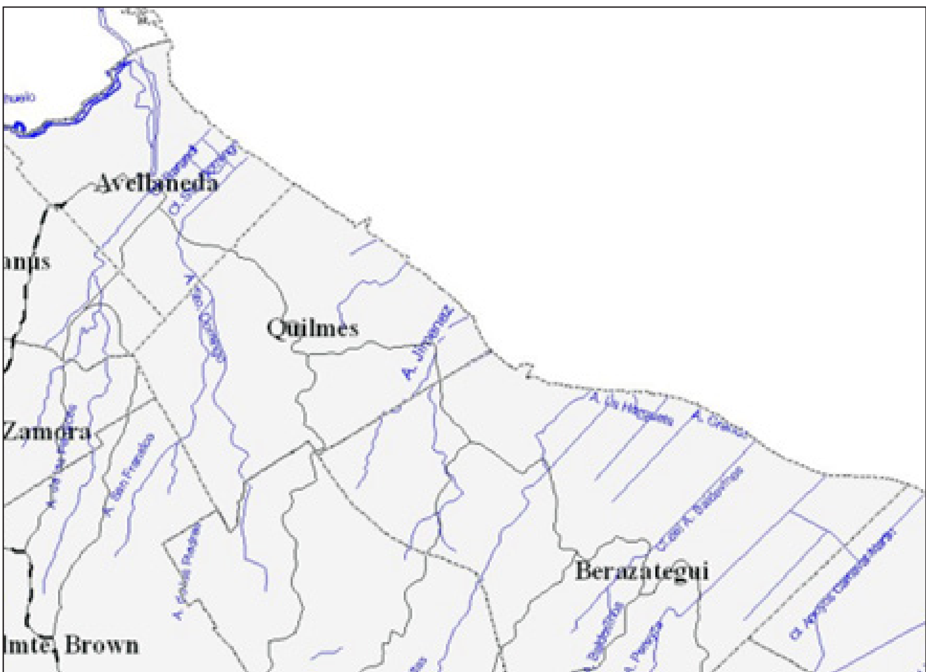

Figure 2. Basins of the Southern Metropolitan Area (Source: Wertheimer 2020).

of urban life: the residents of the Ribera de Bernal reuse discarded objects brought in by the river and thrown away by people from wealthier neighborhoods, places the riverside settlers may not even know about. In this "socio-environmental metabolic process" (Swyngedouw 2006: 26), the river reveals the interconnections between distant territories and the dialectical unity of urban processes. The pollution and the neglect of public spaces, rather than spontaneous occurrences, are active practices that usually precede urban renewal processes and function as a mode of legitimizing new territorial uses with a higher potential rent.

A real estate project

After thirty years of managing waste disposal at this site, Techint envisioned a real-estate venture in and around the landfill. While there was social pressure for the area to be declared a protected natural reserve, where remediation projects could be carried out, Techint Group instead began to shape the Nueva Costa del Plata project with local and provincial authorities' support, renewing territorial conflicts.

Nueva Costa del Plata is a real estate project stretching across 230 hectares of coastal land between the districts of Quilmes and Avellaneda, including the deactivated Villa Domínico landfill. Occupying an area of 1,300,000 square meters, this is reportedly the largest urban development project in Latin America — or at least, so claims its developer, Oficina Urbana (Converti & de Marco 2010). The project takes up 230 hectares, enjoying an initial 100 million US dollars investment. 70% of its surface area would be used for public parks and green spaces, while the remaining 30% would be available for residential use, commercial offices, hotels, community facilities, museums,

cultural centers, a business and convention center, and a university. Up to 40 stories high, its buildings would house approximately 25,000 people. And as for the former landfill, it would host a large public park covering 400 hectares. In 2010, Oficina Urbana received the Best Project in America award for *Nueva Costa del Plata* project. This prize is granted by The International Property Awards, an annual architecture and urbanism competition spanning many categories, which receives submissions from all over the world (Fundación Metropolitana 2011).

Theoretical framework

This section reviews different concepts that enabled the main argumentation sustained in this article. In the first place, I revised the processes of territorial transformation that affected the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA henceforth), related to the reconfigurations in the accumulation regime that Argentina went through since the 1970s. Secondly, I address the emergence of the environmental question and characterize the different environmentalisms identified in the case study, including the cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements.

Real estate megaprojects and urban extractivism

Real estate megaprojects, such as Nueva Costa del Plata, involve major transformations to the urban fabric. During the past three decades, the urban fabric of the AMBA has undergone profound changes, following an eminently economic logic that makes vacant spaces and infrastructure the object of real estate speculation and profitability. Far from playing a passive role, the state accompanies these operations –either directly or indirectly–, thus transforming specific fragments of the city (Stone 1993; Ciccolella 1999; Pírez 2006; Herzer 2008; Cuenya 2009)

One such kind of transformation, driven by local governments and private capital, are large-scale urban projects in vacant urban areas, reshaped according to global standards. These projects are carried out through ambitious real estate operations sustained by a complex network of relationships between public administrations and private actors, endowed with a corporate decision-making mentality and a relative lack of transparency in their internal processes (Harvey 2007). Moreover, the aim of such projects is not to solve housing problems but, rather, to satisfy middle- and high-income consumers (Cuenya & Corral 2011), leading to processes of *urban extractivism*.

The notion of extractivism was first used to describe the expansion of the agricultural frontier and the extraction of primary goods, such as minerals and hydrocarbons, during the last two decades (Svampa *et al.* 2009; Gudynas 2012b; Seoane *et al.* 2013; Svampa 2017). The analysis of these processes was limited, at first, to rural spaces and indigenous territories. However, more recently, there has been a shift towards looking at such processes in cities within the category of *urban extractivism* (Svampa & Viale 2014; Reese 2017; Vásquez Duplat 2017; Viale 2017).

The environmental question

As urban and "natural" extractivism intensified in the new millennium, social conflicts emerged. Mega-mining, soy monoculture, biofuels in rural areas, and environmental degradation and real estate speculation in urban areas have turned entire territories into disputed places, mobilizing communities and giving rise to conflicts and social movements that hinge on territoriality. In this context, collective action — organized in networks of social and spatial proximity — has risen with the aim of defending the land or physical spaces (Mançano Fernandes 2005). These social conflicts constitute "environmental conflicts" when at least one party has put forth an environmental argument since no environmental conflict ever occurs "in its purest form." Therefore, when looking at any environmental strife, we must examine it from various angles and consider its protagonists' arguments (Azuela & Mussetta 2009). For Martínez-Alier (2006), "environmental conflicts" are defined by opposition to projects with territorial impact and a rejection of the cost-benefit calculations underlying such projects. These opposition movements tend to use other languages of valuation, employing non-commensurable terms to valuate concepts such as biodiversity, human rights, autonomy, the right to self-determination, and more.

The conflicts analyzed in this article are led by local organizations, which are generally involved in asymmetric power struggles (Nardacchione 2005). In this context, mobilized social actors must broaden their specific demands and present them as public issues of interest to society — or at least to a broad social group. The *environmental field* (Azuela 2006) has been a source of legitimation, in which *nature* appears as a "universalizable value" (Chateauraynaud 2010) that serves to endow actors with legitimate frameworks for action.

Environmentalism contains several currents of thought and action, making it more appropriate to refer to *multiple environmentalisms* (Gudynas 1992; Bebbington & Bebbington 2009; Martínez Alier 2009), presenting a wide spectrum of positions, suggesting different ways of understanding the relationship between the environment, society, and the market. Therefore, they imply different political projects and imaginaries (Bebbington & Bebbington 2009). The following section includes a brief outlook of the main currents of environmentalism present in the case study, focusing on cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements.

Green marketing and ecodevelopmentism

A set of discourses and practices suggests environmental concerns should not interfere with capital accumulation, subordinating environmental care to continuous economic growth (Harvey 1996). Green marketing practices consistently adapt nature to enable profitability and capital accumulation. To build an environmentally responsible image, green marketing disengages from the scientific evidence of "environmentally-friendly" practices and is merely concerned with displaying a credible "green" image for consumers (O'Connor 1994). Throughout this article, I identify the practices and discourses of Grupo Techint and local governments within this current of thought.

In this case study, green marketing practices are intertwined with ecodevelopmentism, a current within environmentalism that hinges on the premise that, although economic activity produces environmental damage, it is possible — with effective controls — to make economic growth coexist with environmental care, though without questioning the precepts that led to pollution and depredation in the first place (Harvey 1996).

Ecodevelopmentism constitutes a contemporary tangent in the concept of development, elaborated since the late 1980s. The concept of "development" — which gained traction during the postwar period and was applied by the United Nations through the Regional Commissions and, especially, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) — is part of a broader belief system that posits economic growth and expansion as inevitable steps towards progress. Harkening back to Enlightenment ideas, "progress" has been understood by hegemonic state-led projects worldwide to search for better living conditions, using Western standards as the reference point (Colmegna & Matarazzo 2001; Gudynas 2012a).

Sixty years on, referring to "development" remains a strategic recourse that still enjoys much legitimacy and acceptance when promoting urban development. According to Sachs: "When someone talks about development, they really mean nothing — despite pretending to have the best intentions. Development is devoid of content, but it serves a purpose: it sanctifies any intervention in the name of a higher, more evolved objective" (Sachs 1997). Development, then, can be considered a "floating signifier" (Laclau 2005). Its vague and imprecise nature means many disparate political projects can redefine it. This ambiguity is precisely its strength: it would be difficult to find anyone opposed to the concept of development, which is why it garners support from across the ideological spectrum. Since it is a floating signifier, the very meaning of "development" is dependent on hegemonic struggles.

Conservationism

Conservationism is the most well-known current within environmentalism. It is a movement that argues for protecting nature, landscapes, and living species, valuing nature in its "pristine" state. Its main proposal is to restore degraded areas and create spatial units where human presence is restricted (Reboratti 2000; Foladori 2005; Wagner 2010).

Conservationism — supported in disciplines such as ecology or conservation biology — understands nature, above all, as a collection of separate objects which, taken together, represent biodiversity. Within this current, nature constitutes a separate entity from humanity. According to Milton (2001), conservationism can be defined as the active and explicit effort to impose borders between human and non-human processes, the latter of which defines the natural.

Conservationism is a *biocentric* position, for which life on Earth has intrinsic value that is "independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes" (Naess 1992). The idea of intrinsic value holds that there are attributes independent of human beings that continue to exist even in their absence. As Trentini points out, conservationism, by reducing nature to a biological-ecological issue, obliterates the existence of divergent interests in local populations and ends up acting as a moralizing discourse that defines "what people can or cannot do" (2011: 16).

Socioenvironmental justice

Finally, the type of environmentalism that defines the social organizations reclaiming the commons and resisting extractivism is identified as *socio-environmental justice* (Svampa 2008a; Acselrad *et al.* 2009; Bebbington & Bebbington 2009). The socio-environmental justice movement opposes the unequal spatial distribution of the risks, costs, and benefits of pollution and extraction. Their complaints are based on certain populations'

greater risk due to uneven exposure to environmental contamination. The same people are usually excluded from decision-making processes (Harvey 1996). Therefore, the hardships of environmental problems acquire racial and class dimensions. This current finds its origins in the social justice and human rights movements. For this reason, it advocates "critical" environmentalism capable of integrating environmental and social struggles and defines environmental problems in terms of social justice.

Cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements

The above currents of environmentalism describe how the human-nature relationship is predominantly understood in the West, though alternative approaches exist. In the modern Western tradition, the dominant view of the human-nature relationship constitutes a naturalistic ontology, in which nature is an ontological domain separate from what we call culture or society. However, the ecological perspectives discussed above, even the socio-environmental approach, still overlook an important dimension to such conflicts: culture. According to Blaser, in many environmental disputes, what is at stake is not so much a misunderstanding on the management and access to "natural resources," but involves cultural — and often insurmountable — misunderstandings (Blaser 2009a; Descola 2012; Carman & González Carman 2020), regarding what things are even at stake. The actors involved "are not aware that each of them is representing (and assuming) different worlds" (Blaser 2009b).

Transcending the naturalist premise of modernity, Blaser and de la Cadena rely on the work of Stengers (2000) to advocate for the recognition of *pluriverses*, meaning radically different worlds or realities that are capable of existing without necessarily interfering with one another (Stengers 2005). For Stengers, the so-called *cosmopolitics* (Stengers 1997, 2005) can function to overcome several cultural misunderstandings. Cultural misunderstandings occur even in the modern Western world and are not limited to disagreements between "ontologically" diverse groups. As Carman points out, to this day, and throughout Western culture, we can find examples of other ways of being in the world: "the worldviews that have nurtured the experience of humanity for centuries have not completely disappeared, and they still play a role in our dispositions and schemes of perception of the world" (Carman 2017: 122).

From this conceptual starting point, I propose the notion of *cultural misunderstandings* to describe certain aspects of the relationship between Ribera de Bernal residents and the environmentalist resistance movement. The following section explores how an extractivist model was imposed on the Bernal coast, based on a public-private partnership between the local government and the Techint group. The main supporting arguments employed by these actors are presented. I also reconstruct the resources and strategies adopted by a local group to oppose the installation of Nueva Costa del Plata, mainly through arguments and environmental practices close to socio-environmental justice, which increasingly veered towards a conservationist position. Finally, in section 5, I examine how this conservationist position ended up preventing any possibility of reaching common ground with La Ribera de Bernal's settlers and produced cultural misunderstandings.

Results

Progress and *development* as forms of entrepreneurialism and urban extractivism

Government decisions are not fixed or predetermined but are guided by what can be considered "achievable" goals. In this sense, for the local governments, Techint Group's *Nueva Costa del Plata* project represented a viable answer to the question of what to do about the deactivated landfill and its surrounding areas. The authorities found, in this proposal, a real estate project with a pre-designed, self-financing urban program, which might give an economic boost and attract an influx of new inhabitants with greater purchasing power (meaning more tax potential and higher budgets for local government). In addition, the *Nueva Costa del Plata* plan would beautify the riverside area and promote public use of hitherto-inaccessible land. All these factors eventually led to the formation of a *public-private partnership* (Stone 1993; Harvey 2007) between local governments and Techint Group, that exploited the riverside territory as a kind of *territorial capital* (Caravaca & González 2009).

Furthermore, real estate projects like this appear to function not necessarily to assuage housing concerns but rather as places where value can be stored (Guevara 2015) or as financial assets (Barenboim 2010). This deepening relationship between financial markets and real estate leads to *urban extractivism*, following the process started in the 1990s within the City of Buenos Aires. Therefore, urban land becomes a financial instrument since its price grows increasingly detached from the "real" economy and determined, in large part, by the oscillations of rent and property values determined by the financial market (Reese 2017).

To argue in favor of Nueva Costa del Plata, Techint Group and local authorities advanced the following points: the project would (a) facilitate public access to the river, (b) contribute to local development, and (c) help protect the environment. They were deployed, in this case, by promoters of real estate development — and even detractors of the project — to defend their positions. However, it is worth noting that these arguments are not merely rhetorical flourishes. Projects like Costa del Plata can indeed generate incentives and economic opportunities, attracting investments, spurring job creation, and increasing income through the influx of high-income residents. The problem, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2002) point out, is that the ethics of profit and unlimited accumulation cannot justify themselves and need additional "moral support".

Facilitate public access to the river

As the popular saying goes, Buenos Aires was built "with its back to the river." Even today, due to all the urban barriers standing in the way, it can be difficult for the city's inhabitants to access the Río de la Plata's shores. Since the 1980s, different local administrations have attempted to recover these coastal areas. Silvestri (2011) argues these actions mean to counteract the experience of the last military dictatorship, promoting public openness against authoritarian urbanism. For the past few decades, the recovery of public space has therefore been a prominent issue on the urban agenda, becoming a unifying idea bringing many other concerns into its orbit — chiefly, political democracy.

The will to "recover" urban public spaces — among them coasts and waterfronts — as sites for the practice of democracy continues to this day. And in the southern districts of Greater Buenos Aires, this recovery process is linked to the overhaul of an older model of territorial management, perceived as violent and authoritarian, and inherited from the military dictatorship. This matter of "recovering" access to the river shore, as well as the creation of numerous public spaces and parks, are all strongly emphasized in the Nueva Costa del Plata project. Whenever possible, Oficina Urbana representatives call attention to the fact that only 25% of the land under discussion would be occupied by new buildings and constructions, with 75% remaining as public space.

Development and progress

Local authorities and project developers appealed to the twin notions of *development* and *progress* to legitimize the real estate project. Even sixty years after the first debates, referring to "development" remains a strategic recourse that still enjoys a great deal of legitimacy and acceptance when promoting urban development, as was the case with Nueva Costa del Plata. Development, as we argued, can be considered as a "floating signifier" (Laclau 2005), and it's very meaning depends on the result of hegemonic struggles:

> *With Nueva Costa del Plata, we've managed to reorient private investment to proceed with a development project that will allow society to benefit from growth that moves forward, not backward. (...) This project will make us proud of being residents of Avellaneda, letting us enjoy the same urban and environmental infrastructure found in the most developed cities in the world (Techint Group representative, audio transcript of the November 26, 2008, Public Hearing: Nueva Costa del Plata Project).*

No public official or representative of Techint Group ever mentioned how the project would affect Ribera de Bernal's inhabitants and whether they would benefit from this sort of *development*.

A green project

Beyond facilitating access to the river and encouraging development, another factor used to promote the Nueva Costa del Plata was its environmental impact. The project's supporters stressed the need to intervene in and "improve" the natural landscape of Quilmes and Avellaneda. In their arguments in favor of Nueva Costa del Plata, the project's promoters conceptualized nature as a fragile, threatened entity that needs protection. The underlying idea was that "corrective" interventions were therefore necessary. And a well-designed, properly planned intervention could, under this view, transform a polluted site into a "pleasant environment". In short, the argument was that, through design, planning, and intervention, guided by dominant aesthetic principles, it was possible to rearrange the coastal landscape and hide its more unsavory aspects, such as mud or pollution, to impose an "intact" image of nature. Physical interventions, then, could transform a polluted natural area into a dreamlike paradise:

> *When the project reflects our vision for it, it generates iconic images. And in these images, what we see most clearly are public spaces. The areas we're concerned about — the rainforest, the riverbank, the river itself, pools recovered as water mirrors — are turned into places where communities can*

come together, places that retain their identity and allow social gatherings, places that are the stuff of dreams (Techint Group representative, audio transcript of the November 26, 2008, Public Hearing: Nueva Costa del Plata Project).

Certain features of the riverside ecosystem (the rainforest and the view of the river and so-called "water mirrors") acquire, in the context of this project, a *patrimonial* status. The project's architects and designers mean to "rescue" these features from an environment they consider degraded. By turning this environment into a more pleasant place in the public imagination, these features can then be reincorporated as ornaments for aesthetic pleasure. Thus, nature can be domesticated, technified, and transformed into an attractive landscape for future Nueva Costa del Plata homebuyers and consumers.

Techint's representatives and the professionals involved in the Nueva Costa del Plata project view the relationship between nature and economic activity (or between nature and human beings) from the point of view of *green marketing and ecodevelopmentism*. Then, the Nueva Costa del Plata project seeks to add value to a polluted environment and transform it into a new source of economic dynamism. Nature, in this case, acts as a "reservoir of resources" (O'Connor 1994), used by Techint to obtain additional profits.

Opposition

In 2011, the authorities of Quilmes and Avellaneda gave the necessary approvals to begin building the Nueva Costa del Plata project. This inspired a neighborhood resistance movement – that for privacy reasons we will call "The Local Assembly" (TLA henceforth). Most TLA members came from neighborhoods adjacent to the Ribera de Bernal. They represented a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and ages, from 18- to 75-years old. Most could be characterized as middle-class (being journalists, teachers, students, engineers, biologists, and lawyers), although lower-class participants (including construction workers, homemakers, and unemployed people) were also among their ranks. This follows the trend of protest movements shaping political formats not based on class (Cohen 1985; Schuster 2005).

TLA's primary objective was coordinating actions to prevent the construction of the Nueva Costa del Plata project and, thus, guarantee the preservation of the local ecosystem — the wetland and the rainforest — while denouncing the constant filling-in and clearing of the area. TLA members defined their movement as socio-environmental and decried the environmental and social effects of urban planning on the river shore. In a press release, they communicated their central demands:

- Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on the planet.
- They are a fabulous reservoir of biodiversity, oxygen, and freshwater.
- They regulate the rising and falling of water, mitigate floods, and refill aquifers.
- They preserve water quality by retaining pollutants by transforming and transporting sediments and nutrients.
- The Ribera de Bernal neighborhood has resisted eviction for over 60 years.

- Its inhabitants have the right to preserve their homes and demand decent social conditions for their neighborhood and families. We cannot allow the government to privatize our neighborhood and our coast.

- WE DEMAND THE PROTECTION OF THE NATURAL RESERVE! (TLA blog 2011b).

This marked an attempt to give the community a more autonomous, critical role in the decision-making process regarding their territory. This follows from the rejection of the traditional bonds of political representation, inspired by an "anti-bureaucratic" sentiment that tends to "see everything as legitimate when it comes from the citizens and as suspicious when it comes from the public administration" (Azuela 2006).

One of the main characteristics of TLA — which is shared by other social movements that emerged after the 2001 crisis in Argentina — was its constant public protests, as its members sought to voice their demands in public spaces. Indeed, TLA's early period was marked by a strong propensity for direct action. They held meetings to communicate their message. They hosted festivals and art workshops. They organized walks down the coast, with the motto: "Know it to defend it." During these walks, they summoned nearby residents and the general public to visit where the *Nueva Costa del Plata* was being built: the Ribera de Bernal settlement, the Selva Marginal Quilmeña rainforest, the wetlands, and the outer perimeter of the former CEAMSE landfill.

"For someone to defend something, they first have to know about it. And that's what these walks allow because they show people how nature works and what's being threatened," said one TLA's member (Lavaca 2013). The most crowded of these walks attracted around 70 people, mostly from adjacent neighborhoods. During these three-hour strolls, visitors could discover the "green lung" of the Quilmes and Avellaneda districts and briefly forget about their routine and urban life. However, the actual residents of the neglected, low-income Ribera de Bernal never attended any of these walks. Instead, they would look on with surprise at these strangers from nearby middle-class neighborhoods.

TLA integrated itself into both national and regional socio-environmental networks. This gave its members a shared framework for understanding diverse environmental and territorial issues in and outside Argentina, lending a certain "unity" to struggles that would otherwise have seemed unrelated and isolated. This, in turn, provided shared frameworks for action (Cefaï 2008). Thus, TLA members framed local issues as part of a broader socio-territorial process — namely, the elitization of the Buenos Aires riverbanks, as the local manifestation of a regional mechanism in which investment capital commodifies natural resources and common areas.

According to TLA, there are significant similarities between real estate speculation in urban areas and capitalist expansion in rural contexts (echoing, through this argument, the notions of *extractivism* and *urban extractivism*). TLA challenged the "productivist" view of nature and territory, stating it would be impossible to prevent the impact of 25,000 new homes and 40-story buildings on the unique ecosystem of the rainforest and the wetlands. As another TLA member put it:

[Techint] are falling into a contradiction: they say they want to protect the environment, but they're occupying, mutilating, and deforesting fifty-four hectares of rainforest, declared of interest by UNESCO. So, they're mutilating the rainforest, and they're going to extract four million cubic meters of material from the river and dump it onto the wetland to raise the ground level (TLA

member, Audio Transcription of Public Hearing, November 26, 2008: Nueva Costa del Plata Project)

In 2012, TLA filed a protective lawsuit (an *amparo*) to stop the construction of Nueva Costa del Plata, which had gotten underway that year with trees being cleared and land being removed. This action was justified based on (1) citizens' right to public participation in decisions regarding their territory and (2) the obligation to carry out Environmental Impact Assessments as established by Argentina's *Ley General del Ambiente* No. 25,675 (General Environmental Law, LGA). According to the case, neither legal concept had been respected when Techint began work on the Nueva Costa del Plata project. However, the lawsuit's main argument was that both the local authorities and Techint Group breached the *Ley Nacional de Bosques* No. 26,331 (National Forest Law, LBN), which establishes a foundation for environmental protection within Argentina. The *amparo* found, in the letter of this law, its central arguments as it requested the cessation and reconstitution of all environmental damage caused by Costa del Plata. As stated in the lawsuit, this urban project would destroy the rainforest, the disappearance of the wetlands, the loss of the native flora, and severe consequences for the coastal areas, including erosion and flooding. Consequently, the court validated the *amparo* and, for many years, the real estate project was put on hold.

An interesting effect of this precautionary measure — and of its assertion that the rainforest needed guaranteed protections — was how it shifted TLA arguments. Of all the angles an environmental issue may be approached from, the lawsuit fixated on the need to *conserve* an endangered ecosystem, highlighting this over other potential topics (such as, for instance, the right to housing). This emphasis — and its court support — gradually simplified the environmental conflict. TLA focused explicitly on the defense of the rainforest and the wetland (out of many topics open to discussion) and thus adopted an increasingly *conservationist* position.

The protesters, then, adopted the forms and language imposed by the dominant order (through laws and scientific tradition). They did this, consciously or not, to increase their chances of being heard. Their arguments were supported by legal frameworks and primarily scientific language, historically defined as epistemologically valid (Nygren 1999). TLA members appealed to "experts" to legitimize their claims. And they increasingly deployed "expert" language concerning wetland conservation. For example, they denounced the Nueva Costa del Plata project for its direct impact on already urbanized areas west of the Buenos Aires - La Plata highway. Furthermore, according to TLA, when the Río de la Plata rises, the wetlands function as buffer zones, containing the water runoff from urbanized areas upstream. They argue that the preservation of the wetlands is crucial in preventing floods. Using a physiological metaphor, they explain, "The wetlands are like an immense kidney that filters all the polluted water we send to it" (TLA member, interview conducted in 2015).

Moreover, besides its valuable functions for society, the wetlands and the Selva Marginal Quilmeña — for TLA members — had *intrinsic value* (beyond its social utility). They, therefore, adopted an increasingly *conservationist* position. TLA members, then, embraced this scientific language in their protection of the riverside environment, wielding it as a tool to contest the arguments of the local government and Techint Group, their rivals in the dispute. However, this linguistic and rhetorical choice prevented any possibility of reaching common ground with La Ribera de Bernal's settlers.

Discussion: cultural misunderstandings in the Ribera de Bernal: land to live — or an environment to protect?

For the inhabitants of La Ribera de Bernal, the conflict around the Nueva Costa del Plata project was only one in a long list of daily problems and uncertainties. From their point of view, the broader concerns and issues being tackled by TLA members in their confrontation with businesspeople and government authorities were of little relevance.

When the project got underway, the middle-class residents of nearby neighborhoods banded together to form a unified "us," conscious of its group interests and motivated to organize collective action to halt the destruction of the riverside environment. Meanwhile, for the residents of La Ribera de Bernal, the threat posed by the Techint Group was primarily a *housing* problem, calling into question the continuation of their way of life. For them, the specter of eviction was nothing new, as it was for the protesters confronting Techint Group. Indeed, for the inhabitants of La Ribera, the risk of eviction dates to the very foundation of their settlement, which survived removal following the installation of the CEAMSE landfill in the 70s. As an old-time neighborhood resident mentions: "When I was 3, 4 years old, Techint already wanted this land. Now I'm 54, and Techint hasn't gotten a thing." Thus, the possibility of being forced out by the real estate project did not surprise or stir La Ribera's residents — at least, not more than usual.

Other settlers said "someone from Techint" assured them the construction of the real estate project — or what the settlers considered a "gated community" — would not affect their livelihood. "Techint told us they wouldn't touch the neighborhood. They weren't going to harm us at all. On the contrary, they might've even… brought a lot of improvements" (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016). Many residents found the idea of installing a "gated community" quite suggestive. They aspired to indirectly benefit from *progress* and from the investments the state had never made:

> *Interviewer: Do you think the construction of Nueva Costa del Plata will harm you?*
>
> *Respondent: Sure… But maybe… Look, the truth is, I think it'll be a good thing. They'll try to take care of this place. Wherever you have people with money, they look after everything. So, they'll look after this place, make it better (Extract of an interview conducted in 2015).*

Most riverside inhabitants have, over the years, developed coping strategies to deal with the uncertainty and restlessness of the constant threat of eviction:

> *When the day comes that the CEAMSE people tell us, "Well guys, you have to leave," I think that if they want us to leave, they'll have to compensate us, too, because you have people who've been living here for 40 or 50 years. And you can't kick them out on the street just like that. You can't… (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).*
>
> *Look, people say a lot of things. Some say they're going to build a gated community. Others say they're going to connect Quilmes, Avellaneda, and Berazategui with a new road. Or that they want to lay down a coastal road. People say all those things, but no one knows anything for sure (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).*

An essential part of the TLA plan of action was to forge connections with La Ribera's inhabitants and agree regarding Techint Group encroachment on the forest.

TLA's goal was to involve the settlers in the defense of their territory — and have them view it as an *ecologically-valuable* zone, not just *habitable* space. However, no inhabitant of La Ribera ever participated in TLA's activities nor understood their proposal:

Respondent: I know the environmentalists were building a dry toilet. They always go over there, but I don't know what they're looking for. Maybe a bit of soil from the river? But I don't know what they do.

Interviewer: And aren't you interested in knowing what they do?

Respondent: The truth is, no, not at all

(Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

Likewise, despite numerous invitations, La Ribera's settlers have never felt compelled to participate in TLA's rainforest walks, which have been held for over ten years. "Nature," for these settlers, is an empty category.

It is simply the stage of their everyday lives. They live and deal with this environment and do not perceive "nature" from exteriority but by dwelling in it. To paraphrase Ingold, they know about the world "not by describing it from outside but by immersing themselves in it" (Ingold 2012). Indeed, no resident of La Ribera is even aware that the natural reserve under discussion — and which TLA is so diligently fighting to protect — is where their neighborhood is located. This is expressed throughout the following interview excerpts: "the natural reserve is further away. Nobody goes there. Only the boys go on walks, those *ecological* boys" (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

I've never gone (to the natural reserve). I know it's by the beach, further away, between the trees. But I've never gone. You can see it's around the corner. They say it's beautiful… Those walks, they say they're very beautiful.

(Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

Despite mutual collaboration and cordiality, the relationship between La Ribera's settlers and TLA's members is defined by *cultural misunderstandings* (Carman & González Carman 2019), which, as we said, "result from the fact that the various collectives that populate the world do not really understand the fundamental questions that engage other collectives" (Descola 2012: 409).

The above is exemplified by the testimony of one La Ribera resident:

If the environmentalists are protesting, or something like that, sometimes we go, too… We look at them, but don't get involved. Everyone has their own opinion, but we disagree with them. They actually came here and introduced themselves. They said we had to take our children to school on horseback. They criticized us for demanding water supply or electricity. But we live here and want to live well. They have cars, but they park them under the bridge.

(Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

TLA's environmentalists and La Ribera's inhabitants may exchange cordial words and solidarity, but the latter also feel a degree of resentment towards the former.

They suspect the environmentalists, at some level, mean to "educate" them on how they should lead their lives. TLA's ecological messages and activities, utterly removed from the daily experiences and preoccupations of the settlers, are thus perceived as an imposition. As far as La Ribera's inhabitants are concerned, the environmentalists can embrace nature because they do not have to deal with it every day — or suffer the risk of losing everything or even dying in a *sudestada*. What is more, the environmentalists can choose to reject "progress," while the riverside settlers long for its arrival.

In short, the relationship between environmentalists and settlers is riddled with *misunderstandings*. All attempts by the former to bring La Ribera's inhabitants into the "environmental cause" were understood, by the latter, as partial acts of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2014). With their scientific knowledge, ingrained and naturalized as a *habitus*, the environmentalists ended up becoming the "environment's authorized spokespersons," holding a "superior epistemological position" (Carman & González Carman 2019). This came into conflict, repeatedly, with La Ribera's inhabitants and how they understood their own lives and surroundings. As mentioned before, TLA's strategic use of a *conservationist* discourse served to legitimize the cause in public debates. But this same discourse, and its conception of nature, hindered the possibility of engaging in a symmetrical dialogue with the inhabitants of La Ribera. Despite the many actions undertaken by TLA against the construction of Nueva Costa del Plata, in 2016, a provincial law was approved that gave the project, and Techint Group, legal authorization to proceed.

Conclusions

In 2004, the riverside area of Quilmes and Avellaneda, in Buenos Aires, underwent a land valuation process. Since then, public debates have discussed how this territory may be used. Three major positions have arisen. First, there is the one held by Techint Group, which proposes a large-scale real estate project, Nueva Costa del Plata. This position is, in turn, supported by the administrations of Quilmes, Avellaneda, and Buenos Aires Province. It is a pro-development stance, advancing *growth, progress,* and *economic development* arguments.

As suggested in this article, the second position is the *environmentalist* stance, adopted by organizations mobilized against Techint Group's actions. This group, over the years, was nourished by new social actors — The Local Assembly (TLA) members among them — who rose to act to protect the local environment. Gradually, this contingent shifted to a *conservationist* viewpoint.

Finally, the residents of La Ribera de Bernal, a low-income settlement next to the CEAMSE landfill, make up the third group. However, they do not hold a single, well-defined position regarding the desirability of the Nueva Costa del Plata project. Instead, they have their own list of preoccupations — concerning their precarious housing conditions, their permanence within the neighborhood, and other everyday problems — which do not seem to be directly linked to environmental concerns.

The public partnership between Techint Group and local authorities of Quilmes, Avellaneda, and Buenos Aires Province points to an *urban extractivist process* that seeks to exploit the territorial capital of the coastal land to improve the urban competitiveness of the affected districts. Among their areas of interest, we find the Río de la Plata's sights,

the "virgin" forests of the Selva Marginal Quilmeña, numerous undeveloped hectares, and the zone's proximity to the Buenos Aires-La Plata highway, which guarantees a swift connection to the national capital.

The leading role of private investment in much of the refunctionalization of the coastal areas is part of a general trend, not an exception. To be economically profitable, urban interventions — and the housing and services they offer — are aimed at high-income segments. In this context, the provision of public spaces "open to all society" acquires merely secondary importance. Thus, the "recovery" of public spaces, according to Gorelik, ends up serving as a "progressive alibi" for "wild" urban neoliberalism (Gorelik 2008). While the public spaces generated by such projects do allow a certain amount of collective enjoyment, they also legitimize the consolidation of spatial inequalities and "enable a peaceful vision of wealth" (Svampa 2008b).

In consideration of its potential benefits, local governments disregarded the controversies and widespread disapproval sparked by the Nueva Costa del Plata project, principally among environmentalist groups and neighborhood organizations, who stand against real estate projects on the riverside area and favor the conservation of the local ecosystem.

Similarly to the wider trends seen in Latin America these past few years, TLA played a key role in organizing protests, with their famous walks along the riverbank in an area declared a natural reserve. However, despite its embrace of both environmental and social justice perspectives, this group had severe difficulties in interacting with the local settlers directly affected by the Techint project. Their praxis of "critical" environmentalism — which integrates environmental and social struggles — encountered additional difficulties and limitations. Anchored to a modern, naturalist framework, TLA's members could not avoid cultural misunderstandings when interacting with the inhabitants of La Ribera de Bernal and their thoughts and feelings about their own lives and surroundings.

As for the inhabitants of La Ribera, they did not feel spoken to by TLA's environmentalist claims. Similarly, the latter could not understand that La Ribera's settlers inhabit "nature" every day and do not conceptualize it from a distant, outside perspective. To better understand this point, we can bring up the findings of Gordillo (2018), who explains that people from low-income or popular sectors and who live near assets or beings with patrimonial value tend to be indifferent to the emphasis on preservation and reject the abstractions and sensibilities of the middle or upper classes.

Through an ethnographic approach, this article delved into the many meanings sparked by an environmental conflict. Being present at the site for long periods, interviewing, observing, and participating, made it possible to understand the particular ways in which actors rehearse strategies based on how they see and exist in the world — which also leads them to equivocations and misunderstandings. This approach revealed the cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements that occur when, in such environmental conflicts, there is no consensus regarding the actual problem, the solution, or even the heart of the issue. Under certain circumstances, social, cultural and even ontological differences all conspire against the consolidation of a self-conscious sociopolitical collective — demonstrating the need for a cosmopolitics that can transcend the naturalist premises of modernity and cultural misunderstandings.

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Endnotes

1. Sudestada ("Southeast blow") is the Argentine term for a weather phenomenon common to the Río de la Plata and surrounding regions, consisting of strong storms, brisk winds, and flooding rivers.

2. Native expression.

3. Typical South American hot drink.

4. According to environmentalist groups, these trucks are hired by local settlers to raise the ground level by burying demolition debris. They are allowed by local authorities who, in the long term, wish to "fill in" the entire wetland area for urban development.

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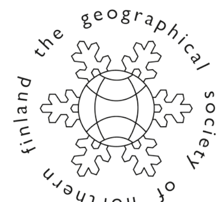

Review article

Grassroots innovation in alternatives to development: a review

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Abstract
Alternatives to development represent fairer forms of social, economic, and political organization, including environmental sustainability criteria as well. Many new outcomes are created during the design and everyday construction of alternatives to development (e.g., knowledge, practices, social relations, institutions). We may think, therefore, that innovation plays a key role in how such alternatives are imagined and materialized. However, the literature on alternatives to development does not appear to have focused much on innovation. In addition, there is academic literature on innovation that has coined and developed the concept of "grassroots innovation" to refer to innovation realized by grassroots groups. Yet, this literature does not seem to have focused on alternatives to development as innovation-rich spaces. Based on these observations, our objective in this paper is to analyze the potential role of grassroots innovation in alternatives to development, especially in contexts of the global South. To this end, we conducted a literature review along three axes: (1) grassroots innovation; (2) post-development and alternatives to development; and (3) Zapatism, an alternative to development in Mexico (in the last two axes we looked for direct or indirect references to grassroots innovation). Our results confirmed the previous observations. Nevertheless, we identified multiple and diverse innovative outcomes in the literature on post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatism, and altogether our findings suggest a very important role for grassroots innovation in these alternatives. Based on our review, we have provided a preliminary characterization of how grassroots innovations may look like and occur in alternatives to development (particularly in contexts of the global South). We emphasize the need to develop a theoretical-conceptual framework on grassroots innovation from the global South to improve its explanatory power given the diversity of existing alternatives to development. In addition, we call for more empirical studies that focus on identifying grassroots innovations and assessing their relevance to the design and everyday construction of alternatives to development.

Keywords*:* EZLN; Grassroots movements; Indigenous autonomies; Post-extractivism; Radical alternatives; Social innovation

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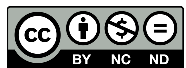

Introduction

Alternatives to development seek to rethink the productive logics and ways of life imposed by the neoliberal developmentalist paradigm to create new, more just, and sustainable societies. Theories about alternatives to development have been mostly built around notions such as post-development, post-growth, post-extractivism and degrowth (Acosta 2015; Demaria *et al.* 2019; Escobar 2017; Gudynas 2012). These theoretical strands recognize a great diversity of alternatives to development, such as Buen Vivir in South America, Zapatism in Mexico or Ubuntu in South Africa (Chuji *et al.* 2019; Leyva-Solano 2019; Ramose 2015). This diversity of alternatives arises from imagining, creating, reinventing or experiencing novelty in indigenous and traditional cultures, rooted in specific places and territories, often as a grassroots insurgency against the dominant capitalist economic model, which has increased poverty, social inequality and environmental degradation (Baronnet & Stahler-Sholk 2019; González-Casanova 2003; Gudynas 2011; Lang *et al.* 2013; Stahler-Sholk 2010).

We argue that grassroots movements, organizations and communities that have embarked on the design and everyday construction of alternatives to development are agents that create innovations to enact and materialize other possible worlds. For example, the post-development[1] literature, and specifically that which is concerned with specific alternatives to development, addresses *Buen Vivir* as a new Andean-based way of life, for which constitutional legal innovations have been created to recognize the rights of Nature (e.g., cases of Ecuador and Bolivia) and community reconfiguration based on new forms of political and territorial autonomy (Escobar 2010; Gudynas 2015; Stahler-Sholk 2016; Zibechi 2007). Also, Escobar (2017) recognizes the potential of autonomous design[2] for social innovation[3] and the generation of new collective practices based on traditional and local knowledge coupled with an intercultural dialogue with other communities and social actors (Escobar 2016, 2017). However, although there is an increasing academic literature that is concerned with the analysis of innovation created by grassroots organizations and communities (i.e., *grassroots innovation*), there are barely studies that have focused on the role of grassroots innovation in the design and construction of alternatives to development (see this omission in recent key publications on grassroots innovation, e.g., Hossain 2016; Smith *et al.* 2017).

Studies on grassroots innovation have been mostly realized in Europe and India. In the context of Europe, grassroots innovation has been defined as new networks of organizations and activists that generate bottom-up solutions and are focused on exploring alternatives for social change geared toward sustainability (Seyfang & Longhurst 2013; Seyfang & Smith 2007; Smith *et al.* 2017). In the context of India, grassroots innovation is understood as innovation created by individuals, families or collectives from marginal groups or poor communities, which has a large focus on technical innovation to create new products or technologies based on local traditional knowledge. Moreover, in India, grassroots innovation has been institutionalized so that it can be promoted actively by public institutions, NGOs and academics (Gupta *et al.* 2003; Pansera 2013; Kumar & Bhaduri 2014; Ustyuzhantseva 2015; Gupta 2016). Theoretical and empirical studies that have analyzed grassroots innovation in Europe and India have attempted to be comprehensive in explaining why and how innovations from the civil society have occurred in their own social-environmental contexts as well as to characterize what are such innovations, who are their agents, what are their values and motivations, among other similar questions.

We claim that neither of the dominant grassroots innovation approaches are well suited to analyze the innovations created and mobilized by grassroots movements, organizations and communities in most alternatives to development that have emerged across the globe, particularly in the global South[4]. On the one hand, the literature on grassroots innovation in Europe has a greater focus on solutions to achieve sustainable development or transitions to sustainability. Its main agents are middle and upper-middle-class urban citizens concerned by the main societal environmental problems (i.e., climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss or unsustainable food production and consumption patterns). These grassroots agents are driven by their ideology—usually anti-capitalist—rather than by the need to fulfill their basic human needs (Seyfang & Smith 2007). On the other hand, the Indian take on grassroots innovation focuses mostly on the invention of products and technologies produced by grassroots people, that are based on local traditional knowledge and thus are culturally appropriate, and that can improve local livelihoods and the well-being of poor people. In this case, grassroots innovation promoters from public institutions, NGOs, or academia seek to help poor people become innovators and profit from their inventions; therefore, this system of grassroots innovation is underpinned by a capitalist ideology even though it has social goals (Gupta 2016). In contrast to both approaches, the grassroots innovation that can be envisioned as necessary to create and put forward alternatives to development would mostly be driven by an anti-capitalist ideology within social movements, organizations and communities in rural areas of the global South. Hence, we argue that a new theoretical framework is needed to analyze grassroots innovation in the context of alternatives to development.

We posit that grassroots innovation can be inferred from the literature on post-development and alternatives to development even though the term may not be used and very few studies have focused on the analysis of anything clearly related to innovation (Gudynas 2011; Escobar 2014; Esteva 2014; Kothari *et al.* 2019). Then, to analyze grassroots innovation from these literatures, we must examine analyses concerning new collective ideas, processes and outcomes that result in new local knowledges, practices, beliefs, products, technologies, programs or institutions. Such ideas, processes, or outcomes may often not be fully new but based on new collective readings of traditions and external knowledge to enable grassroots groups to better adjust to the present socioeconomic, political and environmental contexts. This type of innovation is driven by sharing knowledge and fostering social learning across grassroots movements, organizations and communities. It is usually motivated by the defense of grassroots' territories and life as a condition to (re)produce their livelihoods and cultural identity. In addition to novelty or newness, some specific characteristics of grassroots innovations in the context of alternatives to development may refer to creating radical ruptures with the economic and cultural logics of capitalism, crafting deep social-ecological transformations to pursue just sustainabilities, enabling intercultural dialogues to create new knowledges, or building community autonomy through collective organization and management to be as independent of the state and the neoliberal market as possible. Grassroots innovations generated in the construction of alternatives to development may have specific values like diversity, austerity, defense of the commons[5], relational ontologies, social and ecological justice, absence of hierarchies, the dignity of individual and collective labor, care for life and sustainability, among others.

We suggest that grassroots innovation may be a keystone in the design and everyday construction of alternatives to development because these seek to rethink and reconfigure how grassroots (re)produce their material and symbolic living conditions

and how they relate to the dominant capitalist society. However, despite the alleged importance of grassroots innovation to drive and shape alternatives to development, the analysis of this type of innovation has remained mostly unexplored in the academic literature on post-development as well as in the literature on specific alternatives to development. Thus, our objective in this article is to produce a preliminary assessment of the role of grassroots innovation in the design and everyday construction of alternatives to development. To that end, we carry out a literature review that is global in scope. However, we examine in greater detail literature concerned with or produced in the global South since it is where some of the most vibrant alternatives to development have flourished. We complement our review with an in-depth analysis of grassroots innovation in Zapatism, which is a specific alternatives to development in Chiapas (Mexico) that many post-development scholars acknowledge as one of the most revolutionary, influential, and well-established alternative to development worldwide (Zibechi 2004; Esteva 2005; Andrews 2011). Our analysis of grassroots innovation in Zapatism consists of a review of academic literature and, more importantly, of gray literature and other materials produced by the Zapatistas, coupled with ethnographic fieldwork we have carried out in a Zapatista community to assess their innovations on the ground.

Our study is relevant at a theoretical-conceptual level because the concept of grassroots innovation has barely been explored in the case of alternatives to development. In addition, our work is timely because it may lead to a better understanding of the processes that drive the creation and cross-scalar diffusion of the surge of alternatives to development that have emerged around the world in the wake of the socially and environmentally negative effects of neoliberalism and globalization (Dunlap 2021; Tornel 2021).

Methods

We first reviewed the academic literature on grassroots innovation to identify the elements that characterize it. Next, we reviewed the literature on post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatism to identify and analyze direct and indirect references to grassroots innovation. Finally, we adopted a heuristic approach to complement our review based on our ethnographic fieldwork experience to assess grassroots innovation in rural communities, including a Zapatista community where we have been working over the period 2019–2021.

We systematized our review to be explicit, reproducible, and transparent by using the framework of search, evaluation, synthesis and analysis (Berger-Tal *et al.* 2018; Grant & Booth 2009). We also applied some elements of the systematic review to increase procedural objectivity, consistency, and reduce potential biases in the results and synthesis, and favor the possibility of repeating, evaluating, or updating the review (Haddaway *et al.* 2015). We searched academic literature in Scopus and Web of Science and gray literature in Google Scholar. We reviewed literature in English and Spanish for the period 1994–2021. We chose that period because the Zapatista rebellion began on January 1, 1994. In addition, the first texts radically questioning development began being published around the mid-90s (Sachs 1992; Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995), and they are the main sources of the subsequent literature on post-development and alternatives to development.

Our literature review consisted of three phases: (1) planning and application of the protocol; (2) synthesis of the analysis of the review processes; and (3) interpretation of the findings and conclusion. The three phases cover all the sections of the IMRAD structure of scientific articles (introduction, methods, results and discussion) and consist of eight consecutive steps applied during the review process (Wong *et al.* 2013) (Table 1).

Phase 1 refers to the planning and application of the review protocol, defined by the introduction and methods of the review, which are integrated by the processes of selection, search, extraction and evaluation of the literature. Selection and extraction are based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). We performed a content analysis in Atlas.ti by integrating and reading the references selected for their relevance and quality. This process involved the creation of codes (Hwang 2008; Lewis 2016). Such codes provided information on the main categories of analysis through theoretical elements and concrete experiences on grassroots innovation, which served to identify direct and indirect references to this type of innovation.

We used a set of six questions to assess the relevance (1) and quality (2–6) of the literature reviewed: (1) Does it meet the inclusion criteria of the literature review? (2) Is the general argument of the research and contributions clear? (3) Are the objectives or questions of the research clear? (4) Are the materials and methods for data collection and analysis adequately described? (5) Are the implications and limitations of the research presented? (6) Is there coherence between the results, discussion and

Table 1. Phases, structure and steps adopted during the systematized literature review process.

Phases	Structure and steps
1. Planning and implementation of the review protocol	Introduction
	1. General statement of the problem and objectives. 2. Contribution and academic relevance.
	Methods
	3. Process of literature search, selection, extraction and evaluation: 3.1 Design of inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature selection and extraction. 3.2 Literature searches and extraction in scientific platforms (search terms or strings and download in Excel). 3.3 Evaluation of the relevance of the literature in title and abstract. 3.4 Content review and analysis in Atlas.ti. 3.5 Evaluation of the relevance and quality of the literature in Atlas.ti.
2. Synthesis of the analysis of the review processes	Results
	4. Synthesis of the search, extraction, selection, evaluation and analysis process (document flow chart). 5. Narrative synthesis by categories of analysis of the review process by central themes in Atlas.ti.
3. Interpretation of findings and conclusion	Discussion
	6. Summary and interpretation of the main results. 7. Implications and limitations of the analysis of the literature reviewed.
	Conclusion
	8. Contributions, implications and future lines of research.

Table 2. Inclusion criteria used in the selection and extraction of literature.

Criteria	Reasons for inclusion
Search period 1994-2021	Since 1994, publications on post-development and alternatives to development have increased and publications on Zapatism began to appear.
Academic and gray literature in English and Spanish	The production of literature on grassroots innovation is predominantly done in English and in the global North. The literatures on post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatism are found in Spanish and English and are produced both in the global North and South. Grey literature and other sources of information on Zapatism produced by the own Zapatista movement is primarily available in Spanish and local indigenous languages.
Sectors (social, ecological, alternative economies, educational, political-organizational)	For their role in building innovative grassroots initiatives, processes and practices that solve social needs or problems and for their contributions to sustainability.
Authors	Researchers, academics, and activists who produce knowledge and publish on relevant issues to this study, both in the global North and South.
Scientific disciplines (social and ecological economics, geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology)	The role in the construction of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary knowledge of grassroots innovation and the fields of post-development, alternatives to development in general, and Zapatism in particular.
Theoretical and empirical studies	Theoretical or empirical case studies on the areas of interest for this study.

conclusion sections? We carried out the assessment through a weighted score of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest vs 5 being the highest relevance and quality).

As shown in Figure 1, we extracted 1519 articles from our literature search and selected 598 for their relevance. We then incorporated them into Atlas.ti for preliminary reading and evaluation of quality. As a result, we selected articles with a value of 3–5, which left a total of 397 documents for review, coding, analysis and synthesis of results.

The literature selected for its relevance and quality was integrated into large groups of documents, for example, theories on grassroots innovation, post-development, specific alternatives to development, Zapatism, among others. To design the codes, we considered relevant notions, arguments, definitions, elements, and empirical examples at the level of ideas, processes and outcomes that can be considered as grassroots innovations.

Finally, we complemented the findings of our review with a more heuristic approach based on our own experience working with communities in Mexico to assess their innovations, how and why they produce such innovations, how they conceptualize innovation, among similar issues (e.g., Bucio-Mendoza *et al.* 2018; Solis-Navarrete *et al.* 2021). This approach was particularly useful to better interpret our findings regarding grassroots innovation in Zapatism, as we have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a Zapatista community over the period 2019–2021 to assess their agency

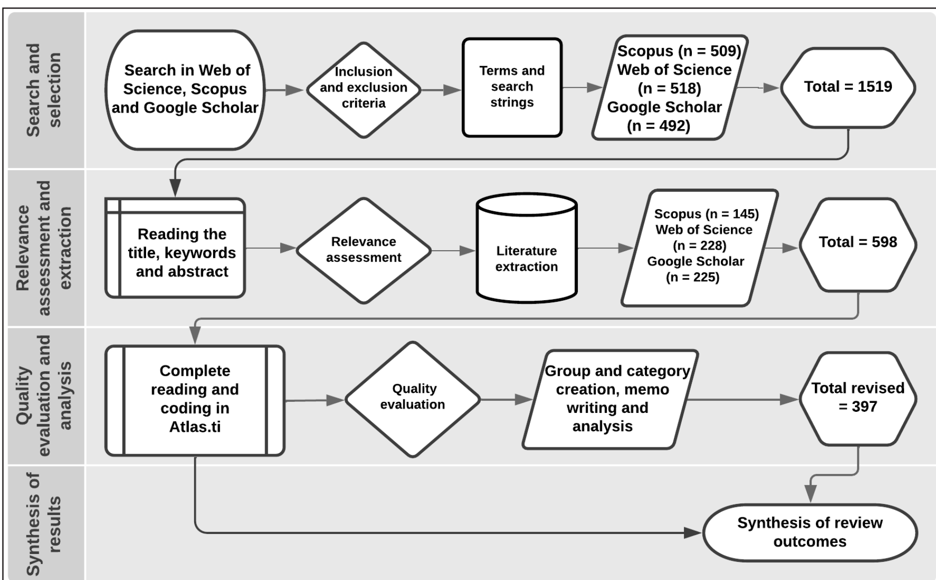

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the processes of literature review, analysis and synthesis.

and motives to produce innovation across several dimensions that are key to building their alternative to development (e.g., education, politics, territorial autonomy).

Theoretical strands, focal areas and examples of grassroots innovations

The study of grassroots innovation has come mainly from innovation economics and theories of the new economics of sustainable consumption (Smith 2007; Seyfang & Haxeltine 2012). However, there are also contributions from other disciplines and sub-disciplines such as sociology, geography, social economics and management (Fressoli *et al.* 2014; Kumar & Bhaduri 2014; Gupta 2016). We identified two main theoretical strands of grassroots innovation in the academic literature: (1) Grassroots innovation in Europe, which consists of networks of activists, organizations and movements that are focused on the creation of collective spaces for experimentation, for the co-production of knowledge and technology to solve social and environmental problems (e.g., effects of climate change, unsustainable use of fossil fuels in energy and food production, marginalization and poverty in rural communities and peri-urban neighborhoods) (Hargreaves *et al.* 2013; Seyfang & Smith 2007; Seyfang & Longhurst 2013); and (2) Grassroots innovation in India, which is oriented toward the identification and support of social and ecological ventures developed in and for marginalized rural communities; this innovation is based on traditional local knowledge, the transfer and appropriation of scientific knowledge, and the registration of patents to commercialize the technologies invented in these communities (Gupta *et al.* 2003; Gupta 2012; Kumar & Bhaduri 2014). Both strands have spread to other geographical areas like Latin America (e.g., Smith *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2017) and Africa (e.g., Gupta *et al.* 2019).

The main focal areas identified in both theoretical strands and the case studies that have analyzed grassroots innovation are associated with (a) new grassroots organizations, (b) specific sociocultural and geographical contexts, (c) alternative motivations and values, (d) the co-production of knowledge, social learning and the use of alternative technologies, and (e) social networks, linkages and spatial scaling. Each focal area entails designing and deploying new, innovative processes from grassroots organizations and communities. The transformational changes generated are oriented toward more just and ecologically sustainable societies. We describe each focal area below and present a synthesis of our results for this section in Table 3, including examples.

1 **New grassroots organizations**. They emerge around the motivations, values and common objectives of collectives within the civil society, e.g., social movements, communities and cooperatives in rural or urban areas. They act as laboratories and spaces where new, alternative knowledge, practices and values are produced and experimented collectively (Martin & Upham 2016; Dias & Partidário 2019). The *Foundation For Intentional Community* is a representative example of rural or urban intentional communities with different architectures, ownership schemes and governance models; some experiences organized around the commons are *Alpha Farm* in Oregon, United States or *Atlantis Ecological Community* in Huila, Colombia. Another novel type of organization is the *Student Housing & Student Co-ops,* e.g., *EcoReality Co-op* in British Columbia, Canada or *Conscious Culture Cooperative* in Washington, United States.

2 **Specific sociocultural and geographical contexts**. These contexts provide insights into the prevailing conditions for innovation, which motivates the creation of alternative directions and effective novel solutions to the problems that grassroots movements and communities want to solve. Depending on the context, knowledge and ingenuity can be used in the generation of inclusive technologies and their transferability to grassroots communities (Smith *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2017). For example, *The Transition Towns Movement* is a grassroots response to the great challenges facing the world by creating sustainable urban communities and neighborhoods in the United Kingdom and other countries in Europe, North America, Australia, and Brazil.

3 **Alternative motivations and values**. They arise from social needs, environmental challenges and conflicts, but also from ideologies or beliefs that inspire the co-creation of novel practices toward more just and sustainable life transitions that break with the dominant values in western capitalist societies (Seyfang & Smith 2007; Smith *et al.* 2017). For example, the *People's Science Movements* in India were created in the 1960s and motivated by discussions between scientists, technology developers and civil society organizations that focused on updating traditional techniques by applying science alternative values to the dominant ones (Martin & Upham 2016). Another example is the *Global Ecovillage Network*, which was created in Denmark but then expanded to five regions across the globe. At present, this network is made up of ecovillages that can be seen as "laboratories" that test new ideas, practices and technologies, as well as best practices, learned in other ecovillages within the network (e.g., *Zambia Greening Schools*, *Youth Social Innovation for Resilient Communities*). Its main motivations and values are the promotion of education, human rights, conflict

resolution and reconciliation through the empowerment of local communities, and the protection of the global environment and citizen and community participation in local decision-making.

4 **Co-production of knowledge, social learning and alternative technologies**. The co-production of new knowledge and learning generates open information and promotes appropriate technologies to design new sustainable systems (Hargreaves *et al.* 2013; Kumar & Bhaduri 2014). For this reason, it is essential to learn from communities that deal with social-environmental problems such as droughts, floods or food production by inventing new techniques or by restoring or updating old but effective solutions (Gupta *et al.* 2003; Gupta 2006; Gupta *et al.* 2019). One example from *The Honey Bee Network* is the creation of life shelters for the displaced population of northern Iraq, which is a durable, environmentally friendly, and affordable modular solution; another innovative initiative in the COVID-19 context is teaching through conference calls to students who do not have smartphones at home in Satara, India. The steps involved are to listen, type, speak and record.

5 **Social networks, linkages and spatial scaling**. They involve the co-creation of new networks that help mobilize resources, promote diffusion through spatial scaling, and expand to higher scales of new practices, processes or products, which involves changes in existing institutions (Smith & Raven 2012; Hermans *et al.* 2016). Success can be measured by considering social ties within communities, contribution to environmental improvement, social connectivity, and innovation trajectories (Feola & Nunes 2014). For example, in *The Honey Bee Network,* the main activities consist in exploring and documenting innovative practices through the *Shodh Yatra* (journey of exploration) and sharing knowledge or inventions found in grassroots communities with a wider audience through the institutionalization of grassroots innovation (Ustyuzhantseva 2015; Gupta 2016; Gupta *et al.* 2019).

Table 3. Theoretical strands, focal areas, and examples of grassroots innovation.

Theoretical strands	Important authors	New grassroots organizations (examples)	Specific sociocultural and geographical contexts	Alternative motivations and values	Coproduction of knowledge, social learning and technologies	Networks, linkages and spatial scaling
Grassroots innovation/grassroots innovation movements (originally developed in Europe but then it has been applied to other geographical contexts in the global North and South). It refers to networks of activists and grassroots organizations that generate novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; also to the results of collective action for the creation of experimentation spaces focused on knowledge and technology (co) production to explore alternative scenarios for social change (e.g., Seyfang & Smith 2007; Smith *et al.* 2018).	Boyer, Dias, Ely, Feola, Fressoli, Hargreaves, Haxeltine, Hermans, Longhurst, Nunes, Pansera, Partidário, Raven, Seyfang, Smith.	Global Ecovillage Network (1991, Denmark to present) https://ecovillage.org/	- Intentional communities, traditional or urban, designed through participatory processes and sustainability. - Ecovillage network regions: Latin America (CASA), North America (GENNA), Africa (GEN Africa), Europe (GEN Europe), and Oceania & Asia (GENOA).	- Innovative and sustainable solutions to the global problems of poverty, environmental destruction and climate change. - Holistic approach integrated by social, economic, cultural and ecological areas.	- Ecovillage projects as educational centers: e.g., Center for Alternative Technology (Wales). - Renewable energy and appropriate technology: e.g., portable electricity microgrid and creation of cleaner coal (Tanzania). - Natural construction and climate-friendly architecture: e.g., Sandele Eco-Retreat and Learning Center in The Gambia and EarthWorks Construction.	- Five regional networks and the youth branch, NextGEN, which spans the globe. - The network consists of some 10,000 communities and projects.
		People's Science Movements (India, 1960s to present)	- The development of the economy centered on heavy industries and machine tools was in crisis in the early 1960s. - All India People's Science Network: Kerala, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Puducherry, Maharashtra, West Bengal, among others.	- Rural energy challenges, experiments in technological alternatives, development of didactic material for science, and innovations in health systems. - Values: knowledge transfer, stimulating creativity, science and technology as a tool for political struggle.	- Science communication and education: science publications, science outreach conferences, street plays, and innovative science teaching methods. - Alternative technology and development: local loop wireless for telecommunications, biomass as a replacement for cement, windmills and biomass-based energy systems.	- Increased interaction between scientists, academics, engineers, technicians, artisans, farmers and the use of technologies for grassroots innovation experiments. - Grassroots communities and regions that integrate the popular science movement.

Grassroots innovation (originally developed in India and then spread to other places in the global South, particularly in Africa and Asia). It refers to grassroots communities and collaborative networks that aim to activate innovations that stimulate the creation of new products and technologies in marginalized indigenous or tribal communities and the informal sector (e.g., Gupta 2006, 2012).	Bhaduri, Gupta, Kumar, Martin, Upham.	The Honey Bee Network (India, 1988-89 to present) http://www.honeybee.org/	- Anil Gupta is the founder of the network and is interested in identifying, documenting and protecting the knowledge of grassroots innovators. - Marginalized or vulnerable indigenous and tribal communities in India, Asia, and Africa.	- Response to the growing interest in disseminating inclusive and environmentally friendly innovations. - Principles: sustainable, fair and equitable knowledge system, protection of intellectual property rights.	- National/Regional/Honey Bee Club chapters have been started in institutions and new clubs can be created. - A local village Panchayat may come out with a new way of resolving conflicts. - Tawa (mud) machine, Mitticol cooler, Clay non-stick tawa in Gujarat, India.	Locally and between regions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Grassroots innovation in post-development and alternatives to development

The post-development current of thought emerged in Latin America and is based on the critical deconstruction of development, a decentering of capitalism and liberalism in the definition of society, and the revaluation of autochthonous cultures and their relational ontologies to move toward more just and ecologically sustainable ways of life (see Escobar 2005, 2012). In Europe, *degrowth* is one of the theoretical and practical positions that emerged in the sphere of post-development, and which today is analyzed in interdisciplinary fields such as ecological economics and political ecology. This alternative to development is considered not only a slogan, but also a social movement composed of activists, ordinary citizens and academics, who propose a critique of economic growth and want to reduce the acceleration of social and technological change to minimize the damage to other human and non-human beings (D´Alisa *et al.* 2015; Kallis *et al.* 2020).

We identified in the literature on alternatives to development some concrete examples in the Latin American region, e.g., the *urban movement of the piqueteros* in Argentina, which emerged to recover state-owned factories that had been shut and reopen them under collective management, or the *Landless Movement in Brazil* and the creation of organizational methods and political formation (Zibechi 2007; Hopkins & Pineda 2021). In the specific case of Mexico, we found some local/regional alternatives to development like the *Council of Agrarian Authorities* against mining exploitation in the Montaña de Guerrero region, the community of *Cherán* in Michoacán and its struggle to protect their forests and territory by constructing a new political autonomy, or the *Movement for the defense of life and territory* in the Northern Zone of Chiapas (Gasparello 2021). Likewise, *Zapatism* is an exemplary alternative to development because of its way of doing politics—very different from the conventional politics of the nation-state—and because of its control of the territory and its expansion through self-government and autonomy in various spheres of everyday life (Zibechi 2004; Aguirre-Rojas 2007; Baronnet 2019).

Indirect references that are closer to grassroots innovation in the literatures of post-development and alternatives to development can be found in Escobar (2016, 2017), who addresses new paths of design for societal transitions like autonomous design or participatory co-design for social innovation. In addition, we find more indirect references to grassroots innovation and examples in literature that analyzes initiatives such as time banks, local currencies, solidarity networks, fair trade and agroecological food networks, new permaculture designs, new products and services (e.g., Wikipedia, ecotechnology), Mother Earth rights in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian political constitutions, intercultural indigenous education initiatives or new forms of organizing and claiming territorial autonomy, among many others (Svampa 2012, 2015; D´Alisa *et al.* 2015; Kothari *et al.* 2019) (Table 4).

Grassroots Innovations in Zapatism

Since the armed uprising in 1994 of the Mayan indigenous people of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation in Chiapas, Mexico, its members have designed and materialized in everyday practices their demands[6] that were neither heard nor respected

by the Mexican State. For these reasons, the construction of autonomy underpins all fields of Zapatista action; for example, education, learning and exchanges of traditional and local knowledge, collective work, organic agricultural production and national and international fair trade (Zibechi 2004; Aguirre-Rojas 2007; Baronnet *et al.* 2011). To analyze the innovations that are (co)produced in Zapatism, it is important to do so from a decolonial point of view[7], trying to deconstruct Western thought and the dominant hegemonic discourse (Mora 2014). The realms where we found more grassroots innovations in Zapatism—from indirect references made by the authors in their empirical studies—were political organization and territorial autonomy, justice, and autonomous education (Zibechi 2007; González-Casanova 2009; Pinheiro-Barbosa 2013; Lang 2015; Baronnet 2019); and, to a lesser extent, health, gender, free media and economic resistance (EZLN 2013; Baschet 2018).

What can be considered as grassroots innovations within the Zapatista communities are related to radical transformations (e.g., design of an educational system that is an alternative to the education provided by the Mexican State), forms of territorial political organization (e.g., self-organization and self-management through *Good Government Councils*, *Caracoles* and Municipal Committees)[8], and the development of the Zapatista political and social movements design of autonomous justice (e.g., laws, regulations, redressing damage with community work), defense and management of the territory (e.g., collective surveillance and monitoring of territories, sustainable management of natural resources) (Esteva 2002; Baronnet *et al.* 2011; Basquet 2017). Empirical studies of Zapatism also indirectly refer to some grassroots innovations, for example, new territorial delimitations (*Caracoles*, municipalities and base communities of support), new forms of struggle (cracks in capitalism and the word as a weapon), new relationships between women and men (sharing of chores), new networks of international solidarity and resistance (e.g., 1st Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity against Neoliberalism, EZLN (1996), Declaration of meetings and caravans of the Zapatistas in five continents (2021), Zapatista International Meetings of Women who Fight (2018, 2020)), among others (Stahler-Sholk 2010, 2016; Pinheiro-Barbosa 2013, 2015; Baronnet 2015, 2019; Pleyers 2019) (Table 5).

Table 4. Examples of grassroots organizations and some of their innovations in the literature of post-development and alternatives to development.

Theories and alternatives to development	Key authors and some references	Examples of grassroots movements or organizations	Examples of grassroots innovations	Main countries or regions of examples
Post-development (North), e.g., Degrowth Movement	D'Alisa *et al.* 2015; Demaria, Kallis and Bakker 2019; Kothari *et al.* 2019.	- Consumer and production cooperatives, e.g., Cooperation Jackson (Mississippi). - Eco-communities e.g., Phoenix Commons, self-managed housing community (Oakland, California). - Open source agricultural machine building for small-scale farming e.g., L'Atelier Paysan (France) and Farm Hack (USA and UK).	- Community Production Initiative, an innovative center for sustainable manufacturing and fabrication (Cooperation Jackson). - Cohousing Community and its senior community practices and cross-cultural blending experiments (Phoenix Commons). - Cocreation of farmer-to-farmer innovations, open source, farmer autonomy, creative commons, technological sovereignty (Farm Hack).	Spain, United Kingdom, Portugal, India, Germany, Holland, USA.
Post-development, post-extractivism, post-growth (Latin America), e.g., alternatives to development, to capitalism, to modernity, to extractivism.	Acosta and Brand 2017; Escobar 2017; Gudynas 2011; Lang *et al.* 2013; Pinheiro Barbosa 2016; Zibechi 2007.	- Buen vivir (Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile). - The Landless Movement (MST), e.g., itinerant school, pedagogy of work (Brazil). - Zapatism, e.g., Autonomous education, agroecological production cooperatives, self-government, territorial autonomy (Chiapas, Mexico). - Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra), e.g., open weekly seminar "Pathways to autonomy, Alternatives to education and health, From informality to communality" (Oaxaca, Mexico).	- Influences for ecological justice transitions, e.g., rights of Nature, drafting of the new Constitution of Bolivia and Ecuador (Buen vivir). - Political formation, social organization, and construction of an own educational system (MST). - Food sovereignty, new pedagogy of Caracoles, community assembly as a laboratory, construction of territorial autonomy (Zapatism). - Use of technological innovations and recovery of tools (dry toilets, homemade greenhouses, solar energy devices, bike-machines, eco-wood) (Unitierra).	Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil.
North-South Dialogue, transnational networks of alternatives to development (collaborative identification of alternatives to development at global and regional levels between researchers and activists from the North and South)	D´Alisa *et al.* 2015; Kothari *et al.* 2019; Pansera 2013.	Buen vivir, economy of permanence, feminist economies, Ubuntu, indigenous autonomy, agro-ecology, communality, eco-anarchism, permaculture.	- New regional and global collaborative networks. - Transitions to more sustainable livelihoods.	Morocco, Australia, India, South Africa, Rwanda, Kurdistan, Mexico, South America.

Table 5. Grassroots innovations identified both in the literature about Zapatism and in their own Zapatista sources.

Examples of realms of action	Key authors and some references	Grassroots innovations identified		
		Practices	**Processes**	**Outcomes**
Territorial organization and political autonomy	Aguirre-Rojas 2007; Baronnet *et al.* 2011; EZLN 2013; González Casanova 2009; Stahler-Sholk 2010, 2016.	- New practices of self-sufficiency and reproduction of community life, e.g., subsistence agriculture, organic coffee fair trade networks, artisan and production cooperatives, agroecology workshops. - New practices of empowerment and participation of women in the movement's decision-making, e.g., truck drivers, militias, education and health coordinators.	- Constitution of new territorial delimitations with Caracoles and Good Governance Councils. - Definition of new governance spaces, e.g., assemblies and participatory committees, deprofessionalization of the political sphere. - Implementation of another *Mandar Obedeciendo* policy or new alternative policy to the State.	- Self-government through five *Caracoles*, 2003 and territorial expansion with eleven current *Caracoles* and 43 autonomous municipalities, 2019. - Organic coffee, handicrafts and collective stores, e.g., Mut-vitz, Yachil Xojobal Chu'lchan, Yochin Tayel Kinal and Ssit Lequil Lum cooperatives. - More horizontal cross-cultural community relations.
Autonomous justice and resistance	Baschet 2017, 2018; Lang 2015; Leyva-Solano 2019; Zibechi 2004, 2007.	- New practices of autonomous administration of justice according to the ethnic context, e.g., application of the *Caracol La Garrucha* Regulations in cases of drunkenness, robbery, attempted rape. - New functions and positions of community and direct democracy, e.g., representatives of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee-General Command of the EZLN, Good Government Councils, Municipal Autonomous Council, Community Support Bases.	- Codesign and implementation of strategies based on repairing harm and restoring social equilibrium. - Cocreation and application of normative basis. - The community assembly as an experimental collective space for problem solving.	- Revolutionary Agrarian Law. - Zapatista Revolutionary Women's Law, 1993. - Revolutionary Laws, 1994. - Publication of the text "Read a Video", 2004. - Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, 2005. - Tree Care Law. - Law prohibiting the cultivation, trafficking and consumption of drugs.
Autonomous Zapatista education	Baronnet 2015, 2019; Baronnet and Stahler-Sholk 2019; Esteva 2014; Pinheiro Barbosa 2015, 2016.	- New critical and decolonial pedagogical practices, e.g., regarding the transmission of knowledge and new indigenous Mayan teaching methods. - New alliances and expanded organizational networks, e.g., A Declaration for Life, 2021, *Semillita del Sol* educational project as an interface of Zapatista solidarity networks.	- New decolonial intercultural autonomous codesign of autonomous education, e.g., new teaching methods, pedagogies geared towards everyday construction of resistance and autonomy. - Definition of decentralized and participative autonomous education, e.g., indigenous autonomy, horizontal relations, democratization of school management, place-based, culturally and politically contextualized education.	- Escuelita's first grade textbooks "Freedom according to the Zapatistas". - Free media, e.g., short films, documentaries, *Radio Insurgente*, the voice of the voiceless. - Specific purposes of the Zapatista school (https://www.serazln-altos.org/) - Construction of school materials e.g., local history and mathematics, reading and writing manuals in eleven indigenous Mayan languages, educational manual What Zapata fought for and Workbook Lum (*Por lo que peleó Zapata* and *Cuaderno de trabajo Lum*).

Discussion

Regarding the grassroots innovations that are analyzed by researchers and scholars in Europe (Seyfang & Haxeltine 2012; Smith *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2017), we know that they have spread to the rest of the continents through local, regional and global networks (e.g., the *Global Ecovillage Network*), and are oriented toward cultural diversity, ecological sustainability and mutual support. These innovations are sometimes motivated by a better satisfaction of fundamental needs—not provided by the state or the market—but mostly by the ideology of individual grassroots movements and communities in Europe in their pursuit of finding ways to achieve transformative change and transition to more just and sustainable societies (Seyfang & Smith 2007; Seyfang & Longhurst 2013). In addition, the production, dissemination and use of technologies played a key role in the design and implementation of innovative initiatives and the creation of experimental spaces for the co-production of local and scientific knowledge (Smith 2007; Smith & Raven 2012; Hargreaves *et al.* 2013).

As for the grassroots innovations that have been identified and documented in India by *The Honey Bee Network*, they have spread to poor communities in African, Asian and Latin American countries and arise from social, productive or ecological needs or problems (e.g., obsolete tools and machinery in agricultural production, access to safe drinking water, hygiene and women's health). In these innovations, local and traditional knowledge is fundamental, as it is combined with technological and social innovation, allowing them to generate new products that are cheaper and ecologically sustainable for the local and regional market in India (e.g., mud fridge, bicycle and motorcycle adaptations, pedal-powered washing machine) (Gupta *et al.* 2003; Kumar & Bhaduri 2014; Gupta *et al.* 2019). The practice of *Shodh Yatra* promoted by Professor Anil Gupta is very innovative and could be replicable in terms of on-foot exploration to identify and recognize grassroots innovators in communities across marginalized areas of the global South (Gupta 2016; Gupta *et al.* 2019).

Regarding the post-development literature, there are theoretical variants more oriented to the sociocultural context and socio-environmental or territorial conflicts, but with the same logic, criticizing and overcoming neoliberal capitalist developmentalism (e.g., post-growth in India and South America, post-extractivism in South America or post-development in an alliance between the North and the global South) (Gudynas 2011; Kothari *et al.* 2019). Regarding references that allude to grassroots innovation in the literature of alternatives to development, we find the case of degrowth (mainly in Europe, USA and Canada) through experiences such as *Cooperation Jackson*, *Phoenix Commons*, *L'Atelier*, *Farm Hack*, which are articulated to cultural diversity and the democratization of knowledge, creativity of the commons and the use of social technologies (Kothari *et al.* 2019; Kallis *et al.* 2020). In the case of Latin America, a greater focus is on transitions to sustainability (Escobar 2012; Gudynas 2015) or radical transformations toward new, more sustainable ways of life through autonomous design based on indigenous relational ontologies in contexts of environmental and territorial struggle against neoliberal developmentalism (Esteva 2002; Escobar 2016, 2017) (e.g., practices of ecological justice and the rights of Nature, organizational reconfigurations and political autonomy, new spaces for dialogue of knowledges and collective learning) (González-Casanova 2009; Gudynas 2011, 2015; Esteva 2014).

A key point that emerges from our review is whether the concept of grassroots innovation should be reconceptualized and analyzed from non-Western rationalities, at least in the case of alternatives to development in the global South. Perhaps this

would help recognize and learn what is new or novel in publications written by scholars of alternatives to development like Zapatism (e.g., Aguirre-Rojas 2007; Pinheiro-Barbosa 2013; Baronnet 2015; Baschet 2017), but are not coined as "grassroots innovation". It would also avoid confusing some processes and practices of grassroots movements, organizations and communities as innovations (e.g., ancestral knowledge and pedagogies, indigenous' communal institutions, traditional indigenous technologies). Therefore, the definition of grassroots innovation we provide in the introduction tries to be comprehensive based on the main elements and values that alternatives to development have in common, and also integrate the characteristics of what is innovative when identifying and analyzing new ideas, initiatives, processes or practices created by grassroots movements and communities in the global South. As a follow-up, it is necessary to begin analyzing the transformative changes performed by grassroots movements in Latin America (e.g., Zapatism in Mexico or the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil) under the theoretical lens of grassroots innovation using our definition or another one as it fits. We can assume that such innovations have emerged driven by social actors involved in historical struggles and resistance through forms of self-government and who are at present engaged in the everyday construction of autonomy in the face of neocolonialism and extractivism. In general, the radical transformations that social agents are imagining and struggling to push ahead are aimed at the defense of life and their territories.

Studies of Zapatism show indirect references where innovation is addressed as new instances of regional coordination (*Caracoles*), new political subjects, or as innovative political and pedagogical practices (González-Casanova 2009; Baronnet 2019; Baronnet & Stahler-Sholk 2019). However, when contrasting the innovations produced by the Zapatistas with grassroots innovations identified in India, they do not refer to artifact inventions aimed at the local and regional market, but rather at new knowledges, practices, institutions and programs that can strengthen the Zapatista struggle and resistance to the neoliberal state, new interethnic community relations, and novel organizational processes that contribute to the construction of collective autonomy, for instance. In that sense, grassroots innovations in Zapatism have more similarities with the goals of grassroots innovation movements from the North (Smith *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2017) because they are more oriented to an ideology and commitment to social and environmental transformations that are manifested in everyday life, such as the sense of community or the construction of territorial autonomy. Furthermore, the distribution of power relations in the Zapatista movement is quite horizontal, with particular attention to gender equity as shown in various facets of their daily life and the organization of international women meetings. Another important element is the creation of a global alter-globalist network (Esteva 2002; Zibechi 2004; Pleyers 2019).

Conclusion

In this study we have identified and synthesized existing knowledge of the main two theoretical strands on grassroots innovation in both the global North and South, illustrating each of them with several examples. We have also identified and analyzed direct and indirect references to grassroots innovation in the literature on post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatism. Finally, we have provided a

brief discussion on the review's main findings, particularly in terms of their conceptual and theoretical implications.

Our analysis has unraveled part of the conceptual confusion that exists around the concept of grassroots innovation, which is used in very different ways according to several factors such as the geographical and sociocultural contexts where such innovation unfolds, the social agents that carry it out, their values and motivations, or the own cultural and academic background of the researchers who theorize about grassroots innovation. Moreover, our study has shown that neither of the two main theoretical strands on grassroots innovation is well suited to analyze how this type of innovation is realized in the specific context of alternatives to development. In addition, through a thorough review we have verified that there are barely direct or indirect references to innovation in the literature of post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatism, and that the concept of grassroots innovation has hardly been used to analyze innovation. However, our findings suggest that grassroots innovation has a potentially very important role in designing and constructing alternatives to development. We have thus provided a preliminary characterization of how grassroots innovations may look like and occur in the design and everyday construction of alternatives to development (particularly in contexts of the global South—e.g., Zapatism—, which are possibly the most fertile grounds for putting them into practice). With this characterization, we have sought to generate a conceptual and theoretical contribution that may allow for the operationalization of the analysis of grassroots innovations in alternatives to development.

Future research is needed to improve the conceptualization of grassroots innovation around different alternatives to development, particularly in contexts of the global South where it is most numerous and diverse. Developing an adequate theoretical-conceptual framework of grassroots innovation tailored to the specific case of alternatives to development is a necessary goal to better understand the potential role of innovation in the design and construction of such alternatives. To that end, it is essential to conduct empirical studies that document and analyze grassroots innovations carried out by grassroots movements, organizations and communities in both rural and urban areas. In addition, it is essential to identify the processes and outcomes of grassroots innovation and understand how innovation is planned and realized by different grassroots groups in different case studies. We acknowledge that this sort of analysis will require a different research design that is not based on a literature review but on ethnography, grounded theory or participatory action research, for instance. Hence, we suggest that is the way forward to produce empirical evidence from case studies that can contribute toward developing a comprehensive theoretical-conceptual framework of grassroots innovation in alternatives to development.

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Endnotes

1. Post-development proposes that development ceases to be a central organizing principle of social life and means a decentralization of capitalism in the definition of the economy and State forms of power (see Escobar 2005, 2012).
2. In the context of Latin America, autonomous design refers to design that is based on the autonomy of indigenous, mestizo and Afro-descendant communities. It is based on the following criteria: 1) Every community practices the design of itself, 2) Throughout the design process, people are professionals of their own knowledge, 3) What the community designs is a system of learning about itself, 4) Every design process implies an approach to problems and possibilities that allow agreeing and deciding alternative actions, 5) The concrete result is a series of tasks, organizational practices and criteria to evaluate its performance (Escobar 2017: 184–185).
3. Escobar (2017) refers to Manzini's (2015: 62) definition of social innovation: *Design for social innovation is everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability*. In this definition, expert design depends on cultural facilitators, strategists, activists or promoters, who have a highly technical training to solve complex problems.
4. The term "global South" is not geographical. It rather refers to a "positionality in power relations and domination of the West over the non-Western world" (Grosfoguel 2016: 128). The term arises from post-colonial theory.
5. The term "commons" refers to shared natural resources that are collectively managed by communities of users through local norms, rules and institutions that promote cooperation and collective action to access and benefit from such resources in an equitable and sustainable way (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López 2021).
6. They fight for new politics, policies and laws that take into account the demands of the Mexican indigenous people: housing, land, work, food, health, education, information, culture, independence, democracy, justice, freedom and peace (EZLN 2005: 18).
7. Decoloniality has been an important political component of local struggles and social movements in Latin America, whose actions are often driven to resist and reject the power relations and social and institutional patterns established by neocolonialism (Mignolo & Walsh 2018: 16).
8. The *Caracoles* combine and integrate in practice the construction of power by networks of autonomous peoples and the integration of organs of power as self-governments that struggle for an alternative within the system (González-Casanova 2009). The *Good Governance Councils* function as true networks of power from below and articulate the municipal autonomous councils, which in turn group community authorities (Romero 2019).

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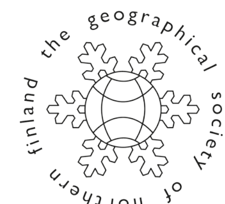

Discussions and interventions

On design, development and the axes of pluriversal politics: An interview with Arturo Escobar

Arturo Escobar[a], Carlos Tornel[b] & Aapo Lunden[c]

Presentation and editorial notes

This interview deals with Arturo Escobar's recent work on Pluriversal Politics and the Pluriversal transitions. The discussion is divided into three main themes: the first section addresses Escobar's reflections on the contemporary civilizational crisis and the politics of the pluriverse; the second section engages with the contents of the Theme Issue, particularly those aspects of the transition that include radical relationality, the transition strategies, ontological and pluriversal struggles, and the notion of terricide. The final section reflects on Escobar's work on development and its implications for the future. The conversation has been edited to fit the guidelines for publication of this journal and supported with the most recent work, both published and unpublished by Arturo Escobar.

We added citations provided by Arturo, or in some other cases that refer to names, works and theories or concepts that emerged during our talk, hoping that this might make it easier for the reader. These additions to the conversation are indicated through footnotes and have also been revised by Arturo, who kindly offered unpublished work to be included. We hope that this interview contributes to the work of those engaging with the politics of the pluriverse, offering some clarity into a few concepts that were still elusive to us as we engage with the Theme Issue, and ultimately, contributes to the struggle for a world where many worlds fit. Our deepest thanks go to Arturo for being so kind with his time and patient with us throughout a long back and forth to design these questions.

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Interview

CT: Dear Arturo, thank you for taking the time for this interview. Getting right to it, one of the concerns that animated our call to engage with the pluriverse was to try to look beyond the imposition of universal and monolithic categories to understand our current epoch/era. Following Antonio Gramsci's famous dictum that 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born', and that we are currently 'experiencing the morbid symptoms of the interregnum', this special issue follows this line of thinking by arguing that we are undergoing a series of multiple crises which reveals the morbid symptoms in ecological, political, economic and social aspects at multiple scales. We see the pluriverse and its promise for alternative ways of thinking and living as a way out of these symptoms imposed by universal categories by paying closer attention to different scales and actors, as well as to their ways of resisting, contesting and/or struggling with patriarchy, capitalism and/or colonialism. You have recently argued (Escobar 2020) that this crisis is, first and foremost, a crisis of meaning. Could you speak some more about what you mean by that and what are some of the challenges that emerge from the ongoing civilizational crisis, and the possibilities offered by the pluriverse from this perspective?

I was thinking about this formulation by Gramsci, and it's really interesting. I've always liked it, but I had forgotten it. I've used a similar formulation by Thomas Berry, a North American ecologist and theologian. His phrase is equally intriguing and an exciting one. To start, I'm going to read a quote from him:

> *It's all a question of the story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not yet learned the new story. …. [The old story has become] a dysfunctional cosmology. … it is no longer the story of the Earth. Nor is it the integral story of the human community. It is a sectarian story. (Berry 1988: 123–126)*

For Berry, the prevailing story is the one of us, moderns, inherited from the long history of the West, whether in its Christian or its secular versions. So, the idea is that we are in between stories and that we are constantly searching for new stories that are always emerging. I'm going to talk about one, especially from Latin America, that is emerging and is crystallizing into a formulation of concepts and strategies. I find this story to be a very compelling one.

Let me start by answering a fundamental question: What is the crisis? The crisis is the crisis of the old story. It's a civilizational crisis as indigenous peoples from Latin America have been saying for decades now: that the current crisis is a crisis of a particular *mode of existence*, that is, the Western-modern/colonial capitalist-heteropatriarchal system, or in whatever way we want to call it. When speaking or writing about the crisis, I usually start

with three concepts (let me emphasize that everything I'll say and what I've been writing are not just my ideas. This is very much the result of collective thinking, a process of thinking with some friends, but also coming from a much larger onto-epistemic field arising from Latin America, specifically from social movements, collectives, political struggles and so forth):

The first concept is that of a *civilizational crisis*. The current planetary crisis is a crisis of the dominant *modelo civilizatorio*, or civilizational model, that of Western capitalist modernity. Ever since, and stemming from various sources, the 'crisis of civilization' has become a commonly invoked notion of referring to the multifaceted crisis of climate, energy, poverty, inequality, food, and meaning, a corollary followed: if the crisis has a civilizational dimension, we are in dire need of civilizational transitions. In its contemporary form, the current crisis was anticipated by anti-colonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, whose dictums, '[a] civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. [...] A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization (Césaire 1972: 9)' are today echoed in many quarters of the world. Similarly, the revered Buddhist teacher Thích Nhãt Hanh calls on us to actively contemplate the end of the civilization that is causing global warming and pervasive consumerism: 'Breathing in, I know this civilization is going to die. Breathing out, this civilization cannot escape dying' (Nhãt Hanh 2008: 55). One of the best ways to present this argument is through the concept of *Terricide* [Terricidio]. A concept to which I will come back later.

The second is the concept of *civilizational transitions* or *transitions to the Pluriverse*. And a third concept is that of *radical interdependence* or *radical relationality* as the foundation for the transition and as a new way of understanding life. But, again, these notions are not really new. However, these ideas are re-emerging in the struggles and the philosophies of indigenous communities and territorialized-based people because, as they have always asserted, life is always about interdependence and relationality.

Most modern inhabitants of this world have forgotten that life is about relationality and interdependence and that it's not really based on the separations and the dualisms of modernity. As a result, one can say that a *One-World World* (a world made of a single globalized world) vision of reality has increasingly occupied other visions, disabling their world-making practices and potential to a significant degree. This is what I refer to as ontological occupations. These ontological occupations take place when a historically specific way of worlding occupies the imaginative space of other peoples and places, rendering their world-making ability ineffectual. However, this process is never complete, not even at the heart of the European societies from where such ontology stemmed from, as non-dominant *Europes* and *alternative Wests* continue to be harbored and cultivated in their midst. Meanwhile, in the Global South, visions of transition are grounded in ontologies that emphasize the radical interdependence of all that exists; this view assumes that human existence takes place within a living cosmos; it finds clear expression in notions such as *Buen Vivir* (collective well-being according to one's cosmovision), *the rights of nature, post-development*, and *transitions to post-extractivism* (see Escobar 2018, 2020).

Another way of stating the same idea is to ask: Where have we been? What is the current situation in socio-political and economic terms and philosophical, spiritual, and ontological terms? There are many answers to that question. I have lately been using a formulation by *Sylvia Winter* (see McKittrick 2015). Sylvia Winter is a Jamaican philosopher. She's in her 90s, and unfortunately, she's not as well-known as many other thinkers. Wynter asked the questions: Where have we been? Where are we now? She

would say that we are contained within or stuck with a *mono-humanist mode of being human* or a *mono-humanist model of the human*. This modern mode of the human sees the human as secular, individual, bourgeois, western, liberal, bioeconomic, et cetera. She has a very detailed analysis of how we arrived at such a mono-humanist notion of the human and concludes by arguing that we need to move towards an *ecumenically hybrid humanity*. The human, for Wynter, is a hybrid of biology and narrative. The human is *homo-narrans*: a human that is biological but also a human that narrates and creates stories and symbols; one who narrates his or her own story. It is not my intention to discuss at length her lucid and detailed analysis here (Escobar 2022). I will instead highlight what I believe is a particularly revealing framing of the question of *Man* (as used by Wynter), the domineering mono-humanist model of the human (originating in Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century), which I find particularly powerful for understanding both the current civilization malaise produced by mono-humanism (including climate change) and the possibility of constructing an ecumenical horizon for humanity.

Wynter posits a two-step process for the emergence of Man, the first of which accounts for the end of Christian theocentrism with the Renaissance, yielding a rational view of Man, the subject of the budding civic humanism of *homo politicus*, which she calls *Man1*. The conquest of America catalyzed this shift from Christian cosmology to a rational worldview, which was indispensable for the emergence of *Man2*, that is, a fully biocentric and economized view of the human. Man2 was grounded on a particular rendering of biological evolution in terms of natural selection, Malthus's theory of resource scarcity and the figure of *homo oeconomicus*, which was ushered in by the then-nascent science of political economy. Man2 implies a mono-humanist view of the Western, bourgeois, secular, and liberal human. Its dominant Darwinian/Malthusian and economic macro-narrative were pivoted on the principle of race and imbricated with capitalism; ever since the experience of all humans became increasingly subjected to the imperatives of accumulation.

Wynter appeals to Franz Fanon to propose a move beyond the bio-economic genre of the human (which she magnificently deconstructs as 'Man2's biocosmogonical and Darwinian-chartered, ethno-class descriptive statement') (Wynter & McKittrick 2015: 42). Wynter finds inspiration in Fanon's notable conception of the human as simultaneously and inextricably biological and social – summarized in the formula, 'Beside ontogeny and phylogeny stands sociogeny' (Fanon 1967: 110), which Fanon uses to explain the dialectic of black skins/white masks confronting all Black people – and in W.E.B Du Bois' notion that the key problem of the twentieth century is 'the problem of the color line' (Du Bois 1903). In these works, and others, Wynter finds a referent-we or genre of the human markedly different from the cosmogony of secular liberal Man. Her expansion of Fanon leads her to emphasize that the human is biological and is also shaped by cultural codes, origin narratives, and storytelling and that these become wired in their brain and behavior. In short, the human is always *homo narran*s. This principle applies even to the allegedly rational narrative of Western Man as naturally bio-economic, which accounts for how difficult it is to change it as the dominant default setting for the human.

For Wynter, it is high time that we, so-called modern humans, bring the laws of the dominant genre of the human fuller into conscious awareness, with a view at loosening its hold, which in turn requires reinterpreting modern modes of consciousness and ways of organizing societies and economies as fully historically constituted and, hence, amenable to change. Not easy, as multiple narratives powerfully implant these genres

in collective culture as a sort of 'second set of instructions.' The following question summarizes the argument up to this point: How to envision a system that would no longer follow a naturally selected/deselected bioevolutionary teleological logic that necessitates accumulation, but rather engenders a worldview and outlook from the ecumenically human hybrid perspective of *homo narrans*? (Wynter 2015: 44).

The philosophical and political implications of Wynter's intervention are enormous since they articulate the need to search for figures of human outside Western humanism. Wynter's placing of Man within modernity/coloniality is essential to this project because this shows how the western human/Man worldview is marked by the confluence of racism, capitalism, and discourses of the survival of the fittest. The response must come from creating a new horizon of humanity that enables an ecumenically open view of the human. So, we now have three concepts: a) we are in a deep civilizational crisis, b) we know that this crisis calls for significant transitions, c) we can think about transitions as taking a place from the perspective of radical relationality and independence, all of which requires developing a greater awareness of where we have been in philosophical terms. I particularly like Sylvia Wynter's formulation of mono-humanism, a worldview that has become increasingly dominant and that we need to destabilize.

The political imaginaries that Wynter calls for go beyond Euro-modern perspectives (those of Man2), transhumanism and techno-utopianism, and even beyond most of the imaginaries that underpin current posthumanist critical theory. Constructing the conditions for such innovative imaginaries becomes one of the essential intellectual-political tasks of our time. At stake here is a novel calling into question any universal idea of 'Man'. I believe that in the work being undertaken at the onto-epistemic and social margins and peripheries of the worlds where Man still reigns (including the academy), we might find auspicious points of departure. Another useful concept is *ex-humanism*. This is not my idea but comes from a wonderful indigenous Brazilian Amazonian intellectual, Ailton Krenak[1], who talks about the possibility of declaring ourselves to be ex-human if (and this is important if) by human, we mean Sylvia Winter's Man, which is also very close to the Man that Michel Foucault (1994) maps in his book *The Order of Things*.

CT: Perhaps we can now ask you more explicitly about the concept of the Terricide and discuss the civilizational crisis that you were just speaking about. We have become wary of using universalising terms and/or concepts such as the Anthropocene to understand our current crisis and its lack of engagement with difference, particularly with transition movements and the multiple scales in which they interact. In your work, you have used concepts like 'Terricide' to describe the ecological devastation and the civilizatory crisis brought about by what has been called the One-World World (OWW) perspective of modernity. What is your view on concepts used to frame our current epochal condition? For example, how are concepts like the Anthropocene contributing or hindering the challenges for a transition towards a pluriverse?

AE: Let me start with the last question. The notion of *the Terricide [Terricidio]* was proposed by the *South American Indigenous Women Movement for Buen Vivir (SAIWM)*. It was first used by Mapuche women in Patagonia linked to the notion of Buen Vivir, which is a collective form of well-being or good living, a holistic, non-developmentalist notion of social life. The concept originated about 6 or 7 years ago, and since then, they have been elaborating on its meaning. In essence, what they mean is that we are killing the earth and the planet. But this doesn't involve only the killing of the physical or biological ecosystems. It also refers to the killing of knowledge and spiritual relations

to those ecosystems, which are notably crucial for indigenous people and ultimately for everybody on the planet. If this is the case, they would say that we need everybody in the world to join in the project of creating a new civilization matrix centered on the concept of Buen Vivir. By this, they mean that we need to take care of the earth and care for each other.

So why do I find that concept more attuned to the Earth and more politically relevant than the concept of Anthropocene? There are several reasons. First, I don't want to suggest that the Anthropocene is useless -it's an important concept- but it's a limited one. After all, it is still anthropocentric, and it lends itself too easily to technological solutions and managerial approaches. One could say that terricide emerges as a parallel concept to the Anthropocene; however, it doesn't lend itself so readily to those managerial and technoscientific approaches. It decenters the Anthropos, enabling the question: is it possible to free contemporary thought – whether in daily life or the academy – from the constraints under which it currently thinks to enable it to think otherwise? For the indigenous women struggling against terricide, this can only be achieved by re-embedding ourselves in the land and seeing ourselves deeply as belonging to the Earth and the stream of life, as many indigenous and territorialized peoples have done for thousands of years. This starting point diverges from most academic theorizing; it provides a direct route into the space where relationality abides.

An axiom of the notion of civilizational transitions is that the current problems cannot be solved with the categories and historical experiences that created them. This point was recently brought home forcefully by a seemingly straightforward statement by the brilliant Mapuche activist Moira Millán: *Necesitamos una revolución del pensamiento* (we need a revolution in our thought). It is revealing that this sentence was uttered not by a famous academic or philosopher but by an activist deeply committed to the struggle for the well-being of the Earth and her people. The conclusion she arrives at is no less instructive: our current form of *pensamiento* [thought] is the basis of what she and the SAIWM, which she co-founded, have come to name Terricide. Thus, we now know we need to develop knowledge of the earth to relate to the earth wisely. There are limitations to that, but I think the concept of the Anthropocene still calls into place this idea that we (humans) can master everything or a *will to mastery*. If we develop the proper knowledge and correct theories, the right science and technology, and the right managerial attitudes, we will finally be able to figure out how to manage the Earth wisely for the benefit of all. Again, that will to mastery and control is so much at the heart of patriarchal, anthropocentric modernity.

So why do I find these concepts and notions problematic? Perhaps I should say that more than problematic, they are limited because they originate in the *modern onto-epistemic formation* (or what we can refer to as a constellation of fundamental premises about life, knowledge, and the world that indelibly shape practices and structures), or the modern episteme, by which I mean the knowledge space where all modern social theory comes from. As a result, modern social theory faces at least *four limitations*:

First, the modern social theory that emerged and crystallized by the end of the 18th century -this is very much centered on Wynter and Foucault- is blind to its locus of enunciations. That is to say that it is blind to the fact that it has emerged within this dualist onto-epistemic formation of Man. Because of its abstract character, modern social theory leaves out the realm of embodiment, practice, and experience, which is essential to understanding the relational-making character of the world. Foucault refers to it as the episteme regime of Man in *The Order of Things*. Very similar to Sylvia Wynter's work.

Second, modern social theory forgets that there are different kinds of humans. That the *Anthropos* is not just one human. It is multiple kinds of humans, and it especially forgets to account for the experiences and realities of the humans that have been at the receiving end of the colonizing and imperializing drives of modern Man, especially the colonized people, the subalterns, indigenous peoples, peoples from the global South, etcetera. So, there cannot be any notion of universal man, and that's very clear. Yet, the Anthropocene still shelters or hides some of the notions of universal man and a universal fix. There cannot be a technological fix for the Anthropocene.

The third limitation of modern social theory is that it leaves out a lot from the domains of experience, embodiment, emotions, intuitions, feelings, spirituality that are important to understand social life. None of that really enters into modern social theory. Some philosophical currents deal with that, but not in modern social theory per se -that is, political, anthropological, sociological, and economic theory-, which doesn't have a place or room for the range of practices and realities that come along with feelings, emotions and intuitions and with the ineffable and sacred aspects of life.

The last limitation is that modern social theory ultimately separates theory from practice. Now, we need knowledge that goes and transcends that binary between theory and practice.

As we try to develop new concepts, we need to be mindful of the ways in which modern social theory originated in the ontologically dualist space of the modern episteme. We need to think beyond the binaries, ideologies and colonizing attitudes of modern knowledge. But, of course, that's easier said than done. It is challenging to do so, but we first need to produce a language with concepts that exceed the modern onto-epistemology. To me, a concept like the terricide does precisely that, as it is closer to the Earth, and it summons us to be close to it, to dwell on it, from the realm of the ancestors, from the domain of spirituality, to try to find ways to come up with a collective project of a new civilizational matrix.

The concept of terricide brings forth the need for a mode of accessing the current planetary predicament capable of taking us beyond the categories with which we currently think, make, and purport to amend the world. It helps us ask questions such as: is modern thought, in whatever guise (from mainstream liberal notions to contemporary Marxist, deconstructive, and post-dualist approaches), capacious enough to help us see, and hopefully escape from, the grand edifice it has built for itself and which provides the sturdy conceptual architecture of contemporary global designs? Or are we instead confronted with the fact that the contemporary crisis puts in evidence once and for all the insufficiency, when not lethality, of modern modes of thought and existence to deal with the crisis? Confronted with the globalization of 'a hegemonic mode of civilizational (mal-)development', the only conclusion possible is that our modes of thinking must be 'radically transformed to become radically transformative. This much is clear: that we can no longer solve modern problems solely or perhaps even primarily with the same categories that created them – growth, competition, progress, rationality, individuality, economy, even science and critique. Transitioning into new modes of existence requires different categories and modes of understanding, which takes us into the territory of relationality and pluriversality.

This notion of the pluriverse comes from the Zapatista imagination, which came up with the maxim that the transitions should aim not to change the current world – the neoliberal globalization and the "capitalist hydra"—but to create a new one, *a world where many worlds fit*. This dictum stands as the most succinct definition of the pluriverse. Many other concepts like the Anthropocene are limited because of their connection to

modern social theory. For instance, the concept of Sustainable Development, which is being streamlined or revived through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), is an agenda that has become very important, but that is still part of the same episteme. The same can be said about newer concepts with the prefix "smart", such as smart cities, smart bodies as smart homes, smart selves, smart lives. You can say that these concepts open the possibility for a newer kind of agency on the subject as an agent that is more active in producing its own reality. Nevertheless, they are problematic because they are still about calculative rationality and control.

Based on Heidegger's philosophy of technology, we can argue that these notions are still trapped within that calculating, instrumental, and algorithmic rationality that limits the scope of choices into some sort of prefabricated ideas about what is good and desirable, what one needs to be "successful" in globalized society and markets. But most of all, they are limited because they also leave out so much of the story of life, of what is part of existence.

So, where do we seek new insights if we see the limitations of some of these theoretical interventions like the Anthropocene? I mentioned terricide as an example but let me give you two other examples. The first comes from a wonderful Nigerian psychologist and philosopher Bayo Akomolafe (2020a, 2020b) and his Emergence Network. Bayo talks about how climate change, for example, is not a problem. For him, climate change *is* the world we inhabit. Akomolafe argues that climate change is *ontologically un-frameable*. It is incalculable and undefinable. We cannot straitjacket climate change into a concept like the Anthropocene or a set of technoscientific solutions. Climate change requires a different attitude towards the world from us. It requires new ways of thinking and concepts that he links with connecting back to spirituality, to the people's struggles that come from different onto-epistemic experiences and so forth.

The second example is from the Chinese philosopher of technology Yuk Hui. Hui (2020) is a challenging read because he demands substantial philosophical knowledge, especially of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and so forth, but I particularly like his last book: *Art and Cosmotechnics*. He argues that we are at a juncture where new conditions for philosophy, thought and thinking are emerging. This is happening because we now stand between the triumph of modernity -especially through technology- and its meltdown. Modernity hasn't come up with new compelling stories about life, with workable social systems and so forth. So in between its triumph and its unraveling, there's a possibility for the emergence of new conditions for thought. Hui is very critical of artificial intelligence and such technologies. Very much like the Korean cultural critic Byung-Chul Han. In his latest book, '*Non-Things*' (Han 2022), he argues that we have lost the connection to things. Things are no longer the source of experience and meaning because of the pervasive digitalization of life. Digitalization does away with the phenomenological dimension of life and things. The consequence is that we need to re-establish presence, and a connection to things, the body, the landscape, and place.

CT: Thank you very much, Arturo. Perhaps we can then start moving from this interpretation of the crisis to praxis, or some of the things we could do. In your recent book (Escobar 2020) and in the several talks that you have given around it, you use the term "Entramado de conceptos" or a "constellation of concepts" to describe a set of neologisms or concepts that are emerging from Latin America such as autonomía, comunalidad, territorialidad, pluriversalidad y decolonialidad [autonomy, commonality, territoriality, pluriversality and decoloniality]. Could you speak more about these concepts and why they are so relevant in the struggle to navigate the civilizatory crisis? For example, you have argued that the pluriverse has a double meaning or two different registers. These concepts are essential

for the design of what you have called the axes or principles for transition strategies (Escobar 2021a). You have also argued that it is precisely how these concepts enable another language, another way of thinking, that they allow us to move beyond what is not possible under the separationist ontology of modernity.

AE: As I was saying, we can see that there are many new stories emerging. I think that the ones that have been crystalizing in Latin America over the past two decades are compelling and important. But, of course, there will be stories arising and crystallizing from many other parts of the world as well. A new Latin American narrative of life is emerging at the interface between social movements, political struggles and social theory, between social movements and the academy. I adapted the term "*entramado*" (entanglement) to the field of concepts from Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2017), who, in my mind, is one of the most important and original thinkers in Latin America today, together with Rita Segato. At this interface -and again, this is my own reading of what I see happening- we can see an entanglement of principles made up of six interrelated emerging concepts. These six concepts are *Territoriality, Communality, Autonomy, Re-existence, Transitions to the pluriverse and Buen Vivir, and politics in the feminine*.[2] To understand how these six concepts interact, we need to start with what I call 'modernity's toxic loops of existence', in which we are trapped. These loops originate in the dominant story that we have been telling ourselves so far: that humans are individuals existing in economies driven by markets, legitimized by the state, a form of *homo economicus* that assumes that we are competitive by nature, that we engage in innovations to solve problems in the most efficient possible ways, and so forth. I argue that we are trapped in these toxic loops in the sense of seeing ourselves in the world in terms of individuality, competitiveness, markets, rationality, instrumentality, maximization, optimization, and so forth.

The emerging tapestry of concepts (or *entramado de conceptos)* I mentioned is not exhaustive, and they don't intend to be. On the contrary, I highlight them because they provide the basis for a narrative about life that differs significantly from the dominant narrative of liberal, secular, rational capitalist modernity. Precisely the narratives that constitute these toxic loops of existence. By contrast, notions like territoriality, communality, autonomy, pluriversality, and re-existence appear here as the seeds of a new language, enabling us to re-think paths beyond the existing crisis. I will briefly discuss these concepts, although each has a complex genealogy and is the subject of rich debates in the Latin American intellectual and political landscape. These concepts aim towards the constitution of an onto-epistemic formation that enables "making life" in re-embodied, re-communalized, re-localized and re-earthed manners. Taken as a whole, this conceptual assemblage constitutes a platform, or a new language, for thinking about post-development, post-extractivist transitions and transitions to the pluriverse, with Buen Vivir as a guiding star. Although these concepts have emerged slowly over the past three decades from multiple sites throughout the continent, these concept-practices result from embodied, often collaborative and grounded epistemologies.

The first concept is "*territoriality*": Territories are seen as spaces where life is actively crafted through manifold practices, resulting in unique worlds –hence the expression, often voiced in activist circles, of "territories of life and difference." Over the past decade, this cultural conception of territory has become more decidedly relational; hence, one hears activists defending rivers, mountains, or forests as being intimately connected with humans, evincing an unbroken continuity between humans and the territory – statements such as "we are the river," or the mountain, and so forth, at the basis of such struggles. Humans cannot be without the territory; they are one with it.

The second concept making up the emerging Latin American narrative is "*communality*". It asserts that we are communal beings, communal in the sense of a "we." In Spanish, this is referred to as the we-condition of being [*la condición nóstrica del ser*]. Communality argues that we exist in a community and in the territory, with a whole range of other humans, non-humans, spiritual beings and so forth. Under conditions of colonization and ontological occupation, territoriality and communality need a degree of *autonomy* (the third concept) to have a chance of flourishing without being reabsorbed into newer forms of delocalizing globalization. Social movements and collectives also understand their political struggle in terms of *re-existence* (a fourth concept), which shows that it is not just resistance but about the recreation of the conditions for existence in the contemporary conjuncture, in a way that is deeply attuned to the earth. All these concepts point at the need for pluriversal transitions from the perspective of *interdependence* (a fifth concept). Interdependence means aiming to transition to different ways of being and models of life. This is what we call the pluriverse.

Pluriversal transitions mean transitions from an allegedly globalized world made up of a single world – what John Law calls the One-World World (OWW), that of capitalist modernity, to a world where many worlds fit. The pluriverse also refers to life's ceaselessly unfolding character, its continued co-emergence out of the dynamics of matter and energy. At the crux of it, for biologist Lynn Margulis, is the notion that life both produces (i.e., autopoietically self-maintains) and reproduces itself. As she argues, life is, above all, a 'sentient symphony,' 'matter gone wild, capable of choosing its own direction to indefinitely forestall the inevitable moment of thermodynamic equilibrium' (Margulis & Sagan 1995: 213). Life is history and process through and through. From the get-go, life is a relation, flows, impermanence, contact, and endless transformation – in short, pluriversal. Unfortunately, humans (or Wynter's *Man2*) have forgotten this fundamental dynamic of life.

The final concept is "politics in the feminine." Pluriversal politics is politics infused with a feminine understanding of life. Feminine is understood ontologically here, especially following the group led by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Mina Lorena Navarro and Lucia Linsalatta in Puebla, Mexico, and also Argentinean anthropologist Rita Segato. For them, politics in the feminine (*política en femenino*) is centered on the production and the reproduction of life from a perspective of care (Segato 2016). Here we are reminded of the stakes at hand by the Latin American feminist dictum that there is no decolonization without de-patriarchization and de-racialization of social relations. This emphasis is particularly well articulated by the diverse movement of communitarian feminisms led by Mayan and Aymara activist-intellectuals, such as Gladys Tzul Tzul, Julieta Paredes, and Lorena Cabnal. Tzul Tzul highlights the potential of the communal as the horizon for the struggle and as a space for the continuous reconstitution of life. Her perspective is absolutely historical and anti-essentialist; it stems from a reflection on the *entramados comunitarios* (communitarian entanglements), with all the forms of power that traverse them. When they talk about politicizing the feminine, they mobilize the feminine as a political principle for a type of struggle that is dysfunctional to capitalism. From this perspective, the reconstitution of life's web of relations in a communitarian manner is one of the most fundamental challenges any transition strategy faces. As stated by Segato (2016: 106): '[w]e need to advance this politics day by day, outside the State: to re-weave the communal fabric to restore the political character of domesticity proper of the communal.' Thus, feminist relational politics needs to be incorporated into many, if not all, transition practices.

In this context, it should be emphasized that femininity is intended to revalue women's historical links to body, place, and community and women's ethics of care, but within a thoroughly depatriarchalized and de-racialized care perspective. In other words, it unsettles the patriarchal imposition on women to be relational caretakers while denying them autonomy over their bodies and economies. As feminist social and solidarity economist Natalia Quiroga (2020) puts it, if capitalism cannot exist without patriarchy, the corollary is that the entire economy (and economics) needs to be depatriarchalized and reconstituted under the principle of the care of life for all.

These women teach us that re-existing means much more than resisting; it involves creating and transforming autonomy in defense of life. By taking these six concepts, we can now formulate what I have been calling the *six axes or principles for redesigning the world* (or re-worlding for a transition into the pluriverse). We have a context in which community relations and social life have been increasingly individualized by globalization, where we need to re-localize many activities or make activities as opposed to just buying everything from world markets. Let me briefly explain these six axes and principles as strategies for transition.

The first axis has to do with the re-communalization of social life. A locally oriented life is one lived in relationship with the humans and other forms of life around us, including, for many peoples, the spiritual world. The co-emergence of living beings and their worlds results in what Gutiérrez Aguilar calls 'communitarian entanglements' that make us kin to everything alive. Oaxacan activists refer to this dynamic as the we-condition of being. If we see ourselves *in this way*, we can adopt the principles of love, care, and compassion as ethics of living, starting with our home, place, and community (see Martínez-Luna 2015; Guerrero 2019). Two brief things to mention here. First, re-communalization does not entail isolation but is instead a condition for a greater sharing and interconnectedness rooted in a re-woven fabric of life that is more collective and integrated with the entire span of the non-human. Secondly, a common counterclaim is that communities are often the site of forms of domination and oppression and are too localistic or 'romantic'. The first one is undoubtedly true, particularly in gender and generational terms. This is indeed the case in nearly all actually existing communities, and strategies of re-communalization must take current power relations into account. The latter points to work such as geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, who revealed the globalocentric nature of many of these critiques. Each social group and locality will have to develop its unique set of re-communalizing strategies, attuned to place, landscape, and diversity. But I do not believe any social group today can escape this predicament; we (especially those of us in modern secular liberal social orders) have lived far too long as allegedly autonomous individuals; this fiction must go, once and for all. Whether in the Global South or the Global North, in rural areas or urban territories, we are bound to re-weave our relations to others based on care and respect; this re-weaving needs to be genuinely relational. It is a fact that today's communities are ineluctably open, connected, and traversed by de-communalizing economic and digital pressures; this makes the process difficult but also enlivening.

The second axis consists of a re-localization of social, economic, and cultural activities. The Covid-19 pandemic has fostered a new awareness that capitalist globalization is not inevitable when our survival as individuals and a species seems threatened. As Gustavo Esteva (2020) states, Covid is re-establishing the importance of the local; regaining our rootedness in the local means re-locating life-essential activities back in the places where we live to the possible extent. Food is one of the most crucial areas, and it is also where a lot of communitarian innovation occurs in many world regions. Food sovereignty,

agroecology, seed saving, commons, slow food, and urban gardens are instances of this renewed turn back to the local; at their best, these innovations also break with patriarchal, racist, and capitalist ways of living. Though taking place at the local and regional levels, these and similar initiatives might foster transformations of national and international food production systems. They could lead to a renewed understanding of the value of commonly held land and re-weaving ties that once flourished between cities and the surrounding countryside. Returning to the local means recovering the capacity for making life across a range of active verbs-strategies: to eat, to learn, to heal, to dwell, to build, rather than in terms of passive services provided by institutions and their experts (food, health, education, housing), as activists say in Oaxaca. Not everything, of course, can be re-localized, but many activities can, as recent approaches to degrowth and the commons argue. The expansion of the '*Commonsverse*' relies on 'the deeper wisdom of the commons, which accepts the idea of distributed, local, and diverse acts of commoning whose very aliveness produces the creativity and commitment to develop solutions adapted to every context' (Bollier & Helfrich 2019: 205) Encouraging examples are found in many domains, including farmers' movements, collaborative digital platforms, organizing of housing and buildings as commons, seed sharing, energy localism, collective rights, novel types of financing, commons-public partnerships, and community charters, to name a few.

This leads me to the third axis: *strengthening autonomy*. Without autonomy, there cannot be a significant degree of successful re-communization and re-localization. Autonomy is sometimes thought of as the radicalization of direct democracy and a new manner of conceiving and enacting politics. It involves reimagining politics as the inescapable process that emerges from the entanglement of humans among themselves and with the Earth but is oriented to reconfiguring power in less hierarchical ways, based on principles such as sufficiency, mutual aid, and the self-determination of the norms of living. All of this requires thinking about a strategic overturning of relations with the heteronomous orders of capitalism and the state. Perhaps most importantly, autonomy requires re-thinking the economy in terms of everyday solidarity, reciprocity, and conviviality. In the modern era, economics has made the economy central to our lives and separated it from the homes, communities, and places we inhabit. Without autonomy, movements toward re-weaving the communal would only go halfway or might be reabsorbed by newer forms of delocalized re-globalization. In many parts of the world, autonomy is at the crux of a great deal of political mobilization but also of less openly political practices. At its best, autonomy is a theory and practice of inter-existence and designing for and with the pluriverse.

The fourth axis is the *simultaneous de-patriarchalization and de-racialization* of society from Latin American feminists. They argue that these strategies must necessarily come together; that is, there cannot be a de-patriarchalization of society without decolonization and de-racialization. Patriarchy is so entrenched in our thoughts and desires that it can seem impossible to transform it, much less dismantle it. This is so because patriarchy, while being a social, economic, cultural, and political system, is also, and primarily, an ontology that privileges separation, hierarchy, appropriation, denial of others, control, and not infrequently, violence and war. If we are to inhabit new ways of living, we must identify, question, and challenge the patriarchal assumptions that are such a natural part of our lives. To de-patriarchalize and de-racialize requires repairing the damage caused by the heteropatriarchal, white capitalist ontology and practicing a 'politics in the feminine' centered on the reappropriation of collectively produced goods and the reproduction of life.

The fifth axis is the *reintegration with the earth*, with the Pachamama. As I have written about recently (Escobar 2021b), we must necessarily arrive at a reconsideration of our relationship with the Earth -Gaia or Pachamama- as integral to any transition process. Drawing on indigenous cosmovisions as much as on contemporary scientific theory, there exists a core, undeniable fact: we live on a planet of profound interdependence. Nothing exists apart from the geological eras and biological evolution that preceded it. New forms of life are always in the process of co-arising. We need to hold this notion of an ever-changing Earth in sight.

The last axis has to do with *weaving networks* or constructing networks among transformative initiatives to encourage the convergence and articulation of genuinely transformative alternatives, particularly from below. Although transitions will necessarily involve many kinds of articulatory initiatives, there is a growing recognition of the need to build bridges among 'radical alternatives,' based on relational and pluralistic worldviews. The project of fostering the creation of self-organizing meshworks, or networks of networks, among such alternatives, is being tackled by a growing number of collective undertakings. The Global Tapestry of Alternatives[3], a project centered on bringing together local and regional networks of radical alternatives, is a case in point.

Let me reiterate that the larger question -on the character of the crises and how to deal with them effectively- is so complex that it demands other epistemologies and politics. This point has been cogently made by Akomolafe, for whom climate change is not a problem that organizations can draw lines around and manage; this is because it is 'ontologically unframable, unthinkable and incalculable.' Others like Tony Fry and Madina Tlostanova (2021) similarly argue that existing academic practices and epistemologies are incapable of comprehending the complexity of the compounded crises. New ways of understanding this unprecedented complexity are necessary to inform effective policy and politics. Short of this, institutions and policy will only perpetuate the de-futuring pressures, perpetually increasing the risk for the planet (the sixth extinction, exponential growth of social and political unrest, etc.), unable to deliver viable futures. The political imaginaries these authors call for go beyond Euro-modern perspectives (those of *Wynter's Man2*), transhumanism and techno-utopianism, and even beyond most critical theory at present. Constructing the conditions for such innovative imaginaries becomes one of the most important intellectual-political tasks of our time. What's at stake is a novel calling into question any universal idea of 'Man.' I believe that in work being undertaken at the onto-epistemic and social margins and peripheries of the worlds where Man still reigns (and this includes the academy), we might find auspicious points of departure.

CT: We want to extend the conversation to your work on political ontology. You, along with others in this and other fields, argue that an approach to reality as objective and external is limited at the very least, given reality's relational character. You use the concept of 'radical relationality' to contest how the modernist ontology (underpinned by an objective understanding of reality and an ontology of separation) is at odds with what you call pluriversal politics. This is also relevant when we try to assess the multiple ways in which the modernist ontologies of the OWW imply a sometimes very literal 'erasure' of other worlds and knowledges - you argue that this implies an ontological occupation. These erasures are underpinned by different types of violence (such as cognitive, ontological and slow violence, to name a few), reproduced through globalization, commodification and individualisation. As we read your work, it became clear to us how the notion of political ontology further expands the work of political ecology. For example, you argue that the Ecological Distribution Conflicts (ECD) theorized by thinkers like Joan Martinez Alier imply ontological disagreements at their core. You also argue

that these struggles also reveal those other worlds or worlding practices that the OWW perspective has occupied. In your recent book of essays, you drew on the concept of radical relationality and added a very intriguing subtitle to the book, which is "The real and the possible." Could you speak a bit more on the possibilities that emerge from adopting these forms of ontological or pluriversal politics? How can these tackle some forms of violence embedded into the OWW perspective? And finally, why do you distinguish between the real and the possible?

AE: A good place to start may be the shift from political ecology to political ontology. This shift, much like all these shifts that I'm describing, occurs both in the academy's social theory and in activist life, or at least I've tried to follow them in both domains as Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (2018; see also Blaser 2016). However, this is not the usual way of doing things in academia. Usually, most academics working on political ontology or political ecology do it by referring solely to academic debates and academic canons. That's fine and useful in its own way, but up to a point, it also faces some limitations.

Political ecology is a field that brings together culture, politics, nature and power. It was initially developed as an interdisciplinary field with the intention of looking at environmental conflicts, which Joan Martínez-Alier (2021) called Ecological Distribution Conflicts (EDC). I've always thought this was a great and valuable way of understanding environmental conflicts. But I started arguing that these are not *just* economic and ecological distribution conflicts but also cultural distribution conflicts. In the book *Territories of Difference* (Escobar 2008), I did this by adding the variable of culture in a post-structuralist take. What post-structuralism adds to the first-generation political ecology is precisely the notion that discourse, knowledge and culture are essential in mediating the relationship between nature and economy, nature and power, and nature and society.

However, there has been a move towards ontology in social theory over the past ten years. Not just questions about epistemology, like with post-structuralism, but also with ontology, which means considering the real. These questions are about the very nature or the status of the real, or what we consider real or not. This was when things got to be both more complicated but also more interesting and potentially more important in political terms. This coincided with a re-emergence of claims by Indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants and many other groups in the world that their vision, or cosmovision [*su cosmovisión*], as activists in Latin America put it, are very different from the cosmovision of the Modern West. That cosmovision is what we call 'the cosmovision of relationality' or 'relational ontology.' This is an ontology that emphasizes the interdependence between all the entities that exist in the universe. It argues that nothing pre-exists the relations that constitute it, that everything exists because everything else exists—referring to your question in terms of what I call *"radical relationality"* in my book. This answers your inquiry about the book's subtitle: *the Real and the Possible*. The notion of relationality is emerging as a cogent alternative foundation for life and the human to that established by the modern ontology of separation.

Ontological dualism has brought about a profound disconnection between humans and the non-human world, bestowing all rights on humans. Such disconnection is at the root of the contemporary crisis. Thus, the key to constructing livable worlds must lie in cultivating ways of knowing and acting based on a profound awareness of the fundamental interdependence of everything that exists. This is what I have called *radical relationality*. This shift in vision is necessary for healing our bodies, ecosystems, cities, and the planet at large – in short, for civilizational transitions. This ontological perspective

is essential to make the case that what is at stake is the very notion of the real. It is essential to be aware that ontological premises are embedded in narratives and enacted through multiple practices in all kinds of social domains. One may say that ontologies – whether of Man2 or interdependence – are performed in practice, enabling and indelibly shaping who we are and the worlds we construct; they emerge historically and become designing events in the present. When we speak about the real and the possible, we are stating that the world that we collectively design under the premise of separation in turn (re)creates us as beings who experience ourselves as intrinsically separate individuals. This model may be so common-sense that it may not even occur to us to be a kind of worldview, cosmovision, or ontology. Nevertheless, there are many other cosmos, reals, and possible that do not abide by the presupposition of separation. Interdependence is the condition of all living things, including, paradoxically, the condition of the artificial.

There are many ways to articulate this. For example, I'm now working on a book with two friends: Michal Osterwall and Kriti Sharma (*forthcoming*) called *Designing Relationally: Making and Restor(y)ing Life* which focuses on how we can regain autonomy over making life relationally because we have outsourced the production of life, or the making of life, to the State, to experts and corporations, while *we (modern humans)* have *forgotten* much of what goes into the making of life. So when we (Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser and I) went back to look at environmental conflicts with this ontological lens, we realized that often, but not always, these EDC are not just about struggles over resources, property, land or control of the territory, but that they are struggles over something that is much more profound and more basic: they are *struggles over ways of worlding*, ways of building and constructing the world and making life, struggles over cosmovisions, ontologies. So that is still the fundamental insight that we're following today when we think about pluriversal politics. We are thinking in conjunction with people rising to defend the territories as pillars of existence and re-existence as territories of life.

The last concept refers to a notion that Marisol de la Cadena and I have been trying to develop: *Pluriversal Contact Zones* (PCZ). These zones are most clearly visible in the ontological conflicts often present alongside environmental conflicts. Let us take a simple example: some ethnic communities in Latin America defend rivers, lakes, or mountains against large-scale mining or hydroelectric dams on the basis that they are one with the river or mountain, that they do not exist separate from it; sometimes, this takes the form of stating that the river, or mountain, is a sentient being, or that it is alive.

From a modernist ontological perspective, this is nonsense: everybody knows that the mountain is an inert being, a piece of rock, or at most an ecosystem, and as such can be mined (destroyed) or managed through environmental conservation, and so forth. These are cases of environmental conflicts that are also ontological. However, suppose we begin to see these environmental conflicts as ontological. Then we also start to see how the interaction between, for instance, a corporation or the state and the activists that are defending territory creates a zone of contact in which different ideas about the world -or different ways of worlding- encounter each other, thus creating a PCZ. Let me give you two concrete examples of this.

The first one comes from Marisol de la Cadena's (2015) book *Earth Beings*. Here Marisol talks about the struggle around a so-called sacred Mountain, *Ausangate*, by local indigenous peasants who are against a proposed mining enclave. Here we have a PCZ in the following way: for the Peruvian state, the mountain is a piece of rock, it's dead, it can be destroyed for the good of the nation, for progress, for development, and that's how it should be. For ecologists and environmentalists, the mountain is an important ecosystem. It's vital for biodiversity, the conservation of water and forests and so

forth, so it should be protected for these reasons. But for the indigenous peasants, the mountain is that, but it's also much more. In other words, the mountain is that but not only that, it is also an earth-being, a living entity. Moreover, they don't see themselves as separate from the mountain. *They are* the mountain. That is the concept of '*being in ayllu'* that Marisol develops so well in her book. The *ayllu* is a relational entity, a relational manifold in which everything is there, and everything exists because of its entanglement, the humans and non-humans, the spirits, the lakes, the mountains, and everything else.

The second example comes from Colombia, specifically from a recent movement for the rights of a river in the Pacific Rainforest region, the Atrato River. I was at an event with one of the activists, a young black woman, an environmental engineer, who explained how their campaign was built on the slogan that "we are the river", that is, '*we are the Atrato'.* This notion is built upon the inseparability between the humans, the people and the river. Now the state doesn't recognize this language. Similar to the case in Peru, for the Colombian state, the river is H_2O. It might be an ecosystem (maybe), thus, the state understands the protection of the river in terms of access to resources because water needs to be protected, managed and rationalized. Still, the State doesn't understand these other forms of relational existence with the river. It sees the Indigenous and Afrodescendant claims of being one with the river - that they don't exist without the river (and so forth- as nonsense. This case is built around the notion of the rights of nature, and there are many other cases in which the rights of nature operate at this interface. For the State, they are only "individuals" with "rights". Although rights have been extended to natural entities, these are still seen as separate, lifeless entities or objects. But for the activists, the "rights of nature" opens up a space of struggle. One may say that "rights of nature" is a compromise or a space to obtain a negotiated outcome that enables activists to protect the territory.

Another concept that Marisol de la Cadena uses in these cases is very useful. In the case of the Atrato River, like in Ausangate's, the different groups have *interests in common* (say, to protect the river), but *these are not the same interests.* It is clearly very different for the State or corporations, environmentalists, and social movements. So, ontologically speaking, interests in common are not the same interest. This also means that PCZs are uncertain political terrains; they are made tangible by *ontological excess*, understood as what is beyond the limit of what can be. Or, to put it in other words, that which is difficult to grasp because it lies beyond the limit of our onto-epistemic purview. Thus, PCZs interrupt, at least temporarily, the coloniality of practices that make the world one. They hint at unknown forms of togetherness that diverse worlds must learn. Scary as this endeavor feels, it needs to be undertaken, for if we open our senses to current events, we may feel the presence of the pluriverse, and its contact zones proliferate. Opportunities for feeling/perceiving these zones tend to follow attempts at their destruction by practices of terricide. Rather than suggesting that PCZs can be designed -they are genuinely emergent, especially where the open political struggle is at play- we (Marisol and I) suggest that they make visible the ontologies of separation embedded in nearly all designs. In the last instance, the approach of PCZs involves recognizing the primacy of relationality anew, opening possibilities for designing pluriversally.

CT: That was a complete and compelling response, thank you very much Arturo. Maybe we can move to the two last issues. First, in your recent interview with Gustavo Esteva (Esteva and Escobar 2017), you spoke about some of the challenges of post-development thinking after several decades in which you, alongside Gustavo, Wolfgang Sachs, Ivan Illich, and many others, declared the 'death of

development'. Development, it seems, has been resilient as it has continued to adapt with a multiplicity of names and incarnations (the most recent being the Sustainable Development Goals). What has changed in the struggle against development, and some of the challenges and threats still posed by the development agenda? Secondly, have more communities across the world embraced a form of post-development thinking? Are there any political strategies for moderns to continue supporting transitions, away from development and towards a pluriverse?

AE: The question that you asked about development could be asked about capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and so forth. Somebody recently asked me a very similar question: have these critiques of development made any difference? What I could say is, well-after 200 years of critiques of capitalism, have they made a difference? After one hundred years of critiques of patriarchy, hundreds of years in the critique to racism and slavery and so forth, have they made a difference?

The answer is yes and no. By this, I mean that these critiques make a difference because certainly without them and without the movements that go along with those critiques, the world would probably be even worse off if that is imaginable. Without worker's, women's, black and ecological movements, who are often themselves the real source of the critiques. Despite this, I don't have to tell you that the world is in pretty dire straits right now. That said, I do not seek to dismiss the importance of these movements and/or their struggles. Instead, I see this as a call on us academics, theorists and activists to think about the productivity of our thoughts, theories and critiques. This is especially a call to reject the idea that doing a critique on paper from the safe space of the academy (especially in the academies of the Global North) is sufficient for progressive politics. What I am saying is that analysis and critique, while important, are not enough. Rather, we must engage in a transformative political praxis of one sort or another. This is what people like Gustavo Esteva and others have been trying to do in their work with social movements.

I would like to connect this last issue of critique and transformation with an issue I consider of utmost importance at present and that we touched upon only in passing thus so far in this conversation, which is how contemporary cutting-edge technologies, such as nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, synthetic biology, robotics, genomics, geoengineering, neuroscience, interstellar traveling, and so on, are making the power of the modern ontology to shape life even more profound. This concern is beginning to be voiced differently by people like Yuk Hui, Byung-Chul Han, and design theorists Clive Dilnot and Tony Fry. There is no doubt that modernity has created this amazingly giant cybernetic machine, largely via the application of computing and AI, that has deployed over all spheres and domains of life and is transforming and designing us as a particular kind of beings or humans. As a result, we are becoming out of touch with many other important things to life, such as place, landscape, body, the sacred and so forth, making us even more individualistic than with conventional globalization. Therefore, the project imagining and articulating alternative frameworks for social, economic, and political life needs to be renewed accordingly.

But again, I emphasize that these alternatives have to be thought about and advanced through praxis. A praxis that connects with the struggles for healing the web of life. I link this idea with my definition of design (*design is an invitation for us to be mindful and effective weavers of the web of life)* and to do so with others collectively to the extent possible. This finally brings me to post-development. I believe that critiques of development and proposals for post-development and alternatives to development, such as Buen Vivir, continue to be important precisely because they are intended to imagine and

enable new ways of understanding and designing the world. From a political ontology perspective, the notions of post-development and transitions to post-extractivism (beyond the prevailing extractive model of development) are seen as essential for a pluralistic movement beyond the dominance of the globalized anthropocentric model of life to a peaceful, though tense, coexistence of multiple civilizational projects, or ways of rendering life into worlds.

Reconstituting local, national, and global governance along plural civilizational foundations must be seen as essential to foster the flourishing of the pluriverse. This applies even to the SDGs that you mentioned. While mechanisms such as REDD+ and carbon trading, which are produced through a capitalist worldview, have proven useful tools for some grassroots groups to appropriate for their own purposes. Still, taken as a whole, the SDGs continue to uphold developmentalist and modernizing ontologies. The task for critical development studies is to move development cooperation and strategies such as the SDGs to support pluriversal transitions. This is what we argue in the conversion with Gustavo Esteva you mentioned in your question.

I think some other topics continue to be important today in critical development studies. For example, food sovereignty is a critical one, climate change, transitions to Buen Vivir, post-extractivist transitions, just to name a few. Pluriversal transitions evince "the gigantic and global confrontation between diverse and plural communitarian entanglements, with a greater or lesser degree of relationality and internal cohesion, on the one hand; and, on the other, the most powerful transnational corporations and coalitions among them, which saturate the global space with their police and armed bands, their allegedly 'expert' discourses and images, and their rigidly hierarchical rules and institutions" (Gutierrez Aguilar 2012) A holistic conception of Buen Vivir (good living, or collective well-being; some Afrodescendant groups liken it to Ubuntu ("I am because we all are") is often taken as a statement on the goal of the transitions.

Finally, regarding your question about what we, 'moderns', can do: in the book you mentioned (Escobar 2020), I identify a three-layered characterization to sort out political strategies and think about how the 'moderns' engage with pluriversal politics. The first one refers to the political strategies and designs conducted in the name of progress and the improvement of people's conditions; these are the standard biopolitical liberal forms of design and politics, such as those by most neoliberal governments, the World Bank, and mainstream NGOs. They take for granted the dominant world (in terms of markets, individual actions, productivity, competitiveness, the need for economic growth, etc.) and take it as a whole. Therefore, they can only reinforce the universals of modernity and their accompanying capitalist institutions with strategies of domination, control, violence, and war; they are inimical to pluriversal politics.

The second layer comprises political strategies and designs for social justice and postcapitalist social and economic orders: this is the kind of politics practiced to foster greater social justice and environmental sustainability; it embraces human rights (including gender, sexual, and ethnic diversity), environmental justice, the reduction of inequality, direct alliances with social movements, and so forth. Some progressive development NGOs, such as Oxfam, and several social movements, might serve as a paradigm for this second trajectory. In principle, these forms of politics may contribute to pluriversal politics, especially if they are pushed toward the third trajectory.

The third option would be pluriversal politics proper, or political strategies and designs for pluriversal transitions. Those practicing this option would engage in ontological politics from the perspective of radical interdependence. In doing so, they would go beyond the binary of modernist and pluriversal politics, engaging all

forms of politics in the same, though diverse, movement for civilizational transitions through meshworks of autonomous collectives and communities from both the Global North and the Global South. No readily available models exist for this third kind of politics, although it is the subject of active experimentation by many social struggles at present. How these kinds of politics might initiate rhizomatic expansions from below, effectively relativizing modernity's universal ontology and the imaginary of one world that it actively produces, is an open question in contemporary social theory and activist debates.

CT: Thank you very much, Arturo for sharing your thinking-feeling with us and for the assertiveness and detail of your answers. We look forward to continuing this conversation with you in the near future.

AE: My pleasure. I very much look forward to that as well.

Endnotes

1. Ailton Krenak is a Brazilian writer, journalist, philosopher and indigenous movement leader of Krenak ethnicity. Several of his writing are available here: http://ailtonkrenak.blogspot.com/
2. Three other yet-to-be-published writings from Arturo Escobar that will come out in 2022 deal explicitly with these concepts. We use them as references here with the permission of the author, to whom we are grateful for granting us access.
3. See: https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/

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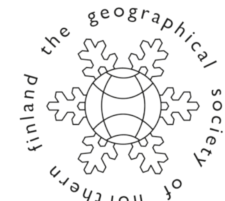

Discussions and interventions

Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History: Dialectical Universalism & the Geographies of Class Power in the Capitalist World-Ecology, 1492-2022

Jason W. Moore[a]

> *All historical writing must set out from these natural bases ['geological, oro-hydrographical, climatic and so on']* and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.
>
> *The proletariat can… only exist* world-historically*, just as communism, its activity, can only have a 'world-historical' existence.*
>
> *(Marx & Engels 2010: 51, 49, second emphasis added)*

The unfolding planetary crisis – which is also an epochal crisis of the capitalist world-ecology – cries out for "pluriversal" imaginations of every kind. But what kind of pluriversalism, set against what kind of universalism, and for what kind of politics?

These words – pluriversalism, universalism – can be dangerous and disabling when abstracted from capitalism's world history (Marx & Engels 2010: 49). These and many companion terms – humanism and post-humanism, Eurocentrism, and all manner of -cenes – have been used and abused so promiscuously that both interpretive and political clarity is easily lost. At their core is a flight from world history: from the "*real* movement" of historical capitalism (Marx & Engels 2010: 482). The pretext for this flight typically rests on two major claims. One is an empiricist assertion that world history is diverse and therefore cannot be grasped in its combined and uneven patterns. The second is an ideological claim that any attempt to narrate capitalism's differentiated unity is irremediably Eurocentric. The result is a descent into amalgamations of regional particularisms with assertions that the problem of modern world history is *Europe* – rather than capitalism. These enable "critical" theorists to redefine the interpretive debate, away from the real ground of world-historical turning points and towards philosophical and conceptual propositions abstracted from those turning points. Too

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often, critical theorists have been content to throw *their* (correct?) phrases against *other* (incorrect?) phrases. Dropped from the frame is the debate over decisive world-historical transitions, the specific patterns of power, profit and life within and across eras of capitalism, and the globalizing geographies of class power.

It is a very old problem. Marx, expelled from Paris and landing in Brussels in the spring of 1845 (soon joined by Engels), met the problem directly. Writing amidst industrial capitalism's simmering revolutionary tensions, Marx and Engels confronted the idealism of the Young Hegelians and the "true socialists." Notwithstanding

> *their allegedly 'world-shattering' phrases, [they] are the staunchest conservatives. The most recent of them have found the correct expression for their activity when they declare they are only fighting against* 'phrases.' *They forget, however, that they themselves are opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world (Marx & Engels 2010: 30).*

Among historical materialism's decisive contributions is its interpretive power to demystify the bourgeoisie's "ruling ideas" in service to socialist revolution (Marx & Engels 2010: 59ff). Is that contribution uneven? From a dialectical perspective, of course it is. And that's the point. Historical materialism is a method organized to reveal the "real movements" of class society in the web of life. In other words, historical materialism is, above all, *historical*. And by *historical*, Marx and Engels underline, they mean "the actual empirical existence of men in their *world-historical,* instead of local, being." (Marx & Engels 2010: 49). Capitalism's uniqueness is found in the historical geography of endless accumulation, which

> *mak[es] each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, and finally puts* world-historical*, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones… [T]his transformation of history into world history is by no means a mere abstract act on the part of 'self-consciousness,' the world spirit, or of any other metaphysical spectre, but a quite material, empirically verifiable act (Marx & Engels 2010: 49, 51).*

In this passage, Marx and Engels foreground capitalism's internationalization of everyday life and, therefore, of class power. This globalization was irreducibly shaped by the "twofold relation" of class society – not only socio-ecological at every turn but premised on an active materialism through which class society is at once (but unevenly) producer and product of webs of life (Marx & Engels 2010: 43; Burkett 1999; Foster 2000). This geohistorical trinity of environment-making, class formation and planetary urbanization has been central to my thinking about capitalism as a world-ecology[1].

That argument is straightforward: identifying, interpreting, and reconstructing the origins and development of planetary crisis is among the world left's most fundamental *political* tasks[2]. Virtually everything about climate justice politics today turns on one's conception of world history – even and especially when those conceptions are ahistorical or paper-thin. Ahistorical thinking is almost guaranteed to reproduce the bourgeoisie's ruling ideas. The "second wave" environmentalism that emerged after 1968, for example, was hostage to the dominant fetishes of the early nineteenth century: populationism and industrialism (Guha 2000: 69–97). It was and is an outlook strongly predisposed to technocratic and technological fetishes, and to ignoring imperial power and the environmental problems faced by workers and peasants worldwide (see, Robertson 2012; Montrie 2011; Moore 2021a).

So much, yet so little, has changed since 1968. Today's big "E" Environmentalism – the "Environmentalism of the Rich" (Dauvergne 2016) and its Anthropocene Consensus – remains captive to these nineteenth-century fetishes and to the program of planetary managerialism (Moore 2021a). Multiple antagonists of planetary *sustainability* – itself a relentlessly polysemic concept well-integrated into the neoliberal eco-industrial complex – are itemized: economic growth, consumerism, inefficient markets, wasteful technology, urbanization, and yes, fifty years after Ehrlich and 225 years after Malthus, overpopulation (Ehrlich 1968). This laundry list is illustrated by the Popular Anthropocene's now-iconic "hockey stick" charts and Great Acceleration narratives (McNeill & Engelke 2016; see also Moore 2017b).

A fateful collision, we are told, shapes modern world history: "Humans" are "overwhelming the great forces of nature" (Steffen *et al.* 2007). The Popular Anthropocene and political ontologists find common ground in the philosophy of external relations: the "collision" of essences conceived through network and system metaphors rather than the interpenetration of opposites. Gone from such accounts are the constitutive role of popular revolts, social revolutions, and imperialism as the mechanism of class formation and the appropriation of Cheap Natures. The politics that issues from this cosmology of Man versus Nature – invented during the rise of capitalism after 1492 – is some combination of techno-scientific planetary management ("listen to *the* science") combined with pious liberal moralism: "live simply so that others may live." All the while, capitalism's business as usual sustains.

What is, and what is not, the Capitalocene? From World-historical method to proletarian internationalism

The relations between the origins of a world-historical problem, its historical development, and its recent configurations of power, profit and life are intimate. One's assessment of these relations feeds, more-or-less directly, into one's conception of world politics. Tragically – three decades after Harvey's lament that Green Thought either ignores environmental history or treats it as "a repository of anecdotal evidence in support of particular claims" – environmentalist theory proceeds as if capitalism's history is epiphenomenal (Harvey 1993).

Counter-intuitively, such history denialism lends itself to critical variants of Hillary Clinton's neoliberal insistence that we "get over" the long history of imperialism: "For goodness sakes, this is the 21st century. We've got to get over what happened 50, 100, 200 years ago" (Reuters 2010). A political theory de-linked from capitalism's world histories produces a politics with major blind spots, not least around imperialism's willingness to "destroy the village in order to save it" and the signal contribution of anti-imperialist revolutions in defending those metaphorical (and actual) villages[3]. The Capitalocene thesis is one antidote to this history-denialism. Both the 1830 and 1492 Capitalocene theses – for all their differences – agree: climate justice politics must interrogate the origins of planetary crisis (see, Malm 2016; Moore 2017a; Moore 2018). About which, more presently.

The flight from history performs a twofold ideological task for capital. First, it fragments our understanding of how structures of knowledge, the geocultural pillars of capitalist domination, and the worldwide dynamics of capital and class fit together. With decolonial perspectives, the problem is revealed in a seemingly-infinite

stream of additive conceptual assemblages: "the heteropatriarchal capitalist modern/colonial world system" and all that (Escobar 2018: xii). The simplest version of these additive formulations is some version of *colonialism plus capitalism*. Almost invariably, these disconnect both capitalism and colonialism from specific class structures – and the dynamics of peripheral class formation – implanted by specific imperial projects seeking to secure a good business environment (e.g., Grosfoguel 2002). Importantly, such disconnection tends to present *any* account foregrounding class and capital as "reductionist" – a view that collapses the significant differences between world-historical class analysis and Eurocentric class formalism. Even more curiously, much of the now-fashionable settler colonialism argument reproduces an older Civilizing discourse of "native" and "settler" – which also abstracted from class relations (albeit with different political sympathies), not uncommonly in the interests of sustainable development *avant la lettre* (e.g., Jacks & Whyte 1939).

The rise of capitalism was tightly bound to climate change and successive Civilizing Projects (Moore 2021e). European Universalism – and its pivotal trinity of Man, Nature, and Civilization – matured in the long seventeenth century. This was capitalism's first *developmental* crisis. These crises mark the transition from one phase of capitalism to another, during which systemwide crises are resolved through new rounds of primitive accumulation and the extra-economic appropriation of Cheap Natures (see Moore 2015). The seventeenth century's "general crisis" was a perfect storm of climate change, popular revolt, endless war, and economic volatility. The climate downturn – unfavorable even by the standards of the Little Ice Age – was a decisive moment (Parker 2013). It was driven by natural forcing and amplified by conquest, commodification, and class formation in the Americas after 1492. The latter marked the emergence of *capitalogenic* forcing. Its geological signature was the Orbis Spike, Maslin and Lewis's (2015) term for the sixteenth-century carbon drawdown resulting from New World genocides (see also, Cameron *et al*. 2015).

Similar to the climate-class conjuncture two centuries earlier – marking feudalism's *epochal* crisis – this seventeenth-century conjuncture amplified class and political tensions, propelling popular revolt and endless war in a Europe fiscally exhausted by the Valois-Hapsburg wars. These culminated in the great financial crisis of 1557 (Patel & Moore 2017). However, in contrast to the late medieval conjuncture, the crisis was resolved. The new modern state-machineries at the heart of Iberian, then Dutch and English, seaborne empires succeeded in "fixing" the seventeenth-century crisis of world order and world accumulation. That fix was realized through an audacious series of productivist campaigns. This was the world-ecological revolution of the long seventeenth century, bringing a critical increment of planetary life into the circuit of Cheap Nature for the first time. Its crown jewels were Peru's silver mining complex and northeastern Brazil's sugar plantations. Meanwhile, within Europe, an epochal movement of semi-proletarianization generated explosive class contradictions in the countryside, manifested in waves of agrarian rebellion (see, Moore 2010a, 2010b; Linebaugh & Rediker 2000).

European Universalism crystallized in this first capitalogenic climate crisis – a developmental crisis grasped as a turning point in capitalism's trinity of power, profit, and life. Refusing conquest-determinism and climate-determinism, this world-historical reckoning understands these two moments as dialectical antagonisms driving capitalism towards a "climate fix" strategy prioritizing large-scale industry and trans-Atlantic proletarianization. In the colonies, the problem for empire was to restore and expand Cheap Labor following the slaving-induced genocides. Within central and western

Europe, the problem was to contain the dangerous classes – which in the fourteenth century had dealt a historical defeat to Europe's ruling classes and by the seventeenth century threatened, once again, to get out of hand (Zagorin 1982). In this first capitalist climate crisis, forms of Universalism began to materialize that directly facilitated this climate fix. Hence, the remarkable synchroneity of the seventeenth-century's labor/landscape revolution with its enabling real abstractions: Man, Nature, and Civilization, quickly germinating naturalized ideologies of racial and gendered domination.

European Universalism was a class-managerial imperative whose geocultural architecture rested on Nature. Note the uppercase, *Nature*. It was a ruling idea and governing accumulation strategy that relocated the vast majority of humans along with extra-human life into that new cosmological (yet very material) zone, *Nature*. The managerial priority was to "civilize" such humans, of course always in the interests of securing the maximal exploitation of labor-power and the maximal appropriation of unpaid work. This is the origins of planetary management as a guiding thread for imperial practice and the appropriation of Cheap Natures – especially the Four Cheaps of food, labor, energy and raw materials (Moore 2021d). European Universalism's vision of planetary management, defined by the anti-political rationalization of socio-ecological problems on the road to Progress, is with us still. Call it Sustainable Development, the Anthropocene, whatever – old wine, new bottles.

This is where Cartesian rationality – and its mind/body dualism – moves to the fore. The significance of Descartes' contribution is easily displaced into a purely philosophical discussion. My priority lies elsewhere: in how Cartesian rationality expressed and enabled early capitalism's managerial fantasies, over time congealing into a managerial ethos that would inform successive waves of imperial, resource, and workplace control revolutions. Centuries before Frederick Winslow Taylor formalized "scientific management," pursuing the managerial concentration of "brain work" and the reduction of proletarian labor "almost to the level of labor in its animal form," Descartes articulated a philosophy of *planetary* management (quotations respectively from Taylor 1912: 98; Braverman 1974: 78). Distinguishing between *thinking things* and *extended things* as discrete essences, and prioritizing the domination of the latter by the former, Descartes articulated the geocultural "premises of the work-discipline" that capitalism required (Federici 2004; Descartes 2006). In so doing, a Cheap Labor strategy was installed at the heart of European Universalism – and its Promethean impulse.

By the time of Descartes' classic formulation of an early modern managerial philosophy (1637) – separating the thinkers (managers) from the bodies (workers) – modern structures of knowledge were taking shape. Across the seventeenth century, the concatenation of Descartes, Newton, Bacon and Locke codified the capitalist "system of knowledge" (Wallerstein 1980; Wallerstein 2006). The structures of knowledge were, in successive turns, dependent and independent variables, channeling but also informing the knowledge and practice of imperialism and its trinity of conquest, class formation, and commodification. The structures of knowledge and domination crystallized *together* in this era for a sound reason: their dialectical unity was crucial to imperial class projects – cultural, political, and economic – aimed at securing the conditions of expanded accumulation.

This leads us to the question of the Capitalocene. First, let's be clear that the Capitalocene is not an argument for the primacy of economic motives. Nor is it an attempt to substitute an abstract logic for world history – as with decolonial thought. For all the significant differences between 1492 and 1830 theses, both prioritize the rise of capitalism. For Malm, it's an Anglo-centric story shaped by the geographies

of class struggle, technical innovation and the coal revolution (Malm 2016). For me, it's a world-historical story of the epoch-making land/labor revolution after 1492, producing a capitalist world-ecology (Moore 2017a). Neither seeks to substitute human for geological history. Both are staunch critics of economism, insisting on the centrality of political power in establishing and reproducing the necessary conditions of endless accumulation.

The Capitalocene argument is a *method* – not an abstract formula (Moore 2017c). Methodological arguments about the bounding of time, space, and socio-ecological relations must be interrogated based on what they allow one to explain. Malm's circuit of fossil capital and my theory of Cheap Nature are methodological procedures tracing the emergence of capitalist socio-ecological relations. There are differences. Malm thinks I am a Latourian. I think Malm's theory of fossil capital internalizes a resource fetish and practices a Eurocentric class formalism. These are differences among comrades, although one can't help but see a missed opportunity in Malm's reluctance to engage the historical questions (see, Moore 2017a).

Whereas most critical theory – and most eco-socialism – dissolves that world history in the acid bath of "world-shattering" phrases, the world-ecology conversation insists that radical theory is world-historical, or it is nothing. The Capitalocene thesis is an argument about *turning points* and *patterns*. It challenges the imperialist mythology of Man and Nature inscribed in that most sacred phrase, *anthropogenic* climate change. Its alternative is *capitalogenic* climate change: shorthand for the emergence of capitalism as a planetary force. This method flows from a commitment to identifying and informing the class politics that pinpoint capitalism's strategic vulnerabilities. If we wish to understand those weak links, we must situate them historically and geographically within the *longue durée* of capitalist environment-making – not least, within previous political conjunctures of unfavorable climate change.

The Capitalocene method highlights the three most pressing historical-geographical questions of capitalogenic planetary change[4]. First, it situates the origins of the planetary crisis within early capitalism's labor/landscape revolution. Second, it identifies and interprets the patterns of recurrence, evolution, and crisis in capitalism's world history. Third, one can argue for the novel character of the present moment only after identifying capitalism's cumulative trends and cyclical patterns.

This method has two virtues. One, it directly confronts the neo-Malthusian orthodoxy of Man and Nature – broadly conceived, an ahistorical and externalist conception of the "limits to growth." Second, it constructs a world history of the limits to capital forged through modernity's contradictory unities of class struggle, capital accumulation, geocultural domination, and imperial power. These world-historical unities are at once producers and products of the web of life. Far from denying the limits to capital, world-ecology affirms these as the antagonistic unity of "inside" and "outside" relations, themselves interpenetrating and interchangeable (Ollman 1971; Levins & Lewontin 1985). This conversation foregrounds capitalism's drive to extend its hegemony over new domains of life, necessary to restructure its limits and postpone the day of reckoning. In that pursuit, capitalist environment-making transforms not only the conditions for the reproduction of planetary life but the valorization process (Marx 1976: 283).

The valorization process – comprising the transformation of value and its wider socio-ecological implications – not only encounters limits, but actively *produces* these. Here the concept of negative-value may prove useful, drawing out the *political* implications of modernity's antagonisms of life and capital. In this perspective,

capitalist environment-making *necessarily* generates contradictory relations that cannot be solved by capital (Moore 2015). Any climate "fix" – authoritarian or socialist – will undermine capitalism's five-century business-as-usual model. To repeat what every primer on dialectics tells us: this is a quantity-qualitative transformation of the highest order (Marx & Engels 1987: 356). Capital *must* exhaust the biospheric conditions of capital accumulation, which is far more than the depletion of passive webs of life. Such exhaustion also emerges through webs of life in revolt against toxification and all manner of bourgeois simplifications. Just as the proletariat resists capital's dehumanizing logic, the biotariat – those webs of life set to work for capital – continually unsettles the disciplines of planetary management (Collis 2016; Wallis 2000).

Capital tends to see proletariat and biotariat as just so many interchangeable factors of production. Thus, Marx's observation that labor-power becomes, for capital, "disposable human material" alongside the other "material elements" consumed in production (Marx 1976: 785–786). Successive waves of capitalist development have pushed this linear development to its qualitative rupture. Forms of social life – entangling the human and extra-human – emerge that are increasingly incompatible with the logic of capital. This counter-tendency is *negative-value*. It's not negative in a mathematical sense. Rather, these are limiting tendencies. Once activated, they threaten the *negation* (the transcendence) of the law of value. So long as sufficiently large frontiers of Cheap Nature could be conquered and appropriated, the activation of negative-value was kept within manageable limits. As those frontiers have been enclosed – including the enclosure of the atmospheric commons as a dumping ground for greenhouse gases – capitalism's contradictions have become increasingly unmanageable. Although the specific expressions have changed, the insights of Lenin and Luxemburg on the closure of frontiers and the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalry retains considerable power (Luxemburg 1970; Lenin 1964). World-ecology extends those insights to capitalism's internalizing relation with and within webs of life. This approach has the advantage of identifying capitalism's weak links (its limits) and clarifying the possibilities for planetary justice and Biotarian socialism.

European's Universalism logic *is* totalizing (Mignolo 1995). Forgotten in so many critical accounts is an elementary historical observation: Universalism is the geocultural moment of the endless accumulation of capital. It is neither base nor superstructure. It is sometimes a "force of production" in its own right, at other points an indispensable mechanism for legitimating a wildly unequal and violently reproduced capitalist world-ecology (Wallerstein 2006). This is a bourgeois Universalism.

The alternative is not a world history narrated through "a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies" (Mignolo 2012: 22). This is abstract particularism. It is the mirror image of abstract Universalism. The anti-capitalist way forward is a dialectical universalism. Dialectics proceeds through variation, not in spite of it. Its socio-ecological basis is the worldwide formation of the capitalogenic trinity forged in the seventeenth-century crisis: the epoch-making relations of the climate class divide, climate apartheid and climate patriarchy (Moore 2019). This ideological-class-imperial configuration was understood, even if provisionally, from the first stirrings of proletarian internationalism: emerging in the seventeenth century's trans-Atlantic class struggles. In the hands, bodies and minds of the plantation proletariat, dialectical universalism recognized that the diverse forms of appearance of oppression and exploitation belied an underlying unity (Linebaugh & Rediker 2000; James 1989). The question of internationalism – and of a dialectical universalism that pursues human liberation in its widest diversity – would thenceforth be fundamental to working-class politics. The twentieth century's inflection

point was Lenin's reorientation towards national liberation struggles from Baku (1920) onwards (Prashad 2008). Spectacularly, such internationalism – uneven, often fraught, always fragile – was the crux of the worldwide class struggle, with national liberation as its pivot, across the postwar era (Arrighi, Hopkins & Wallerstein 1989). Why should this be? As every new reader of the *Manifesto* learns, it's because capital must drive beyond all limits and, in so doing, creates an internationalist system oriented to the destruction of effective resistance, yet creating the socio-ecological basis for revolutionary action.

The Capitalocene is an evolving conversation to clarify the historical geography of capitalism's long march towards planetary crisis and world revolution. It eschews a double alienation characteristic of critical and mainstream approaches. First, it rejects historical interpretations that take modern fetishes as their point of departure. For the Popular Anthropocene and most environmentalism, this is one or another version of the Man and Nature cosmology. For pluriversal approaches, and its wider decolonial conversation, this is "the West and the Rest," pitting a reified Europe against the rest of the world. The former unfolds through an abstracted logic of empirical observation embedded in the deep history of positivist and imperial thought. The latter embraces, as we shall see, the most thoroughgoing Eurocentrism under the sign of anti-Eurocentric critique. Offering no account for the epochal synthesis of power, profit and life realized in the long sixteenth century, we are treated to a reified modernity isolated from its patterns of accumulation, class formation, and geopolitical power.

This decolonial approach has the curious (and surely unintended) consequence of rendering the rise of Europe as quite miraculous! Rather than reconstructing the historical geography of the transition to capitalism across these early modern centuries, we are treated to a woke version of the European miracle, through which the political ecology of class, empire, and capital is nowhere to be found. This leaves only a reified modernity to explain an unprecedented biogeographical transition in human affairs (the so-called Columbian Exchange) and an unprecedented labor/landscape revolution in the centuries after 1492.

Delivering on the promises of climate justice will require a new, unprecedented labor/landscape revolution in the coming century. That revolutionary strategy – towards a Proletarocene – cannot be abstractly coalitional. Instead, it must be grounded in capitalism's work-relations, linking paid and unpaid work, human and extra-human lives (The Salvage Collective 2021). Planetary justice will succeed or fail according to how capably the world's re/producing classes draw on the actual and latent work-centered unities forged by capitalist development – again, taking seriously the *Manifesto*'s geographical logic (Harvey 1998). These differentiated unities find their common thread in the Planetary Proletariat. From this vantage point, we can bring into focus the unifying movements of capitalism's geographies of work, life and power. Here we discover a necessary vista of the class struggle in the web of life, swirling about the differential unities of paid and unpaid work, of humans and the rest of nature. This is the interpenetrating, overlapping and porous trinity of the proletariat, femitariat, and biotariat (see, Moore 2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

Abstract pluriversalism & its discontents

I am now going to risk of the intellectual equivalent of "farting in a lift" – to borrow a joke from my friend Raj Patel. I want to begin by communicating my gratitude to the co-editors for inviting me to join a dialogue on pluriversalism, knowing well that I would challenge its guiding threads (Lunden & Tornel 2021). From the outset, let me stipulate that scholars' ongoing efforts to recuperate indigenous cosmologies and practices are necessary to any planetary justice project. However, it does not follow that any of these are outside modernity.

In the editors' call for papers, I want to flag the following problems for debate: 1) it conflates the bourgeois abstraction of the Anthropocene with the dialectical abstraction of the Capitalocene, suggesting that these are right and left variants of a modernist position; 2) in so doing, it recapitulates political ontology's caricature of historical materialism as a variant of Western universalism; 3) it reproduces a confusion between levels of abstraction and geographical scale, falsely suggesting that world-ecology approaches are mono-scalar rather than multi-scalar, despite the latter's repeated insistence on linking the biosphere and body, the sites of re/production and world accumulation, through the mediations of capital, class and empire; 4) it privileges fetishisms like "economic growth" (and de-growth) in an explicit disavowal of "naming the system"; and not least (!) (5) it dispenses with the need to connect radical politics to the long-run historical-geographical formation and development of *capitalogenic* climate change since 1492.

Pluriversalism and its cognates self-present as heterodox and inclusive; they are, in fact, deeply exclusionary. They project a bourgeois flattening of proletarian dialectics, contending that world-historicizations of capital and class, science and empire, are irremediably *modern*. This makes for some significant blind spots. In one of the most intriguing, the co-editors for this special issue propose the Anthropocene as "disrupt[ive]… [of] the Nature/Culture divide." This is a widely-circulated claim. What bears underlining is that Chakrabarty and Latour – the co-editors' points of reference – are unabashedly class-denialist and anti-dialectical. Chakrabarty's audacious reduction of class struggle and class politics to an abstract "inequality" even leads him to argue a counterfactual: a "more egalitarian and just [world]… *the climate crisis would be worse! Our collective carbon footprint would only be larger*" (Chakrabarty 2014: 11). Ours? Whose? The "footprint" *must* be larger because, after all, capitalism and socialism are the same. There is no alternative.

Like pluriversal arguments generally, Chakrabarty and Latour practice a philosophy of *external relations*, narrating a "collision" of essences. The consequences of such a view are enormous. An externalist philosophy of relations drinks deeply from the well of Cartesian rationality and its ontological prioritization of substances over relations. The externalist framework "holds that there are both 'things'… ([or] 'factors') and relations, but that they are logically independent of each other… [In this perspective,] the relations between two or more things can undergo dramatic changes and even disappear altogether without affecting the qualities by which we recognize" (Ollman 2015: 10). Recognizing this externalist philosophy allows us to make sense of Mignolo's curious vista of political possibility. In this pluralist framework, "Western universalism has the right to coexist in the pluriverse of meaning. Stripped of its pretended universality, Western cosmology would be one of many cosmologies" – as if European Universalism has been a disembodied worldview rather than the world bourgeoisie's practical hammer of world domination.

The pluriversal affinity with anti-dialectical thinkers like Latour and Chakrabarty is reasonable within its anti-communist framework. Notwithstanding pluriversalism's surficial endorsement of diversity, the thrust of the argument is clear: they must deny the dialectical character of arguments constructed through the philosophy of internal relations (Chakrabarty 2014). For Latour, "capitalism does not exist" (Latour 1988: 173). In Latour's exceedingly unfortunate case, capital-denialism leads to the unsavory formulation of the "Earthbound" and its predictable call for the "defense… of the European homeland" (Latour 2018). As for Chakrabarty, the "logic" of capitalism and the "history of life on this planet" are externalized. They have no "intrinsic" connection. *Intrinsic*? Wobble words like this run through Chakrabarty's arguments. These two moments of capital and life certainly enjoy a dialectical relation. This was, after all, Marx and Engels' argument in *The German Ideology*, positing an active relation between webs of life, "modes of life," and "modes of production" (Marx & Engels 2010: 31).

The *active* relation between "mode of production" and the "history of life on this planet" is much more pivotal to historical materialism than Chakrabarty supposes (2009: 217). Dialectics allows for the non-reductive incorporation of, for instance, volcanic activity in the history of class society. A hugely consequential relation, to be sure! The *internal* moment of the philosophy of internal relations does not presume that volcanic activity is somehow subsumed by capital. Rather, *internal*, like *totality*, is a methodological procedure that allows for the interpretive integration of "natural forcing" into the making of class society and its crises (Moore 2017c). This culminates in today's *capitalogenic* forcing and the unmaking of capitalism. It's this dialectical recognition that is implicit in the environmental justice slogan, "There is no such thing as a natural disaster."

In step with political ontology, Chakrabarty maintains that Marxism is totalizing, and finding that it doesn't linearly explain everything, condemns it to the dustbin of history. But historical materialism pivots on the dialectical consideration of "natural forcing" (e.g., solar minima and maxima, orbital variations, volcanism, etc.) in the history of class society. It dialectically joins "earth formation" and "social formation" with an appreciation of the "swerve of the atom" (see, Chakrabarty 2014; Foster 2000; Alvater 2016). Chakrabarty's externalist view blinds him to the dialectical alternative staring him in the face. Thus, he consistently mis-represents the Capitalocene thesis – both Malm's and mine – which does precisely what Chakrabarty advocates, albeit in dialectical mode: reveal the differentiated unity of "force" as unevenly geophysical and geohistorical (Chakrabarty 2021: 161ff). This is among historical materialism's animating insights: the "twofold relation" – natural and social – of the forces and relations of production in class society (Marx & Engels 2010: 43).

What kind of pluriversalism for what kind of politics, in what kind of planetary crisis? Arturo Escobar's recent intervention is worth considering as we reflect upon the question (Escobar 2018). Escobar's pluriversalism comes uncomfortably close to Third Way politics. Popularized during the Clinton-Blair years, Third Way politics span most of the twentieth century[5]. Allegedly neither left nor right, Third Way politics in its leftwing expression self-presents as always authentically more radical than the socialist and communist left, who are – we are told – imprisoned in the iron thought-cage of modernity.

Pluriversalism belongs to something called political ontology. Among its foundations is a post-Cold War formulation in subaltern form: the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993). Blaser underlines three points. First, "'Europe' operates as a metonym for modernity" (Blaser 2013: 548). Second, we must critique and deny the myth that "the

encounter with Europeans is the single most important constitutive factor in the historical trajectory of any given social formation" (Blaser 2009: 881). Third, there are "many… stories *in spite of Europe*, that is, stories that are not *easily* brought into the fold of modern categories" (Blaser 2013: 548). (Easily?) Marisol de la Cadena finds no meaningful difference between "liberal and socialist projects" (de la Cadena 2015: 143, passim). Mignolo arrives at the same conclusion, creatively interpreting the postwar non-aligned movement as resistance to "capitalist *and* communist imperial designs" – somehow forgetting that socialist states and communist-led revolutionary movements were the fundamental counter-tendency to US-backed fascism and ecocide in the Third World (Mignolo 2011: xiii). Sometimes, decolonial thinkers say the quiet part out loud. Fondly quoting Third Way philosopher Agnes Heller – who saw no meaningful difference between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – Escobar dismisses state socialism as a "dictatorship of needs" (Heller 2010; Escobar 2018: 108). On this view, dialectics are incurably infected by "modernism": "its aspiration to universality, totality, teleology, and truth" (Escobar 2018: 36). This abstract pluriversalism, under cover of a seemingly radical critique, recapitulates key elements of Cold War anticommunism and Eurocentrism – above all, the reification of "Europe," which exists neither as civilization nor as a metonym before 1492.

Among the sentiments we find in pluriversalism is a classic Third Way formulation: neither capitalism nor socialism. Or: neither Anthropocene nor Capitalocene. Instead, we are told, the problems of world-historical transition, fundamental to the unfolding epochal crisis of capitalism, can be politically addressed through "re-worlding." (Politically? Or is it anti-politically?) Figures like Mignolo want to eat their cake and have it too, making arguments that cohere only within the domain of "world-shattering phrases." He wants "pluriversality as a universal project," through which "the universal cannot have one single owner." (Note the conflation between world-historical process and bourgeois Universalism.) It "corresponds with the Zapatistas' vision of a world in which many worlds coexist." Recognizing the bind in which pluriversalism finds itself, Mignolo insists that his perspective is "not cultural relativism, but the entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential" (Mignolo 2018: x).

The source of that power differential? Of course, it cannot be class or capital. Nor can it be imperialism as a world-historical force. At the end, we are left with the metaphysic of coloniality that denies capitalism's centrality in the making of planetary crisis – and denies the constitutive linkage between the structures of knowledge, ideology and capital in the web of life. The source of that "power differential" – for Mignolo, Blaser, and countless others – is "Europe," the "coloniality of power" abstracted from world history.

Paradoxically, this critique of Eurocentrism ends up proving the European miracle (Wallerstein 1999). Removed from the Transition Debate are the constitutive relations of civilizational crisis, imperial advance, and class struggle that defined the passages from feudalism to capitalism (Moore 2007, 2021f). This erasure of early modern capitalism is common to the critique of Eurocentric historiography (Frank 1998; Pomeranz 2000). Mignolo is explicit on the point: early capitalism becomes the "Atlantic commercial circuit" (Mignolo & Ennis 2001). Here Gunder Frank, the dependency radical turned Chicago-style monetarist, and Mignolo, the decolonial champion, find common ground in a circulationist (and class-denialist) reading of early modern world history (Frank 1988). A miraculous account of the Rise of the West indeed.

Internationalism & the perils of 'Groupism'

In this miraculous perspective, not only is world history epiphenomenal; *all* interpretations of capitalism's world history are Eurocentric. This erasure is wildly disabling to any emancipatory project that must be concretely internationalist if it is to resist and transcend the prevailing superpowers' global economic, ideological, and military might.

The rejection of internationalism is linked to what Rogers Brubaker (2004) calls *groupism*. It relies on a form of status-group ontogenesis, common to many nationalisms (Hechter 1977). Groupism embraces subjectivities of varied ascriptive identities resulting from capitalism's uneven and combined development. Its typical mode of argumentation regards these varied identities as something outside of modern world history – an eternal independent, rather than historically dependent, variable. Groupism is:

> *the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic constituents of the social world)… It has managed to withstand a quarter century of constructivist theorizing in the social sciences, a sustained critique of reification in anthropology and other disciplines, the influential and destabilizing contributions of feminist, post-structuralist, post-modernist, and other theories, and even the widespread acknowledgment, in principle, that 'cultures,' 'communities,' 'tribes,' 'races,' 'nations,' and 'ethnic groups' are not bounded wholes. Despite these and other developments, ethnic and other groups continue to be conceived as entities and cast as actors… 'Groupness' is a variable, not a constant; it cannot be presupposed (Brubaker 2004: 2–4).*

Pluriversalist groupism lends itself especially to a romantic politics of "life territories" allegedly outside of capitalism's five centuries of conquest, commodification, and class formation in the web of life. Correctly recognizing the largely defensive character of peasant and worker struggles across the neoliberal era, pluriversalism commits to a strategic error: the reification of *defense*, a word that appears dozens of times in Escobar's book. Worse still, *defense* is bound to ethnonational claims of political *detachment* from class struggle and ontological *attachment* between "life worlds" and "territories" (Escobar 2018: ix). (My guess is that widespread sympathy for indigenous struggles – often heroic and inspiring for me as well – has silenced radical critique that questions the reifications such struggles internalize in their calls for "tradition," a fraught form of politics to say the least!) (Taylor 2019). While practically speaking, defensive struggles against capitalist enclosure and exploitation are vital, they constitute neither a political program nor a revolutionary vision capable of engaging today's planetary crisis.

The "defense of… life territories" – in Escobar's unfortunate language – readily lends itself to the second erasure: of working-class internationalism under cover of a subtle but powerful anticommunism (Escobar 2018: 21). Some version of this phrase, *defense of life territories*, runs like a red thread through political ontology. Shorn of a world-historical vista on worldwide class dynamics, however, such formulations lead to a clash-of-civilizations worldview. In this groupist reading of the Cold War thesis, defense of "life territories" is not a means to building practical internationalism, but a particularist program. Abstract pluriversalism trades in easy and surficial judgments of actually existing internationalism, which from the beginning proceeded through "unity in difference." The dismissal of dialectics is intimately to this anticommunism, drawing on the Cold War formula that equates fascism and state socialism.

The linguistic acrobatics performed to avoid naming capitalism – or decentering it in word salads like "the heteropatriarchal capitalist modern/colonial world system" – are impressive (Escobar 2018: xii). Such acrobatics are the stock in trade of *abstract* pluriversalism, which refuses to make the world-historical connections between imperialism, racism, sexism and worldwide class formation. Google search-string expressions like Escobar's short-circuit our capacities to think through imperialism – and its constitutive Civilizing Projects – as the bourgeoisie's preferred mode of class formation. For Escobar, imperialism and capitalism appear a nuisance, an irritation. Socialist politics is subjected to a patronizing nostalgia of peasants reading Mao's *Little Red Book* (Escobar 2018: 35–36). The Chinese Revolution's success in raising life expectancy from 40 to 65 in just three decades, an unprecedented achievement in human affairs, is beside the point! No, that's just another "totalitarian" project.

The resulting political ontology is a web of metaphysical claims about modernity – separated from capitalism and class except as lip service or as passing description – that effect a double lacunae. One is the discouragement of world history through a false conflation of "universal" and world-historical. Mignolo puts the matter bluntly, refusing capitalism's differentiated unity by obscuring the difference: "*a* world history or *a* universal history is an impossible task" (Mignolo 2012: 21). Never mind that these are not the same!

For Marx and Engels, capitalism's universalization is shorthand for developing world-historical antagonisms – a unity in difference that takes variation as its point of departure and motivation. Theirs is a *critique* of European Universalism. Rather than find common ground with Marx and Engels, decolonial thinkers confuse matters. This is nowhere clearer than in their conflation of Kantian universalism – premised on "the achievement of a universal civic society which administers law among men" – with historical materialism's emancipatory horizon, premised on the "*real* movement" of class struggle in its "world-historical existence" (Kant 1784; Marx & Engels 2010: 482). This imprecision is ideologically-licensed: anticommunism is a powerful opiate. Its effect is to flatten Marxism and silence an enduring tradition of anti-imperialist socialism with deep roots in national liberation struggles – reaching critical mass with the early twentieth century's great social revolutions in Mexico and Russia (Dussel 2002).

For historical materialism, the history of class society in the web of life proceeds *through* variation and unevenness – not in spite of it. I know I repeat myself – but I risk pedantry in the face of chronic mischaracterization emanating from new materialist, political ontology, actor network, and other academic vogues. Unity in difference is the dialectical imagination's methodological core. It is a relentlessly curious and connective historical method that allows us to construct specific totalities from the standpoint of capitalism's pivotal contradictions. *Totality* is a methodological procedure unfolding through the *immanent* critique of capital. It is not an empirical statement. Rather, the "point of view of totality" is a means of demystifying capitalism's laws of motion and its abstract Universalism – to see beyond the limits of capitalism's reifications (Lukács 1971). It is the "situated" standpoint of the planetary proletariat, in its combined and uneven mosaics of paid and unpaid work, exploitation and appropriation, and human and extra-human natures.

The dialectical imagination begins, proceeds, and concludes – again, provisionally – with the "interpenetration of opposites" (Marx & Engels 1987: 356). *Opposites* are not ontologically independent but relationally co-produced. This explains the apparent paradox of Marx's dialectical naturalism and dialectical humanism, through which the labor process unevenly transforms specific environments and human social relations in

the web of life (Marx 1976: 283). Predictably, political ontologists routinely assert that for Marx, "nature is unhistorical" (de la Cadena 2015: 147). This would surprise Marx and Engels, who insisted that all historical writing must set out from "natural bases" and "their [subsequent] modification"!

For Marx, the world-historical movement of capitalism produces and is constituted through all manner of counter-tendencies. European Universalism is, from this standpoint, revealed as not only a "ruling idea" but as continuously shaped by its counter-tendencies, not least the "developing tendencies" of anti-capitalist revolt, resistance and revolution (Lukács 1971). The dialectical insistence that every socio-ecological process forms *through* connective and asymmetrical variation is a *critique* of positivist totalization. It is a historical method for making sense of capitalism as an evolving and uneven world-ecology of power, profit and life. From this standpoint, neither "Europe" nor "the Americas" exist as geosocial formations before 1492; *capitalism* does not form within Europe and *then* conquer the world (Quijano & Wallerstein 1992; contra Wood 1999). The *emergence* of capitalism was a dynamic of militarized accumulation and Civilizing Projects. These formed and re-formed geosocial formations, including *Europe*, an idea that came into widespread use only in the seventeenth century (Marino 2007; Quijano, 2000). Let's be clear, despite political ontology's protestations; capitalism *did* subordinate planetary life to the law of value over the ensuing four centuries – but not in the way that political ontology's linear and positive caricatures would have it. It was combined and uneven and formed through its decisive counter-tendency: the formation of the planetary proletariat and its trinity of the proletariat, femitariat, and biotariat (Silver & Slater 1999; Moore 2015). To paraphrase Marx, this trinity speaks to the "original sources" of surplus-value, spanning the apparent divides of human and extra-human life, paid and unpaid work. The history of capitalism's law of value – a law of Cheap Nature – is a historical-geographical movement of worldwide class formation. Its historical development holds forth and the possibility for the revolutionary transcendence of capitalism.

Dialectical Universalism, or the standpoint of the Planetary Proletariat

What kind of universalism? What kind of pluriversalism? Surely there are many possible answers. Let's avoid collapsing the difference between epistemological and ideological European Universalism – which flattens differences – and assessments of capitalism's world history and the emancipatory possibilities of working-class internationalism. When Marx and Engels speak of "universalizing" tendencies, they signify the "real movement" of capitalism's world-historical contradictions. This movement is constituted through tendencies and countertendencies: the interpenetration of opposites. The classic instance is Marx's discussion of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Marx 1981). It applies equally to the history of imperialism and anti-imperialist struggles, which is to say the worldwide class struggle in the web of life.

For dialectical materialism, the world history of class society – and capitalism in particular – proceeds *through* variation, not in spite of it. Dialectical materialism not only proceeds through difference but explores the inner relations that simultaneously flatten variation and produce it anew. It is connective and historical. It is open to the

webs of life that are at once products and producers of the capitalist world-ecology (Moore 2017c). Call it a dialectical universalism or a dialectical pluriversalism, whatever one prefers. Such a method insists that relationality is structured by webs of power and re/production in *actually existing* world history. It is an approach mindful of the real conditions of international solidarity created by capitalism itself (Silver & Slater 1999). This allows the re/producing classes – in fits and starts – to identify the international conditions of bourgeois rule and the imperative for internationalist solidarity against that rule.

Historical materialism, then, rejects the fashion of assemblage and political ontology approaches favoring a "democratic theory of causation." Listing capitalism's "bads" – racism, sexism, colonialism, class, and so forth – evades and indeed undermines efforts to connect these dynamics as differential internal moments of each other. In this light, everything becomes an "assemblage," everything is reduced to conjuncture. And yet, history cannot be wished away. Capitalism's world history is messy, contingent, but nevertheless patterned. A materialist philosophy of internal relations licenses the interpretation of world history as a "rich totality of many determinations," articulating a method that pursues uneven yet combined geographies (Marx 1993: 99; Wallerstein 1974). Given capitalism's unique logic of endless accumulation, which requires the endless appropriation and capitalization of the Earth – and therefore places planetary life at the center of its world-historical project – the world-ecology alternative foregrounds the centrality of an internationalist response to the biospheric dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

This standpoint allows us to go beyond a clash of civilizations between an essential Europeanness pitted against indigenist and other ethnonational identities. It alerts us to the danger of the widespread critical tendency to erase the pioneering contributions of race/class and gender/class super-exploitation in the name of abstracted patriarchy and racism. These lacunae – delinking the ideological formation of sexism and racism from the history of class formation and struggle – lead to an externalist collision of essences ("race, class, gender"). As such, they preclude the revolutionary syntheses of, for instance, Silvia Federici and W.E.B. Du Bois, situating racism and sexism as ideological mechanisms of the "ultimate exploitation" of, and the reproduction of cultural divisions within, the proletariat (Federici 2004; Du Bois 1935: 15). As Federici and Du Bois emphasize, the "proletarian struggle" is not one of abstractly combined "intersections" but rather determined through their world-historical interrelations, internationalist on both sides of the world-class struggle in the most thoroughgoing fashion (Federici 2004: 40; see also Linebaugh & Rediker 2000).

Too often, "decolonization" proceeds through the form of appearance identified (and critiqued) famously by Fanon – without however Fanon's attentiveness to the dialectical antagonisms of colonial class structures, enabled by racism but not propelled by it (Fanon 1963/1961). As C.L.R. James reminds us: "to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous," although – as James and Fanon make clear – to think of imperialism (the bourgeoisie's preferred mode of class formation) without race is clearly absurd (James 1989: 283). Fanon underlined the point in 1956: "the apparition of racism is not fundamentally determining. *Racism is not the whole but the most visible*" (Fanon 1967: 31–32, emphasis added). Writing the *Wretched of the Earth* in a race against time with leukemia, Fanon continually opens discussions of the colonial situation at the level of appearance – an "us" versus "them" Manichaeism – only to levy his most damning critiques at the "native" petty bourgeoisie and a collaborationist intelligentsia.

Wallerstein, who arranged for the English-language publication of *Wretched* in 1963, underscores Fanon's furious critique of class collaborationism in national liberation struggles. Fanon came to classify

> *those of the Third World who were not supporters… as among 'them'… [Fanon's] anger was now primarily directed at the bourgeoisie of the Third World, the exploiters who have emerged to share in the devastation with their erstwhile masters in a neo-colonial hell. Fanon had reverted to his earliest instinct, to a rational militancy based on class analysis (Wallerstein 1970: 229).*

The struggle against the racialized class regimes of the colonial world pivoted on the "international situation." Such an internationalist politics would smash the "compartmentalizations" of the imperialist world (Fanon 1963: 65, 37ff). In Fanon's view, the struggle for liberation turned on internationalism, forging "the community of interests between the working classes of the conquering country and the combined population of the conquered and dominated country" (Fanon 1967: 76).

World-ecology privileges an engaged pluralism and an ethics of synthesis committed to building the internationalist solidarities necessary to effectively resist – and thence to socialize – the International of Capital. Those two internationalisms, from above and below, are amplified by the deepening climate crisis, which should be understood as a singular crisis of life-making and profit-making. In this epochal transition, we are witnessing not only the breakdown of capitalism's basic economic mechanisms but also a worldwide turn towards ethno-national authoritarianism: Modi, Trump, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Orbán and others across eastern Europe. Expressive of this movement in the richest countries – all boast significant rightwing ethno-nationalist movements (Sweden Democrats, German's Alternative for Germany, France's National Rally, Britain's UK Independent Party, and a significant layer of the US GOP) – is the worldwide construction of a "global climate wall." These climate walls have been aggressively supported by mainstream parties everywhere. Border security spending between 2013 and 2018 sharply increased in the imperialist centers: the United States (34.3 percent); Germany (35.6 percent); Great Britain (30.5 percent); France (29.9 percent); and Australia (a whopping 70.9 percent) (Miller *et al.* 2021: 21). As US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made clear at the recent COP 26 meetings (2021), the climate crisis is a security problem. When the most powerful figures in the world say the quiet part aloud, believe them (Democracy Now! November 10, 2021).

Punctuated by ethno-national "anti-terror" legislation, border militarization, and Covid-inspired surveillance states, liberal democracy is showing clear signs of decomposition in the twenty-first century. The long wave of bourgeois democratization that began in earnest with the revolutions of 1848 is coming to an end (Berberoglu 2020). This is directly linked to capitalism's developing planetary crisis: its surplus capital overhang and an increasingly unpredictable spiral of climate events (Moore 2021f). Capitalism is driven by contradictions, to be sure – above all between semi-peripheral authoritarian nationalisms and the "masters of the universe" who gather each year at the Alpine ski resort in Davos. For all their differences, both fractions of the world bourgeoisie are well aware of the gravity of the crisis. Both are gravitating towards one or another "tributary" solution – to borrow Samir Amin's concept – to capitalism's epochal crisis (Amin 1974: 140). A tributary mode of production is one in which *politics* guarantees the accumulators of the surplus, a qualitative generalization of late capitalism's "too big to fail" guarantees to finance capital. The move towards

a tributary resolution for the planetary crisis is entirely unthreatened by particularist struggles to defend "life territories"– indeed, the worldwide tendency towards bourgeois authoritarianism is happy with such discourses and their politics (Forchtner 2019).

The world left is not well-positioned to halt these tendencies and organize an internationalist response (see, Baker *et al.* 2021). On the contrary, at the very moment when working-class internationalism is most necessary, a critical mass of intellectuals have embraced assemblage, actor-network, political ontology, pluriversal and other approaches that deny the connective historical and geographical asymmetries of capitalism as a "world-historical fact" (Marx & Engels 2010: 51). To play with an old French expression: one can ignore global politics, but it will not ignore you.

Planetary justice and the Planetary Proletariat: towards a Biotarian internationalism

The flight from world history disables ways of thinking necessary to advance a politics of planetary justice at the end of the Holocene. Those politics will need to be internationalist. At the same time, socialism will come – if it comes at all – unevenly, and the world history of socialist revolutions and national liberation movements needs to be taken seriously. A strategy for gaining and defending territorial power in order to reconstruct the relations of re/production in the interests of a broadly defined sustainability is non-optional. We live in a century where sea-level change, just to cite one prominent example, will compel the worldwide reconstruction of town-country divisions of labor. We cannot ignore politics because we dislike it. As Christian Parenti reminds us, the planetary crisis is *already* setting motion disasters "that call forth the state. How the state responds [and what kinds of states we organize] is a different question: sometimes it fails, but always it is called" (Parenti 2016: 183).

Absent a world-historical critique, radical arguments tend to reproduce one-sided visions that incorporate one or the other pole of the ruling binary: Nature and Society. This can take the form of an abstract localism paired with empty rhetorical gestures towards ecological holism: "Think Globally, Act Locally" (Albo 2006). Its leading intellectual exponent is Latour, whose "Earthbound concrete" reproduces an older epistemology of regional particularism and the primacy of parts over wholes (Latour 2018). Or it can take the form of "accelerationism," rightly grasping the technological possibilities of capitalism and political imperatives of internationalism, but abstracted from the historical natures that channel and constrain that technological history (Srnicek & Williams 2016; see also Moore 2015). Both peasantist and accelerationist tendencies acknowledge significant truths. The challenge before us today is to join these in a higher synthesis. To paraphrase Mao, such a guiding thread must join varied hues of Green, Red and "expert" in an internationalist vision of planetary justice – and socialist reconstruction. Those threads must, at a minimum, proceed from a recognition of the Planetary Proletariat's connective tissues and the trinity of capitalist work, whose threefold character can be abbreviated in the provisional formula: *proletariat* (human paid work), *femitariat* (unpaid human work), *biotariat* (the largely unpaid but valorized work of life as a whole).

The Planetary Proletariat emerged through capitalism's successive world-ecological revolutions – and vice-versa. Its formation was coterminous with the geocultural invention of Europe in the long – and cold – seventeenth century (Linebaugh &

Rediker 2000; Moore 2021f). Hence the uneven but virtually simultaneous formation of the climate class divide, climate patriarchy, and climate apartheid at this time. Against the international of capital, geographically and occupationally diverse working-class movements sought to mobilize on a world-scale. Successive socialist and communist internationals were only the tip of the iceberg. Watershed internationalist conferences – Baku in 1920, Bandung in 1955 – suggested the possibilities, even if unrealized and frustrated by the contradictions of populist nationalism and proletarian struggle, of a global democratic alternative to European Universalism and America's Cold War hegemony. Internationalism brought crucial solidarity against the American war in Vietnam and established robust networks that struggled against American support for Third World fascism from Indonesia to El Salvador. Cuban solidarity with Angola's revolutionaries prevented the new country's subordination to South African imperialism, and in time, contributed directly to the end of the apartheid regime (Gleijeses 2002).

A world-historical assessment of capitalism, and its conditions of emergence, reveals both the constraints and possibilities of revolutionary transformation in the late Capitalocene – and in the not-yet-too late Holocene. Such assessments alert us to the hazards of utopian speculation. *Utopian*, not in the sense of creative and experimental post-capitalist imaginaries, but rather in the classical Marxist appreciation: the disconnection of socialist vision from the history of capitalism, its revolutionary challengers, and the commitment of the imperialist forces to "destroy the village in order to save it." The pluriversalists, in their flight from history, have no way of reckoning and mobilizing the countervailing historical forces that might allow for their "re-worlding" transition – and no program for defending revolutionary gains once realized. (What to do when economic sanctions are imposed, special forces arrive, drones deploy, and the bombers come, never appears in such discussions.)

Marx once quipped that ideas can become "material forces" when seized upon by the proletariat – a point just as true for the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary period (Marx 1970: 137). What defined European Universalism's revolutionary cosmology? More than anything, it was a materialism that challenged feudalism's teleological metaphysics (Foster 2000). Its core was bourgeois humanism and its necessary antonym, bourgeois naturalism. Out of this rupture emerged not only new philosophies but new *technics* – new practical tools of empire and capital, like the new cartographies, new accounting techniques, and new ways of sorting out which humans were civilized and which humans were not. The "long" sixteenth century witnessed not only the "discovery of mankind" but its invention (Abulafia 2008). *Nature* became everything that Civilized Man was not.

The roots of Cheap Nature and its double register – economic exploitation and geocultural domination – are found in modern imperialism. Imperialism is the bourgeoisie's preferred mode of class formation because it more readily brings to bear the military and juridical power of states, who must pursue "cheap" class formation to pay the bankers and create good business environments. Imperialism doesn't happen for free. It's financed by bankers, not taxes – which go to paying the bankers in a horrific alchemy of world money, world power, and world nature (Patel & Moore 2017; Arrighi 1994; Antonacci 2021). It is a procedure of domination aimed at advancing the rate of profit and resolving the problem of surplus capital endemic to capitalism.

The now-commonplace expression that we should "decolonize" our thinking communicates something essential. Namely, we must resist any acceptance of capitalism's self-representation – which is, of course, not one of class struggle but one of the Civilizing Project and Man against Nature. This is the arrogance of European Universalism and its erasure of class politics in favor of Progress: the world-historical

march of Weber's "European rationality of world domination" (Altvater 2016). The march of social, cultural, and economic rationality civilizes the un-civilized, develops the undeveloped. The fruits of capitalist development are gifts to the "savages," those humans variously unable or unwilling to accept Progress. In this cosmology, Civilization represented the best of Mankind. Those who resisted were unreasonable and irrational; notwithstanding their biology, these humans, invariably but not exclusively colonial subjects, were part of Nature, not Civilization (Patel & Moore 2017). So, it was the bourgeoisie that came to "over-represent" itself as *Man*, the better that most humans, and the rest of life, could be *under*-represented as Nature, and correspondingly devalued (Wynter 2003).

In the flight from history – "Please don't say Capitalocene!" – there is also a flight from two insights of historical materialism. One is that class society is always with and within webs of life. The second, no less fundamental, is that class societies in the web of life generate contradictions that cannot be fixed within a given mode of production and its class structure. While dialectical thinking unfolds *through* variations, it doesn't reify these. Instead, it focuses on the real historical movement of socio-ecological forces and relations as a "rich totality of many determinations." All that is solid may well melt into air, but the dialectic of fixity and motion cannot be abolished. Here is a world-historical rather than abstract pluriversalism that grounds the possibilities for human and extra-human liberation in the history of capitalism. It points towards a Biotarian socialism capable of practically addressing the planetary crisis through internationalist solidarity.

Proletariat. Femitariat. Biotariat. These are the relational pivots of the Planetary Proletariat, formed in the seventeenth-century climate crisis, and now returning, with a vengeance, at the end of the Holocene. Here is a revolutionary standpoint indeed, one fearlessly embracing a dialectical humanism and a dialectical naturalism, one that celebrates the creativity and potentiality of all forms of life – never equally, always in relation (Lukács 1998; Moore 2021d). If European Universalism over-represents the Civilizing Project and its Promethean aspirations, a proletarian universalism grasps the distinctiveness of life-forms and workforces connected through capitalism's violent syntheses of social formation and earth formation.

Dialectical universalism guides us to see class politics through a relational and *eductive* lens: an optic that draws out the complexity of diverse relations of work, life, and power, unified but never flattened through capitalist development. Here is an anti-formalist and anti-Eurocentric analytic that pursues the possibility for a new metabolism of planetary justice. In this, a certain reverence for the *oikeios* – the generative, creative, and multi-layered pulse of life-making – can and should be woven into hard-headed assessments of capitalism's world-ecological antagonisms (Moore 2015). (We are back, once again, to Marx's "swerve of the atom.") In place of one-sided localisms and globalisms, we can cultivate internationalist responses to the explosive volatility of late capitalism, always with an eye to modernity's "weak links." Only then can the imperial bourgeoisie's Sword of Damocles be beaten into ploughshares. Only then can those ploughshares be reinvented and put to work by the "associated producers" – and reproducers! – in the web of life (Marx 1981: 568ff).

Endnotes

1. Key texts include Moore JW (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. Verso, London; Patel R & Moore JW (2017) *A History of Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. University of California Press, Berkeley; Moore JW (2016) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* PM Press, Oakland, CA; Brenner N (2019) New Urban Spaces. Oxford University Press, Oxford. Recent contributions include Campbell C, Niblett M & Oloff K (2021; eds.) *Literary and Cultural Production, World-Ecology, and the Global Food System*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York; Gibson K (2021) *Subsumption as Development: A World-Ecological Critique of the South Korean 'Miracle'*. PhD dissertation, Environmental Studies, York University; Dixon MW (2021) Phosphate Rock Frontiers: Nature, Labor, and Imperial States, from 1870 to World War II. *Critical Historical Studies* 8(2): 271–307; Otter C (2020) *Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World-Ecology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago; Boscov-Ellen D (2021) *After the Flood: Political Philosophy in the Capitalocene*. PhD dissertation, Philosophy, New School for Social Research; Jakes AG (2020) *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism*. Stanford University Press, Stanford; and the essays collected in Molinero Gerbeau Y & Avallone G (2021; eds.) *Ecología-Mundo, Capitaloceno y Acumulación Global Parte 1*. Relaciones Internacionales, 46; Molinero Gerbeau Y & Avallone G (2021b) *Ecología-Mundo, Capitaloceno y Acumulación Global Parte 2*. Relaciones Internacionales, 47. Several hundred texts in the world-ecology conversation can be found here: https://www.academia.edu/Documents/in/World-Ecology.

2. A representative sampling includes: Moore JW (2000) Environmental Crises and the Metabolic Rift in World-Historical Perspective. *Organization & Environment* 13(2): 123–158; Moore JW (2003) Nature and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism. *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 26(2): 97–172; Moore JW (2010) 'Amsterdam is Standing on Norway', Part I: The Alchemy of Capital, Empire, and Nature in the Diaspora of Silver, 1545-1648. *The Journal of Agrarian Change* 10(1): 33–68; Moore JW (2010b) 'Amsterdam is Standing on Norway', Part II: The Global North Atlantic in the Ecological Revolution of the Seventeenth Century. *The Journal of Agrarian Change* 10(2): 188–227; Moore JW (2017) The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44(3): 594–630; Moore JW (2018) The Capitalocene, Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(2): 237–279.

3. The precise quotation, from a US Army major in the midst of 1968's Tet Offensive, was reported at the time by Arnett P (1968) The Only Way to 'Save' City was to Destroy It. Associated Press, 7 February, 1968.

4. Here I lean on Giovanni Arrighi's Three Questions. See Arrighi G (1994) *The Long Twentieth Century*. Verso, London; Moore JW (2011) Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Our Times. *Journal of World-Systems Research* 17(1): 108–147.

5. For a penetrating sketch of Third Way politics over the past century, see Dale G (2019) Justificatory fables of ordoliberalism: Laissez-faire and the 'third way'. *Critical Sociology* 45(7–8): 1047–1060.

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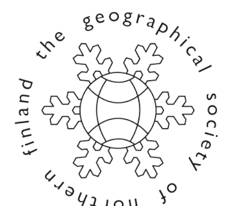

Discussions and interventions

Pluriversalism and the Ecological Regime of Accumulation

Federico Luisetti[a]

Jason W. Moore is a fierce polemicist and his indictment of the decolonial project associated with the Latin American "Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality" collective confirms his verve. His commentary on pluriversalism cannot be more straightforward. It thus deserves close reading: decolonial thinking has constructed an abstract "metaphysics of coloniality" that misses the concrete origins of the modern world-system; its romantic cult of indigenous struggles lacks the internationalism of radical emancipatory politics; "pluriversalism and its cognates" are incompatible with a history of capitalism centred on the material process of accumulation, class formation, and the plundering of nature; decolonial "linguistic acrobatics" promises war against Western knowledge, but in reality it reifies Europe and reproduces bourgeois ahistorical universalism.

Let me continue to highlight Moore's arguments: world-system analysis sees history as "patterned", made of "world-historical turning points" and transitions in the wicked saga of capitalist accumulation, decolonial thought embraces an anti-communist agenda ingrained in the ideological narrative of the clash of civilizations: the "West and the Rest", Eurocentrism or "indigenist and other ethnonational identities". Decoloniality is not radical politics but a bourgeois paradigm, political ontology. It dissolves history, capital, and classes into assemblages, conjunctures, and re-worldings. Eurocentric and liberal thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Dipesh Chakrabarty join with the decolonial collective in the Anthropocene Consensus, a class-denialist and anti-dialectical caricature of historical materialism. In short, Marxist political ecologies have little to gain from pluriversal thinkers, the narrative of capitalist expansion and the struggles by the Proletariat/Femitariat/Biotariat must be distinguished from bourgeois "ruling ideas".

For those familiar with the alchemical transformation of Marxist concepts during decolonial struggles – Frantz Fanon, Subaltern Studies, and the Zapatistas are prominent examples – Moore's harsh condemnation of pluriversal themes will sound an alarm bell. His method of "dialectical universalism" seems to reject decolonial "border thinking", the production of knowledge "from non-Western categories of thought through Western categories of thought" (Mignolo 2021: 330). Are we witnessing the exhaustion of an emancipatory conjuncture? Don't we need instead to

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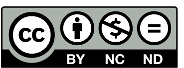

cultivate strategic convergences of heterogeneous anti-capitalist ideas? Readers might have noticed Moore's reference to an essay that was seminal for both world-system analysis and decolonial thought, co-authored in 1992 by the founding figures of these intellectual traditions: Immanuel Wallerstein and Aníbal Quijano (Quijano & Wallerstein 1992). The articulation of Marxist and decolonial views from North and South America contained in this text has forged an enduring epistemic alliance and reinforced a paradigm shift: if the origin of the modern world-system is located in the colonization of the Americas and in the "long sixteenth century"; if the history of capitalism can be rewritten through the concept of coloniality; if labour distribution and ethnicity, capital and power relations have been woven together in a world-economy three centuries before the Industrial Revolution in England, then the ruling ideas of the Western social sciences can be uprooted from the European soil and planted in the historical geography of "New World" genocide, slavery, and racism. Both Moore's world-ecology and Walter Mignolo's geopolitics of knowledge presuppose the Quijano-Wallerstein articulation of coloniality and modernity, the coalescence of a narrative of capitalist accumulation and colonial power formations.

So, I do not follow Moore's rejection of pluriversal decolonialism, and I suggest that we cultivate a common horizon against the "violent synthesis of social formation and earth formation" attempted by neoliberal capitalism. As recalled by Wallerstein in a 1981 interview – world-system analysis emerged from "the birth of the Third World as a political problem, the Bandung Conference, and decolonization" (Wallerstein, Stame & Meldolesi 2019). By continuing to probe Marxist categories – I quote again from the interview with Wallerstein – we can approach "the moment of a definitive political rupture in the single Marxism (as reflected in a single world Marxist movement) and the birth of a thousand Marxisms".

Moore's penetrating critique of the Anthropocene Consensus can help pluriversal thinkers recognize the civilizational/colonial matrix of this "relentlessly polysemic concept well-integrated into the neoliberal eco-industrial complex" (Moore, this issue). The Anthropocene is a crucial epistemic device of green capitalism. It re-articulates the "double internality" of historical nature and financial capital by absorbing markets into natural history. In the Great Planetary Inside of the Anthropocene, the neoliberal plundering and management of nature recognizes itself as a world-ecology of geohistorical proportions. The fragmentary practices of the subsumption of climate and the environment into capital are glued by a suasive arrangement of thoughts and affects, an imaginary condition reflecting empirical reality in a distorting mirror. Through the Anthropocene Consensus, neoliberalism becomes a pervasive ecological state of society, a true state of nature – as it happened with Rousseau's "savage" individualism, which inspired the US Constitution and liberal Western subjectivities.

For the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Anthropocene is a "unifying lens" that frames the planet as a theatre of resilience and adaptation (IPCC 2018: 32). The Earth is apprehended as a crime scene of mass ecological extinctions; heterogeneous natures constituted by forensic reason are monitored by a suspicious Anthropos. A theory could not accommodate incoherent desires and heterogeneous disciplines. But since the Anthropocene is a way of thinking – "Anthropocene thinking", as claimed by the United Nations Human Development Report (UNDP 2020: 22) – then it can channel eco-political preoccupations and shape them as an all-encompassing atmosphere: everything, from food and religion to sex and military strategy, is perceived as taking place in the homogeneous geohistorical milieu of the Anthropocene.

Neoliberalism is at the same time a planetary ecology, an economic theory, and a governing rationality. Its underlying claim is that it can reveal the secret design of nature, which according to Friedrich Hayek is a *kosmos*, the biological and social equilibrium that emerges spontaneously from complexity (Hayek 2012: 38). Nature and the economy are two sides of the same coin, a fascinating "spontaneous macro-order" that only an evolutionary approach can apprehend in its global configuration (Hayek 1990: 131).

The need to address climate change has accelerated the neoliberal management of the atmosphere – the ultimate commodity frontier – and intensified the efforts to integrate financial and human capital into the two-headed monster of "natural capital". An abundant literature in political ecology and critical geography, social anthropology and environmental social theory has reconstructed the perverse translation of climate, biodiversity, water, fisheries, seeds, plants and renewable resources into natural capital. Through enclosures, global environmental regulations and ecosystem services, neoliberalism has inserted capital in the past, present and future of the land, sea, and air. Markets are apprehended as ecosystems exposed to evolutionary forces of natural selection and competition; adaptation and survival are the guiding principles of policymakers and corporations; resilience characterizes both natural capital and social systems; hundreds of structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to defeat collectivism in the global South have destabilized socio-ecological relations and the ensuing crises have been naturalized as turbulences in the far-from-equilibrium states of the planet (Walker & Cooper 2011).

The neoliberal state of nature is the theater of operations of the present world-historical phase transition of capitalism into an ecological regime of accumulation. Instead of a univocal value theory, neoliberal capital relies on a bricolage of methods, supported by a plethora of valuation tools and scenario planning frameworks. A monistic theory of value would not allow capitalism to pursue its uneven practices of appropriation and capitalization. On the contrary, a flexible political ontology – such as Hayek's evolutionary philosophy grounded on the performative production of socially natural order through "shaping rules" (Hong 2002) – serves this purpose effectively. Neoliberalism's ontology of nature legitimizes the energy transition and facilitates the structural transformation of biopower into geopower (Luisetti 2019). Without the Great Inside of Anthropocene Thinking, heterogeneous socio-natures could not be flattened, and ecocides recast as a "CO_2 -equivalent" issues of energy-costs and ecosystems' depletion (Dehm 2018).

Natural capital embraces irenically a plurality of valuation techniques, overcoming Hayek's excommunication of ecological economics and the accounting of value through interchangeable units of abstract energy (Hayek 1979). Once all externalities have been internalized in the ecological state of nature, biophysical theories of value and socio-metabolic flows can work side by side with mainstream economics and evolutionary approaches.

The ecosystem services mapped by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA 2005) endow natural capital with properties that suit both economic valuation and ecological sensibilities. The inclusion of human-made capital into the "supporting services" of natural capital is the final transubstantiation of capital into cosmic nature. Modularity characterizes the energy transition: the MEDEAS-World model of integrated assessment sets the landscape for Europe's energy future, combining monetary and biophysical data, aggregating heterogeneous physical parameters such as energy available to society, economic indicators, and environmental impacts (MEDEAS 2021).

The neoliberal ecologization of capital is the final metamorphosis of the colonial enclosure of life and matter carried out by the thermodynamic idea of work as energy.[1] Since energy is ubiquitous, and "the essential property of energy (the ability to do work) cannot be substituted", natures can be expressed as services – their specific "ability to do work" – containing a specific energy-content (Costanza 2004: 343). Even if not yet fully operationalized by econometric tools, a "general biophysical theory of value" (Costanza 2004: 344) accompanies the reduction of capital to evolutionary processes of self-organization and dissipation. Through the regulative idea of "available energy", food, raw materials, labor, and energy sources link up with energy costs, and can be modelled by the monetary system.

The Four Cheaps – food, labor, energy, and raw materials – at the core of Moore's history of capitalism are now correlated through a system of abstractions and substitutions. Despite the rising costs of commodities and the disruption of planetary life, the current world-ecology does not appear to neoliberalism as the ultimate contradiction of capitalism but as an exciting quantum leap into a non-anthropocentric regime of valuation: "If ecosystem services were actually paid for, in terms of their value contribution to the global economy, the global price system would be very different from what it is today." (Costanza, Golubiewski & Cleveland 2007: 259) The ecological regime of accumulation is a "passive revolution", a top-down reorganization of socio-economic systems in new forms consonant with existing property relations. Since the "ability to do work is related to the degree of organization or order of a thing relative to its environment" (Costanza 2004: 343), energy can be mobilized everywhere: biophysical gradients offer precious energy sources also in melting glaciers and decomposing waste, ocean winds and animal heat; one can squeeze hydrogen from the air and the movement of tectonic plates. The all-encompassing commodity frontier of the neoliberal state of nature is the thermodynamic harvesting of the planet.

It is worth recalling Moore's opening statements: "The unfolding planetary crisis – which is also an epochal crisis of the capitalist world-ecology – cries out for 'pluriversal' imaginations of every kind. But what kind of pluriversalism, set against what kind of universalism, and for what kind of politics?" (Moore, this issue) I share Moore's interrogative urgency: *what kind of pluriversalism, and for what kind of politics?* Radical decolonialism expects that we get rid of the European fetishization of "the political" and qualify pluriversal imagination as a situated geopolitics of knowledge. It resonates with materialist political ecologies that circumvent the deadlock between "Planetary Proletariat" and "life territories". The neoliberal subsumption of "plural, vernacular 'little-e' energies" and human labour (Lohmann 2015) takes place everywhere, from hydroelectric mega-basins in the Swiss Alps to lithium mines in the Atacama salt flats of Chile. Opposing this world-ecology demands antagonistic epistemic communities, reconstitutions of perception and thought that break with the political ontology of the neoliberal state of nature: "What kind of work do we want? What kind of nature and science do we want? Who has already taken this approach and how can we learn from and join with them? ... In indigenous Latin America ... a planner's project to extract oil to meet energy needs will often be seen as interfering with, diminishing or blocking other 'energies' associated with the earth" (Lohmann 2015: 5).

The cross-fertilization of materialist and decolonial concepts is not over yet. A pluriversal politics of nature can reverse the ecocidal imagination of the capitalist energy transition. It can promote alliances between liberation ecologies in urban centres and agricultural lands, indigenous territories and Western enclosures (RTM 2022). So, where is the "real movement" of world-history to be found? We can detect its creeping crawl

in distributional conflicts, in the struggles to preserve and promote incommensurable values and practices of energy, life, and justice across extra-human natures (Martinez-Alier 2010)[2]. The flight from the neoliberal state of nature is not a flight from history and a retreat into abstract particularisms (Latourian Earthlings and parliaments of things are not welcomed). To quote Wallerstein, it is a farewell to "European universalism", the birth of a "multiplicity of universalisms"(Wallerstein 2006: 84). The neoliberal regime of accumulation shuns biophysical limits. It can be defeated only by the pluriversal universalisms of liberation movements and insurgent earth-beings (de la Cadena 2015).

Endnotes

1. On the capitalist/colonial co-production of work and energy in the nineteenth century, see Larry Lohmann (2021: 87–91). Lohmann's thermodynamic interpretation of the capitalist world-ecology integrates Moore's historical topology of commodity frontiers (Moore 2000).
2. See the EJAtlas 2022 for 3610 concrete cases: https://ejatlas.org/

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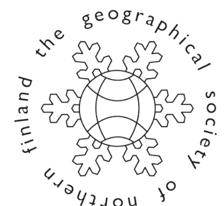

Discussions and interventions

The Insurgent Universal: Between Eurocentric Universalism and the Pluriverse

Japhy Wilson[a]

Universality is something of a dirty word in critical scholarship these days. Decolonial theorists, in particular, have noted the role that universalism has played in concealing the particular interests of white European colonizers and providing the colonial project with a veneer of moral sanctity and scientific objectivity. They further claim that Marxism reproduces the colonial narrative of inevitable historical progress towards a distinctly Western modernity, framing the particular interests of the white male factory worker as those of a putatively universal working class, and imposing a civilizing mission on subaltern peoples through the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of an urban intellectual vanguard (Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 2011; Walsh 2012). Against theories and ideologies of universal emancipation such as Marxism, communism, and socialism, which are accused of complicity in the "civilizing" project of colonialism, and of sympathy with the Eurocentric commitment to replacing multiple realities with a single Western world, leading decolonial theorists such as Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar propose the construction of a pluriverse in which diverse indigenous cultures coexist and flourish. In Escobar's words, "the notion of the pluriverse questions the very concept of universality that is central to Eurocentric modernity," replacing it with "pluriversality as a shared project based on the multiplicity of 'ways of worlding'", which is actualized when, for example, "indigenous peoples… mobilize on behalf of mountains, lakes or rivers, arguing that these are sentient beings with 'rights', not mere objects or resources" (Kothari *et al.* 2019: xxxiv). From this perspective, a truly emancipatory politics must reject universality as irredeemably tainted with the stain of Eurocentrism and can only be comprised of "diverse projects coming from the experience of local histories touched by western expansion", which reaffirm "the 'traditional' that the 'modern' is rolling over and ruling out" (Mignolo, quoted in Escobar 2004: 218).

In his contribution to this special issue on pluriversal politics, Jason W. Moore presents a forthright rebuttal to the decolonial condemnation of Marxist universalism, and a trenchant critique of the political limitations of the pluriverse. Building on his own historically rich and conceptually complex world-ecological reformulation of the Marxian critique of political economy, Moore accuses decolonial theory of embarking upon a flight from world history through its reduction of capitalism to one among many

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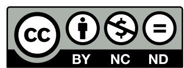

forms of the coloniality of power, and of misrepresenting Marxism as a species of European universalism equivalent to the colonial project. He challenges these tendencies by identifying the endless accumulation of capital as the material force driving colonial expansion, which should fundamentally be understood as a project of class power, for which the discourse of European universalism has served as an indispensable tool of ideological legitimation. By elevating this discourse to the determinant causal factor of colonialism, and abstracting from the class relations that underpin the colonial project, decolonial theory mystifies the material processes that are actually driving the world-history of modernity. In doing so, it tends to limit the battle against the coloniality of power to the realm of competing narratives, and to romanticize indigenous territories as pluriversal spaces supposedly independent of capital, replacing a universal politics based on the class relations traversing global capitalism with an external opposition between essentialized European and indigenous identities. Moore counters this approach by defending the Marxist project as a "dialectical universalism" diametrically opposed to the abstract universalism of Eurocentric thought, and calling for a revival of the internationalist tradition of the anti-capitalist left in the name of a "planetary proletariat" (Moore 2022).

This is a powerful argument, which Moore develops with far greater depth and nuance than can be conveyed in such a brief summary. His paper should be studied in detail by all those committed to the decolonial project of the pluriverse. But I fear that his uncompromising line of attack might discourage such engagement, given that it builds directly on the very same Marxist foundations already rejected out of hand by decolonial theory as complicit in Eurocentric universalism. This rejection rests on a seemingly deliberate misreading of the Marxian tradition, as Moore convincingly shows. But for this very reason, his decision to respond by setting out a condensed restatement of the central arguments of this tradition, while summarily dismissing decolonial theory and the pluriverse, is likely to contribute to an ongoing dialogue of the deaf. This paper takes a different approach, by seeking to meet decolonial theory on its own terrain and to contest it on its own terms, through an exploration of an alternative form of political universality that shares many of its concerns. It should be read alongside Moore's contribution, as a companion piece in our shared commitment to the urgent task of re-establishing universal emancipation at the heart of critical scholarship.

Moore's affirmation of the project of universal emancipation overlooks a recent resurgence of this project in radical political theory, which is grounded less in the dialectical universalism of the world-historical process than in close attention to the spontaneous universality that emerges in concrete moments of subaltern struggle (Buck-Morss 2009; Badiou 2012; Tomba 2015; Haider 2018; Žižek 2018; McGowan 2020; Kapoor & Zalloua 2021). This approach was pioneered by Susan Buck-Morss in *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*, which argues that "the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis" (Buck-Morss 2009: 75). Renouncing the grand historical metanarratives that decolonial theory regards as abstract and totalizing, Buck-Morss's argument is based instead on the concrete history of the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, in which the black slaves of Saint-Domingue overthrew their colonial masters and founded the Haitian state. The slaves exposed the hypocrisy of the French Revolution, which framed itself in the language of universal freedom, but which failed to extend this principle to the enslaved populations of its colonies. But they did so, not in defence of a pluriverse based on their own ancestral cultures, but in the name of universality itself. The Haitian constitution became the first in the world to genuinely enshrine the

principle of universal freedom, which is therefore the legacy not of colonial Europe but of the victims of its oppression, and which originates not in the minds of Eurocentric intellectuals but on the barricades of subaltern struggle:

> *"The definition of universal history that begins to emerge here is this: rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose cultures have been strained to breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. And it is in our empathic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state, that we have a chance of understanding what they say. Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences" (Buck-Morss 2009: 133).*

The common humanity that spontaneously arises amidst revolutionary upheaval has been conceptualized by Massimiliano Tomba in terms of an insurgent universality. Like Buck-Morss, Tomba explores the tension between the universal claims of the French Revolution and the universal demands of the oppressed. He coincides with the decolonial critics of universalism in arguing that the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 concealed the interests of white male property owners beneath a disingenuous celebration of universal freedom. However, he also draws attention to the lesser known but far more radical Declaration of 1793, which was formulated in response to the initial phase of the Haitian Revolution, and under pressure from the demands of women and the poor in France itself. This Declaration, which was initially endorsed and ultimately suppressed by the Jacobins, was grounded not in "juridical universalism" but in "the neglected legacy of insurgent universality" (Tomba 2015: 109). Tomba introduces a crucial distinction here, between the *ideology* of universalism and the *actuality* of universality. Whereas juridical universalism is imposed from above as a set of abstract principles, "insurgent universality has to be understood concretely: it is constituted by individuals who act in common and put in question the hierarchical organization of the social fabric" (Tomba 2015: 117).

This reformulation of the universal project rejects both the abstract universalism of Eurocentric ideologies and the organicist particularism of decolonial theory, while remaining focused on capital as the ultimate and unavoidable enemy of an emancipatory politics. Its source lies not in theory itself but in the spaces of struggle, the moments of revolt, and the experiences of comradeship, in which the universal dimension emerges like a flash of lightening, simultaneously exposing false universals and transcending closed identities. As such, insurgent universality cannot be categorized and dismissed as just another variant of universalism by the denizens of the pluriverse. Instead, it introduces a third term into this supposedly binary opposition, as a universality that emerges, like the possibility of the pluriverse itself, from within the constantly shifting multiplicity of subaltern struggles in and against the churning worldwide vortex of global capital accumulation.

The detection of the insurgent universal at work in the world can accordingly be understood as a decolonial project in itself, to the extent that it is faithful to the principle of building theory on the basis of subaltern struggles, rather than imposing it upon them from above. However, the dichotomy that decolonial theory establishes between top-down universalism and a bottom-up pluriverse threatens to blind it to manifestations of insurgent universality performed by subaltern subjects in their confrontations with global capital. We therefore need an alternative approach that is

attentive to the possibility that "universal humanity is visible at the edges" (Buck-Morss 2009: 151). The remainder of this short paper sketches such an approach. The next section seeks to grasp the universal "not by subsuming facts within overarching systems or homogenizing premises, but by attending to the edges of systems" (Buck-Morss 2009: 79). These include the *spatial edge* of the extractive frontier, the *temporal edge* of the spontaneous uprising, and the *experiential edge* of crossing the line between obedience and revolt. Decolonial theory frames such edges as divisions between Eurocentric universalism and the pluriverse. But they can instead be seen as openings onto the actuality of insurgent universality, as illustrated by a brief account of a spontaneous uprising on an Amazonian oil frontier in the third and final section of the paper.

Insurgent universality on the edges of worlds

The extractive frontiers of global capitalism are the privileged sites at which decolonial theory stages its dichotomized collision between Eurocentric universalism and the pluriverse. Long framed by colonizing ideologies as the borderlands between modern civilization and primitive barbarism, such frontiers promise windfall profits to those with the power to plunder their resources (Moore 2015). The frontier process forces open vast tracts of land, necessitating rapid infrastructural developments and triggering massive influxes of landless and workless populations, while encroaching on the territories of indigenous peoples. But it also opens political possibilities. Decolonial theory locates these possibilities in the "exteriority of capitalism" (Mignolo 2002: 75), which is said to lie on the other side of the frontier, and which is believed to harbour "long-standing place-based logics that are irreducible to capital and imperial globality" (Escobar 2004: 221). From this perspective, the struggles that play out on the extractive frontier tend to be framed in terms of a Manichean confrontation between a universalizing capitalist growth machine on one hand, and indigenous communities defending their particular ways of life on the other.

Under conditions of global capitalism, however, even the most far-flung places are entangled in the dynamics of accumulation, and the most pristine community on the remotest frontier has already been irredeemably altered by the arrival of the frontier itself, through which the class relation between capital and labour, and the exchange relations of the world market, begin to internally reconfigure the very cultures that decolonial theorists claim to be exterior. This is not to deny that different cultures maintain distinct identities. But to the extent that we are entangled in these dynamics, we all now inhabit a single world. This commonality is not grounded in a universal human essence of mental rationality or material need, as imagined by Enlightenment liberals and orthodox Marxists respectively, but in the relationality of a "shared deadlock" (Kapoor & Zalloua 2021: 16). As Slavoj Žižek argues, "The world we live in is one, but it is such because it is traversed… by the same antagonism that is inscribed into the heart of global capitalism. Universality is not located over and above particular identities, it is an antagonism that cuts from within each 'way of life'" (Žižek 2018: 13).

This antagonism gives rise to a frontier proletariat at the extractive *spatial edges* of this planetary system, understood not as a homogenized mass indoctrinated by an intellectual vanguard, but as "an explosive combination of different agents" (Žižek 2009: 92). This composite class is as old as the commodity frontier itself. As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have demonstrated in their radical history of Atlantic commerce, the

English colonial expansion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was enabled by the labour of indigenous peoples, "dispossessed commoners, transported felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates, urban labourers, soldiers, and African slaves", comprising "a multi-ethnic class that was essential to the rise of capitalism and the modern global economy" (Linebaugh & Rediker 2012: 4–6). But this "motley crew" did not behave as passive servants of capital. Instead, they constituted an insurrectional force, which led strikes, riots, and mutinies, creating autonomous maroon communities in remote jungles and on uninhabited islands, and operating pirate ships on egalitarian principles, according to which rank was abolished, and spoils were enjoyed in common. This frontier proletariat was not defined by a racial, cultural, or ethnic identity of any kind. On the contrary, it was formed by "the 'outcasts of all nations' – the convicts, prostitutes, debtors, vagabonds, escaped slaves… and political prisoners, all of whom had migrated or been exiled to the new settlements 'beyond the line'" (Linebaugh & Rediker 2012: 158). Yet precisely for this reason, its collective actions gave expression to a "universalism from below" (Buck-Morss 2009: 106). This was equally the case in the Haitian Revolution, which occurred on the Caribbean sugar frontier, and constituted "the first victorious workers' revolution in history" (Linebaugh & Rediker 2012: ix). Field slaves and free labourers were united in rebellion. Racial hierarchies were eradicated from the new constitution, in which all Haitians were defined as black regardless of their race. And when the French troops advanced to crush the insurrection, they realised that their adversaries were not chanting traditional African songs but singing the *Marseillaise* to symbolize the fact that they, the rebel slaves, and not the colonial Europeans, were the true agents and embodiments of universality (Buck-Morss 2009; James 2001).

These historical examples of insurgent universality, it should be noted, arose precisely through the lived experiences of coloniality to which decolonial theorists are rightly so attentive. Similar fusions of cultures, races and ethnicities continue to generate similar political possibilities, as will be demonstrated in the following section. And yet the presence of insurgent universality within these contexts is obscured by the insistence of prominent decolonial scholars on the persistence of an exteriority to capital, and by their imposition of a strict division between the alleged universalism of Eurocentric modernity and an indigenous pluriverse. The dissident decolonial theorist, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, has rebelled against this orthodoxy, by arguing that this binary opposition is itself a violent abstraction, to the extent that it denies the fact that "we indigenous were and are, above all, contemporary beings and peers, and in this dimension we perform and display our own commitment to modernity" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012: 96). Indeed, she goes as far as to accuse Mignolo and other members of the decolonial academic elite of neutralizing "the practices of decolonization by enthroning within the academy a limited and illusory discussion regarding modernity and decolonization," while "providing theoretical support for racialized and exoticized multiculturalism" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012: 105, 102). Martín Arboleda similarly argues that the strict division imposed by decolonial theory between "Global North and Global South… inadvertently reproduces the bifurcated world that it sets out to criticize" (Arboleda 2020: 212). According to Arboleda, the universalizing drive of global capitalism, in its relentless expansion of the extractive frontiers of this planetary system, is not only destructive of biodiversity and cultural difference, but also opens the possibility for new forms of universal struggle to emerge across these differences, "circumventing the culturalist trap of romanticizing a supposedly 'pristine' essence of the subaltern subject and instead rooting the determinations of its political agency in the entanglements

and interdependencies that underpin capital accumulation on a world scale" (Arboleda 2020: 217).

From the perspective of mainstream decolonial theory, as Moore has noted in his contribution to this special issue, such Marxian claims regarding the world-historical dynamics of capital are dismissed as complicit in the universalizing Eurocentric project (even when articulated from the positionality of a South American scholar like Arboleda). Against such supposedly totalizing discourses, decolonial theory draws attention to temporal "discontinuities, ruptures and shifts in the historical process" (Chakrabarty 2007: 23), which disrupt the narrative of teleological progress from primitivism to modernity that underpins abstract universalism in both its liberal and orthodox Marxist forms, according to which specifically Western principles are "assumed to have a universal value across time and space" (Mignolo 2002: 69). However, such *temporal edges* are not necessarily wellsprings of pluriversal difference, but can themselves be moments of the emergence of the insurgent universal. This is the argument of Alain Badiou, who has been dismissed by the decolonial theorist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro as "an old pontiff of the Universal," which is condemned as nothing less than "the bimillennial patriarchal, repressive, transcendent, racist and phallocratic narrative that runs like a red thread throughout the West's history, from Saint Paul to Marx… and beyond." (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 56). This is somewhat ironic, given that the universality that Badiou is attempting to vindicate is directly opposed to any such transcendent narrative, and is grounded in the very same moments of rupture celebrated by decolonial theory. Badiou has conceptualised such moments as Events, which are radically heterogeneous to the established temporality in which they occur. Against the historical determinism of orthodox Marxism, he argues that an Event is irreducible to the material circumstances of its emergence, and is embodied in the contingent actualization of universal equality staged in spontaneous uprisings by those excluded from the false universalism of the capitalist world order. According to Badiou, an Event is "a sort of grace supernumerary to every particularity", in which "the production of equality and the casting off… of differences are the material signs of the universal", understood not as a conceptual abstraction but as "something that exists in its active process" (Badiou 2003: 109; Badiou 2012: 87).

The universal dimension that shines through a spontaneous uprising of this kind is directly experienced in the "collective creative exaltation" of the Event itself, which possesses a carnivalesque dimension (Badiou 2012: 90). In his study of medieval carnival, Mikhail Bakhtin has noted that such moments are marked by "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 1984: 10). In the uprising, as in the carnival, universality exists not as an abstract principle but as lived reality in which "life is subject only to… the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit… vividly felt by all its participants" (Bakhtin 1984: 7). As Badiou observes, reflecting on his own involvement in such Events: "I know from experience that a new political situation can only be known from within its own process… Political novelty, which is subjective, does not allow itself to be grasped from the outside at the moment of constituting itself" (Badiou 2012: 32). This is the *experiential edge* famously defined by Hunter S. Thompson as an ineffable domain of shared humanity known only to those who dare to transgress the limits of state-imposed social order: "The Edge… There is no honest way to explain it, because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over" (Thompson 2003: 282).

This commitment to thinking and acting from the edge is in apparent accordance with the methodological principles of decolonial thought, which insists on building

theory on the basis of subaltern experience, rather than imposing Eurocentric assumptions on such experience from outside. Indeed, the concept of the experiential edge would seem to resonate with Mignolo's method of "border thinking," which critiques the putatively neutral position of "zero point" knowledge assumed by Western thought, against which he proposes border thinking as "the epistemology of the exteriority," which is "grounded in the experiences of the colonies and subaltern empires" (Mignolo & Tlostanova 2006: 206). But border thinking is structured in advance against the possibility that such experiences could include an experience of universality. Mignolo insists that universalism is projected onto the subaltern from the Eurocentric perspective of zero point knowledge, while "pluriversality, and not universality, is the major claim made by border thinking" (Mignolo & Tlostanova 2006: 210). Writing from a similar perspective, Catherine Walsh juxtaposes "the hegemony, 'universality' and violence" of "Eurocentric modes of thinking" against "a different thought constructed and positioned from the histories and subjectivities of the people," which leaves no conceptual space for the possibility of a universality thought (or enacted) by "the people" themselves (Walsh 2012: 12). And in her analysis of the extractive frontier, the decolonial scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris asks: "In zones of continual extractivism, what responses, engagements, and viewpoints emerge that do not exhaust difference but instead proliferate it?" (Gómez-Barris 2017: xx). From such a starting point, eruptions of insurgent universality would seem destined to either be overlooked due to their apparent failure to "proliferate difference" or condemned for seemingly contributing to its "exhaustion." Despite being committed to the validation of subaltern experience, border thinking is thus unable to think – let alone *experience* – the actuality of the insurgent universal.

Insurgent universality on the Savage Road

The decolonial project of the pluriverse is attentive to extractive frontiers, historical ruptures, and epistemic borders – spatial, temporal, and experiential edges at which it repeatedly finds evidence of a pluriverse of indigenous communities resisting Eurocentric universalism. But closer examination of these three edges has revealed the spectre of an alternative form of universality emerging within each of them, as an emancipatory potential that the decolonial approach tends to render invisible and to determinedly ignore. I will now conclude with an illustrative example of a spontaneous uprising that recently erupted at the confluence of these three edges to create "a liminal space, where human universality comes fleetingly into view" (Buck-Morss 2010: 175).

In 1979, a new road was sliced into the Amazonian oil frontier of northern Ecuador. The road came to be known as the *Vía Auca* – the Savage Road. It was named after the '*aucas*' – or savages – as they were disparagingly referred to by mestizo settlers: the *Huaorani* indigenous nationality who inhabited the region. The Savage Road ran straight into their territory, following the path of newly discovered oil wells. In 2015, the Ecuadorian government signed a $4.9 billion contract with the Franco-American multinational Schlumberger for the exploitation of Block 61 – an oil field located in the region of the *Vía Auca*. Schlumberger would ramp up extraction from the block through a vast infrastructural expansion. The work was subcontracted to the Argentinian company *Construcciones Globales Andinas* (CGA), which established a production complex on the outskirts of the town of Dayuma on the Savage Road. In August 2017, around

eighteen months after construction work had started, I visited Dayuma as part of my research into the historical geography of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Wilson 2021). But as I passed the gates of the production complex, I could see a demonstration involving indigenous people taking place outside. And within hours of my arrival, I found myself caught up in an uprising against the company. From the perspective of decolonial theory, this struggle might be assumed to epitomise the supposedly ubiquitous confrontation in such circumstances between the universalizing Eurocentric imperative of extractive capital and the territorial defences of an indigenous pluriverse. But it turned out that the indigenous rebels blocking the company gates were not insisting on the preservation of their traditional ways of life against the global oil industry. They were oil workers fighting for better pay and improved working conditions, and unemployed proletarians demanding the right to participate in the extraction of natural resources from beneath their lands.

This frontier proletariat comprised landless mestizo peasants from the Ecuadorian highlands, impoverished Afro-Ecuadorians from the historical slave communities of the coast, fugitive members of the *Shuar* indigenous nationality who had migrated from the southern Amazonian region of the country, members of the *Kichwa* who had escaped indentured slavery along the River Napo, and members of the *Huaorani* who had arrived in the region a century earlier, fleeing enslavement during the Peruvian rubber boom. Brought together by the diverse acts of dispossession and displacement that had driven them to resettle along the Savage Road, these disparate racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities came to form a motley crew reminiscent of the renegade pirate ships of the seventeenth century, which was united not by a common identity but by a shared experience of alienation. In the early 2000s they had launched an escalating series of uprisings against the oil industry. This movement was met with military repression which led to its further radicalization, culminating in a series of violent confrontations that came to a head with a military crackdown in Dayuma in 2007.

The repression had been brutally effective, and no further uprisings of any note had occurred in the region in the following years. But simmering resentments had continued to accumulate. The demonstration that I observed on my arrival in Dayuma was just a small sit-down strike outside the gates of CGA – the Argentinian construction company subcontracted by Schlumberger. I interviewed two of their leaders about the systematic exploitation and abuse to which the workers were subjected by CGA. Both leaders were arrested a few minutes later, and these arrests provoked the uprising. Suddenly hundreds of workers were on the streets, CGA was shut down, and Schlumberger's expansion of the oil frontier was brought to an abrupt halt. Within minutes of this explosive Event, the general manager of CGA had been kidnapped by members of a local *Shuar* community in retaliation for the arrest of the strike leaders, and a military division deployed to rescue him was approaching at speed. But the workers, together with unemployed locals and veteran militants, maintained the blockade of the company gates, demanding the release of their arrested leaders and the expulsion of CGA from Block 61. The next morning they were joined by indigenous communities from up and down the Savage Road, and the blockade took on a carnivalesque dimension, filled with music and dancing and the symbolic mocking of authority. Through this process, the historical divisions between indigenous nationalities and mestizo peasant colonizers were superseded by the spontaneous lived experience of insurgent universality, embodied in the collective use of *Shuar* body paint and wooden spears, and articulated in powerful speeches in which *Shuar* leaders repeatedly insisted that "We are all indigenous!"

After nine days of escalating struggle, the uprising succeeded in forcing the state and CGA to sign an accord with the workers that brought the blockade to an end. But none of the agreed measures were implemented, and a month later the revolt exploded once again. This time it was on a much larger scale, involving the majority of the local population, lasting for twenty days, and severely restricting oil production throughout the region of the Savage Road. Faced with a deepening crisis, the Ecuadorian government finally expelled CGA from Block 61. But at the same time, the unity of the original uprising was being eroded by Schlumberger, which remained in control of the oil block. While CGA was being expelled, Schlumberger and the government were working behind the scenes to divide the uprising by encouraging each individual community to identify with its own specific ethnic identity and narrow economic interest. The result was the fragmentation of the movement into multiple indigenous and mestizo particularisms, and the reproduction of the power of state and capital on the Savage Road. The success of this strategy demonstrates that, like the ideology of Eurocentric universalism critiqued by decolonial theory, the identity politics of the pluriverse constitutes a crucial element in the ideological repertoire of the coloniality of power. As Asad Haider concludes in his assertion of the emancipatory necessity of insurgent universality:

> *"Universality does not exist in the abstract, as a prescriptive principle which is mechanically applied to different circumstances. It is recreated in the act of insurgency, which does not demand emancipation solely for those who share my identity but for everyone… This is a universality that necessarily confronts and opposes capitalism… Every compromise of this kind of universality, every step away from the primacy of insurgency and the revolutionary potential of anti-capitalist organization, [has] led back to the particularism of the existing order"* (Haider 2018: 113).

I have discussed the uprising on the Savage Road in much greater detail elsewhere (Wilson 2022). This brief sketch aims only to illustrate the flourishing of an insurgent universality in precisely those places that decolonial theory teaches us to only see a pluriverse. Like Moore's dialectical universalism, this form of universality introduces a third term into the binary division that dominant strands of decolonial theory seek to establish between abstract Eurocentric universalism and a pluriverse of indigenous lifeworlds. But in contrast to Moore's approach, it does so not by demolishing the central tenets of decolonial theory, but by working with them in an attempt to demonstrate that even on the basis of their assumptions, an emancipatory universality can be affirmed. The insurgent universal arises not in the core of global capitalism but on the *spatial edges* of the extractive frontier, as demonstrated by the frontier proletariat of the *Vía Auca*. It emerges not through the gradual unfolding of a totalizing historical process, but at the *temporal edges* at which this process suddenly comes apart, as in the contingent explosion of the uprising in which I was involved. And it is not imposed by the metanarratives of Western intellectuals, but is directly lived on the *experiential edges* marked by the collective decisions of subaltern subjects to cross the line of state-enforced social order, as demonstrated by the intense and joyful struggle on the Savage Road. This was not a dry universalism drawn from dogmatic manifestos, but a living universality that leapt from the flames of sudden confrontation. Not a working class of white men defending their privileged position in the stable core of the global system, but a motley crew of indigenous and mestizo renegades, fighting tooth and nail on the extractive frontier. Not the steady march of historical progress toward a universal future, but a moment of temporal rupture in which universality was immediately

present. And not the imported ideology of foreign intellectuals, but the boisterous self-expression of undisciplined renegades. This form of universality is consistent with Moore's contribution to this special issue, and concurs with the decolonial critique of Eurocentric universalism. As such, it is a point on which the Marxist and decolonial projects might find common ground. More importantly, perhaps, the actuality of the insurgent universal demonstrates that the emancipatory horizon of subaltern struggle extends beyond the fragmented panorama of the pluriverse.

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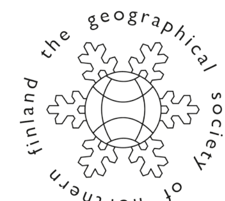

Discussions and interventions

Seeking common ground: On possible dialogues between Marxisms and Political Ontology

Carlos Tornel[a]

Introduction

This commentary seeks to flesh out a series of ongoing debates regarding Marxism, Latin American decolonial thought and the rise of political ontology. I deal with several issues that emerged in conversations with Arturo Escobar, Jason W. Moore, and the commentaries in this theme issue. I identify three main points of entry. The first one comes from engaging with Marx's writings in the second part of his life. As Marx moved away from a teleological understanding of history, he saw capitalism as a totality, which allowed him to look beyond the rise of the bourgeoisie toward the possibility of emancipation beyond capitalism. The second entry comes from analyzing the history of the social movements emerging in Latin America, 500 years after colonization began. I argue that the genealogy of emancipatory struggles can guide the emergence of a pluriverse of alternatives. The last point of entry comes from the critiques formulated against political ontology. These points of entry open new avenues for discussion to listen and learn with and from the subaltern and provides some examples of bringing political ontology into a dialogue with other forms of Latin American Indigenous resistance and struggles for re-existence.

The late Marx and the dialogue with post/decolonial thought and praxis

In the decolonial school of Latin America, the criticism of Marx's thought emerges from Marx's conception of history and his teleological or mechanistic argument about the stages of development necessary for an actual proletarian revolution to take place. Santiago Castro Gomez has perhaps articulated one of the most complete formulations

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of this argument. Drawing from other Latin American thinkers in the 80s and 90s – such as José Arrico (1980) and Leopoldo Zea (1988) –, Castro-Gómez argues that Marx inherited this teleological argument from his reading of Hegel, who thought that because Latin Americans had not yet developed political institutions and philosophical thought they were *'outside'* universal history.

For Marx, Latin America and other parts of the world (aside from Europe and the United States) had not developed sufficiently and thus, were closer to semi-feudal societies. His argument was that these revolutionary societies were closer to monarchists with reactionary creoles (Castro-Gomez 2008: 262), and thus, no bourgeoisie would be able to emerge and no proletarian revolution could eventually follow. This is why Engels celebrated the annexation of Texas to the United States (de Toledo 1939: 99–100) and why Marx disregarded Simon Bolívar as an aristocrat (in his 1857 article for the *New York Daily Tribune*). Marx reproduces a stagiest conception of history, looking at Britain as his point of departure (Castro-Gomez 2011). Thus, for Marx, colonialism was nothing more than a side effect or an unintended consequence of global capitalism, necessary in his view to enable the emergence of a bourgeoisie and then the possibility of seizing the means of production by the proletariat.

Postcolonial thinkers argue that Marx was preconditioned by his Eurocentrism and his conception of modernity. The postcolonial dialogue with Marx debates back to the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978). In his text, Said argued that Marx had adopted prefigurative politics based on what he called an Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) or oriental despotism. This thesis, later developed by Spivak (1999), was based on the fact that Marx had implicitly reproduced two problems that originated in the Eurocentric and colonial context in which he was thinking: he had reproduced Smith and Ricardo's theory of value, restricting his analysis to a national level, thus excluding an analysis of colonialism and imperialism in his critique of Political Economy. Secondly, he had adopted the Notions of AMP and oriental despotism, which implicitly signaled the inferiority of Asia (Pradella 2017b: 582–583).

Similarly, Castro-Gomez (2008: 263) argues that Marx saw racial discrimination as a phenomenon limited to precapitalist societies, whereas

> *colonialism would be simply the past of modernity and would disappear altogether with the global crisis that would give rise to communism.*

In other words, colonialism is just an additive to modernity and not a constituent of it. For postcolonial thinkers, the main problem in Marxist thinking is in the universal categories he elaborated in the light of the European model, erasing historical difference (Chakrabarty 2008: 48) and reproducing geopolitics of knowledge with an economic reductionism (Mignolo & Walsh 2018). Colonialism created an imaginary for the social world of the subaltern that only served to legitimize imperial dominance on a political and economic level and fostered epistemological paradigms within these sciences. Moreover, the outcome of personal and collective identities of the colonizers and the colonized were created, making coloniality, not a collateral phenomenon but a central piece of modernity (Quijano & Wallerstein 1992).

The teleological argument that Marx developed in his critique of political economy in the *Communist Manifesto* was on point, but not necessarily in *Das Kapital*. As several authors have shown (Shanin 1983; Anderson 2010; Pradella 2017a, 2017b; Arboleda 2020), during Marx's later years of his life, he seems to have moved away from this mechanistic argument in favor of a universal theory of value. Pradella (2017a, 2017b)

argues that Marx's attention to the question of class revolution without capitalism signals a substantial destabilization in his thinking. Similarly, Arboleda (2020) suggests that Marx's turn toward India, China, Russia, and to a lesser degree, Latin America in his work, reveals a shift in his thinking and places Marx's analysis of class and colonialism closer to each other.

In 1853, Marx revisited his original arguments in the Communist Manifesto. In his unpublished notebooks of that same year, Marx's study on India, he questioned the notion of oriental despotism developed by Francois Bernier.[1] Focusing on the existence of communal property mainly in South India enabled him to reason that it was colonialism, through taxes on land, salt, and opium what had impoverished peasant communities. This awareness marked a turning point in his understanding of history which he later articulated in *The Future results of British Rule in India,* where Marx supported an independence movement based on anti-colonial principles (Pradella 2017a: 581).

Later, in his support of the Taiping Revolution (1850–1864), Marx saw the importance of anti-colonial struggles and the 'living potential for international solidarities' (Pradella 2017a: 157). Here, Marx recognized the agency of the peoples in the South, arguing that the South did make a difference in his understanding of global development and global history (Anderson 2010). This explains why, in *Capital* (particularly in Chapters 26–33), Marx had already incorporated the notion of primitive accumulation, understanding both colonialism and imperialism as constitutive elements of the development of capitalism (Coulthard 2014).

As Kevin Anderson (2010) and Lucia Pradella (2017a) have brilliantly argued, Marx's writings in the later parts of his life show that he went on to challenge Adam Smith's and David Ricardo's unilinear model of development and started to see capitalism as a globalized project, a system "historically determined and surpassable mode of production that precisely for these reasons, can be conceived as a totality" (Pradella 2017b: 583). Arboleda (2020: 214) expands on this notion arguing that the fact that Marx explored different paths towards social development, reveals how he insisted on "site-specific multilinear view of history that ... is positioned to offer elements for an alternative path toward socialism".

Later, in the 1870s, Marx turned to Russia to drive a final nail to the teleological argument of history. In Marx's view, Russia was different from India or China in that no foreign colonial powers had taken hold or interfered. Instead, he saw the seeds in Russian populism of achieving socialism without capitalism (Anderson 2010). This line of thinking can be noticed in Marx's letter in 1881 to Vera Zasulich and in his letter to the editorial board of Otechestvennye Zapiski, as well as in the preface to the second Russian edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party in 1882 prepared by Marx and Engels (Shanin 1983). Unfortunately, as Gustavo Esteva argues, these writings are often ignored or disregarded as minor contributions in front of Marx's towering figure in *the Communist Manifesto*. However, already in *The Civil War in France*, Marx (1871) adopted a position about the State and the tasks of the proletarian revolution that very few Marxists seem to know, where he contradicts their obsession with seizing power and using the State apparatuses for the revolution (Esteva 2015: 71).

It is no surprise that at this point in his life, "some Marxist were more Marxist's than Marx himself" (Esteva 2015), showing how Marx effectively broke away from this paradigm. As Arboleda (2020: 212) argues, for postcolonial thinkers, the Marxian notion of class

> *obfuscates the modalities of social domination that underpin modern society and are understood as transcending the economistic focus of labor exploitation.*

From this perspective, the subalterns and their interaction with other ecologies and technologies point towards a different kind of interdependence or a "third space where the disparate domains of the local and the planetary can become interwoven" (Arboleda 2020: 28).

Luisetti, Pickles and Kaiser (2015: 9) argue, regarding the relationship between decolonial and Italian Marxism, that

> *strategies do not always converge, but their latitude demonstrates the vitality of the current alternatives to the paradigm of the homo economicus.*

Similarly, Arboleda (2020: 214) argues that Marxist thought in Latin America offers powerful tools to rethink the idea of a global working class beyond the Eurocentric bias conceptualizing class relations beyond those existing in Western Capitalism. Here, Latin American Marxism and the emergence of critiques and alternatives from activists and scholars in the region enable us to see some of the main limitations of the traditional critique of the Marxian political economy. As Pradella (2017: 575) argues, one of the main limitations is that the nation state is seen as the de-facto starting point for social, political and economic transformations (see the following section). This is problematic because the State is in essence a modern institution, one that emerged from the rise of European modernity and that has systematically failed to recognize difference (Segato 2007) and to have now become subordinated to the new central actors of globalization shattering the illusion of representing the general interest of a nation in order to promote a transnational ideal based on ideas like progress or development (Ansótegui 2021: 126).

The conceptual merging of the State and the society downplays the importance of colonialism and imperialism in capitalist development. Instead, international inequities, products of this process of development, are naturalized and "the West is portrayed as a model for the rest of the World" (Pradella 2017a: 576). This is the core of the stagiest development argument: eliminating the collective agency of subaltern peoples and justifying, directly or indirectly, European and Western domination over the rest of the world (Dinerstein 2015). In other words, Marx began to see, in non-Western forms of land ownership and social reproduction, some of the embryonic and unrealized forms of the universalized political community of the future (Arboleda 2020: 214; see also Esteva 2015; Jappe 2017).

Learning from the subaltern

During the 1990s, two trends of thought emerged in Latin America among Indigenous thinkers. The first one came from Indigenous movements themselves. In 1992, almost everywhere in the Americas, the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of America was being commemorated. The Indigenous peoples of Abya Yala in Latin America raised their voices to clarify that what had happened half a millennia ago was not a discovery to be celebrated. Instead, it was as a moment of "inward" reflection on

the systematic attempt to exterminate Indigenous cultures and ways of life. Here, the moment of commemoration was seen as an opportunity to reaffirm their identities and remember the ways in which they as peoples and communities had resisted. At the beginning of a decade that proclaimed the "*end of history*", positioning modernity and neoliberal capitalism as *the only alternative*, "modernity" implied an even sharper descent into barbarism where the "others", or the victims of modernity and of the industrial civilizational project refused to be made invisible any longer (Dussel 2015).

This trend was affirmed two years later, on January 1st, 1994, when the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico, rose in arms, denouncing their 500 years of oppression and being silenced by the structural forces of colonialism and capitalism. The Zapatista declaration is much in line with David Graeber's and David Wengrow's (2021) argument that the default position that emerged through the conquest of the Americas was that Indigenous and local people were incapable of producing their own philosophies, of formulating complex thoughts and of practicing their own ideas. Instead, their thought was considered romanticized, non-existent, essentialized (Graeber & Wengrow 2021: 55, 78; see also López Bárcenas 2019).

As Dussel (2015: 84) argues, European modernity became the first culture to transcend its ethnocentric character and to be established as a universal notion under a world-system:

> *The emergence of modern philosophy attributed itself the position of being the only deployment of human reason, while simultaneously presuming to be universal and planetary, a process that necessarily (de)values other philosophies, mainly from the south as 'backward', naive or particular.*

For Dussel, it is the possibility of recognizing these other forms of thought, that have been traditionally oppressed, or actively produced as non-existent (Santos 2014), that enables members of other philosophic and cultural traditions to interrupt the world-system pretension of universality as they become aware of their philosophical history and the value situated within them (Dussel 2015: 24).

Dussel explains how postcolonial thought fits somewhat uncomfortably with the debate emerging in Latin America. The region's occidentalization is much more evident than in Africa or Asia, and thus, the emergence of a transmodernity or a critique of occidentalism becomes essential for transformation. Therefore, occidentalism presents

> *the expression of a constitutive relationship between Western representations of cultural difference and worldwide Western dominance. Challenging occidentalism requires that it be unsettled as a mode of representation that produces polarized and hierarchical concessions of the West and others. (Coronil 1977: 14–15, cited in Dussel 2015: 46)*

Dussel calls this *the Philosophy of Liberation*, a process that groups together the 'victims' of modernity, of late transnational capitalism, through their possibility of engaging in philosophical dialogue. Instead of discounting the other, it is preoccupied with otherness. Transmodernity, for Dussel, is then the possibility of enabling a "universality in difference and difference in universality" (Dussel 2015: 48). This constitutes the second trend of decolonial thought, a project anchored not on whether subalterns can speak, but on whether we can learn to listen, and learn to come into dialogue with other forms of thought (Santos 2014; Leff 2017; Esteva 2019; Mendoza 2019).

As Luisetti, Pickles, and Kaiser (2015: 4) argue,

> *the current geopolitical shift – the biopolitical reconfiguration of power within capitalist societies, the progressive erosion of the centrality of the Euro-North Atlantic space, the autonomization of the Southern and Eastern blocs – is not just a systemic rearrangement of global capitalism (...) but can be seen as a mutation making room for alternative political and micropolitical practices and imaginaries, requiring different conceptual vocabularies and a shift in the understanding of autonomy.*

While the emergence of these alternative political practices and imaginaries is by no means homogenous, it is nonetheless anchored in the need to reformulate and rethink the universalizing concepts of Eurocentric political theory.

On the one hand, these concepts emerge simultaneously from opposition to certain forms of exploitation and extraction associated with capitalism. But on the other hand, they are also grounded on particular histories, spatial relations and decolonial practices from each particular place. This latter point is essential in analyzing and articulating subaltern strategies toward emancipation. Particularities cannot be universalized or simply adopted or reproduced as some scholars have attempted to do, in their effort to "become Indigenous", as they tend either to overlook this character or to dismiss it as a simple universalizing condition (see Chandler & Reed 2019 for a critique).

In other words, the multiple movements, philosophies and praxes emerging from Latin America are constituted within particular territories and under a particular set of characteristics. As Barkin and Sanchez (2020: 1422) argue:

> *their defining characteristics are the relationship to the land, the historical emphasis on the class nature of their struggle and the political identity of their mobilizations.*

Raúl Zibechi (2012) echoes these defining characteristics by proposing that these groups, despite their different ontological perspectives, display recurring features as they are concerned with the re-appropriation of land and their struggles are seeking autonomy from and beyond the State. This not only includes a struggle to reinvent the processes of production (i.e, through solidarity), but they are radically at odds with heteropatriarchal form of capitalism, where communities embark on a series of pedagogical projects producing their own vernacular knowledge about the world and where women are at the center of the reconceptualization.

Mendoza, for example, argues that the coloniality of power and knowledge that emerged in Latin America in the nineties was shaped around the outside and the lived experience of the colonized, which required 'tapping into' Indigenous epistemological insights, a process that enabled non-Indigenous, Mestizo, Criollo, and European descendants to 'think with and not against them' (Mendoza 2019: 115–116). The prominent examples of this are perhaps Bolivia and Ecuador, where a bricolage of identities became encoded into the modern/liberal political code (i.e., constitutionalising the rights of nature and the notion of *Buen Vivir*). However, as Mendoza argues, the manner in which the discourses of plurinationality and interculturality are incorporated into the State, complicates the possibility of emancipation beyond 'existing political structures' (Mendoza 2019: 115–116).

In the next section, I delve into some of these contradictions, claiming that, as decolonial thinkers argue, there are no modern solutions for modern problems. Hence, Indigenous peoples' ways of being need to be emphasized as an example that challenges

the status quo and the social and ecological unsustainability caused by modernity and development. As Santos (2014) argues, modernity created a *sociology of absences*, that is, ways of knowing, being and doing that were hidden but not eliminated through the imposition of a modern ontology. Thus, the task becomes how to listen to these other worlds and interact with them without recurring to essentialist, ahistorical or romantic positions (i.e., eliminating Western modernity in favor of the absent other), nor by discounting the histories of oppression and domination produced by the emergence of European modernity and capitalism.

Political ontology and class politics

As Mendoza (2019: 118) argues, it is not a matter of romanticizing, exoticising, or downplaying other epistemological arguments but understanding how the subaltern *Other* "continues to inhabit the Western theoretical imagination". This leads to a paradoxical situation where those who invoke the *Other's* discourse end up erasing the *Other* in the process (Chandler & Reed 2019). This presents a "new" form of coloniality, extraction, or alienation: a process that renders the knowledge useful without including those that put the knowledge forward.

The emergence of political ontology in Latin America comes from an insistence by some thinkers to take the *Other* and their ways of being and doing seriously (Blaser 2009, 2014). To do so, it draws on a diversity of frameworks. The first is the decolonial turn in Latin America and Quijano's (2000) Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP). This perspective argues that coloniality creates three forms of structural oppression between power, knowledge, and the self. Moreover, these three aspects interact by devaluing non-European forms of knowledge and symbolic systems, considered practical or local and with limited theoretical value.

The forms of coloniality of power and being are experienced through the codification of racial differences between Europeans and non-Europeans, aimed at making the latter appear naturally inferior, and by the use of Western/modern institutional forms of power (like the nation state) in non-Western societies to organize and control labor, its resources, and its products (Quijano 2000). As Leff (2017) argues, the experiences in Latin America in resisting colonialism and the multiple manifestations of global capitalism during the last five centuries have developed into an interrelated framework of knowledge, theories, and practices, what he refers to as Latin American environmental thought. This form of environmental thought draws on

> *theories of dependence and internal colonialism, liberation eco-theology, decolonisation and liberation ethics, as well as agro-ecological theories and practices (...) which, from the perspective of the ecology of difference and the conflict of territorialities, puts its stamp on political ecology in Latin America. (Leff 2017: 243)*

I do not seek to reproduce a detailed genealogy here (see Leff 2017; Escobar 2020). However, it does seem important to highlight a few considerations. The first is the tendency of political ontology and decolonial praxis to focus on contestations over the appropriation of nature and the ontological character these conflicts usually have. For political ontologists, the framework developed by political ecology – focusing on the redistribution and access to resources and 'nature' – becomes insufficient, as it tends

to reduce the definition of nature into a form of coloniality of knowledge. As Blaser (2009: 891) argues,

> *conflicts are becoming (...) visible as ontological conflicts precisely because they hinge upon contestations of the two great divides of the Euro-modern constitution and its associated notion of progress.*

In Latin America, socio-ecological struggles emerge from a multiplicity of sources: by seeking emancipation from the coloniality of knowledge, reconstituting a connection with the forms of being, doing, and understanding of Indigenous people and the historical understandings of how these conflicts are experienced presently. Moreover, these struggles show that environmental conflicts and ecological distribution struggles are much more than mere demands for recognition, distribution of resources, or participatory demands in decision-making processes (the core tenets of the environmental justice movement).

For Escobar (2020: xxxi), political ontology enables the possibility to "unlearn the ontologies of separation that shape our bodies and worlds" and provides a set of tools to understand that "most worlds live under ontological occupation". Thus, political ontology enables the possibility of challenging the categories and hierarchical classifications historically deployed by governments, corporations, and the academy to impose a dominant onto-epistemic structure. From this perspective, environmental conflicts in Latin America are not only movements for the defense of the territory, the demand for rights to be recognised, or the possibility of emancipation, but struggles to continue the existence of other worlding practices. Indeed, these are not only resistance movements but movements for re-existence (Porto-Gonçalves 2001).

The formulations of political ontology are useful in trying to "relate with radical difference without taming it" (Blaser 2009: 892), something in line with other decolonial practices such as the configuration of the pluriverse (Escobar 2018), a Universal Ayul (García Linera 1995), or a Ch'ixi modernity (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010). Thus, the diversity of worlding practices seeks to challenge the traditional colonial binaries while arguing that all existence is radically interdependent. Indeed, it challenges the assumption and insistence of the Modern worldview that only one-world, one real, and one possible world are possible (Escobar 2020: xx). Notions like *Ch'ixi modernity*, which combines the Indian world and its opposite without ever mixing them (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010: 105), recognizes the existence a bricolage of identities, knowledges, and practices and, hence, proposes the construction of identity based on differences that complement and antagonize each other. In other words, it enables a way of reinterpreting the working class as a revolutionary subject, doing away with the teleological and Eurocentric readings where subaltern struggles are deemed inferior to those of the white proletariat (Tornel & Lunden 2020). This does not mean that the possibilities emerging for the subalterns should become romanticized, but that in their struggles towards emancipation and liberation, there are vibrant opportunities for radical change, especially in Latin America, where Indigenous, campesino, women, and other subaltern struggles are reproducing a notion of the *Ch'ixi* and enabling the construction, design, and emergence of a pluriverse (Escobar 2020).

Jason W. Moore argues in his commentary piece that political ontology risks producing a class denialist or an anti-dialectical reading of history. For Moore, any ahistorical understanding might end up reaffirming or erasing previous injustices or not questioning the ruling ideas that created and sustained the violent enterprise of cheap nature that gave birth to and reproduces capitalism. As Moore argues, by placing

Western cosmology as part of the many cosmologies that come into view, we risk erasing the history of domination, subjugation, violence, and extraction that has shaped this particular worldview from which we cannot disassociate capitalism.

Perhaps some of these limitations can be addressed by briefly analyzing the cases of Ecuador and Bolivia.[2] The leftist and Indigenous supported governments of Rafael Correa and Evo Morales, respectively, attempted to incorporate the *Other*'s world views by recognizing other forms of well-being beyond development (such as *Buen Vivir*) and the rights of nature into their constitutions. This process effectively challenged the colonial ontology of separation by encoding a pluriversal ontology into their political codes (i.e., the constitution) and existing political structures (i.e., the State). The result arguably questioned neoliberal capitalism but without altering the dynamics of extraction, violence, and the colonial hierarchies that underpin global capitalism (Dinerstein 2015; Mendoza 2019; Riofrancos 2020).

On the one hand, these examples show the impossibility of producing a national, state centered alternative to our predicament as a civilizatory crisis (Esteva 2020). While on the other hand, they have sparked essential criticisms over the actually existing possibility of emancipation by questioning the role of coloniality in power, knowledge, ways of being, and calling for the recognition of the *Other* in political frameworks. Hence, the idea is no longer whether the subaltern can speak but of how can *we* listen to those created absences (Santos 2014) or enable a dialogue of philosophies (Dussel 2015), knowledges (Leff 2017) and *livings* in relation to them (Esteva 2019) beyond the existing structures of domination.

For example, Indigenous scholar Glen Sean Coulthard brings Marxian class analysis into the debate over recognition and Indigenous politics. Drawing on the work of Fanon (1967), he argues that the politics of recognition serve the interests of colonial powers. This happens by shifting the State's reliance on repressive violence to the ability to

> *entice Indigenous peoples to identify, either imperfectly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler State and society (Coulthard 2014: 25).*

Recognition acts as a form of 'condescending hospitality' where the settler State can continue to gain access to land (resources) with apparent Indigenous support. Coulthard hinges on the Marxian notion of primitive accumulation, arguing that settler colonialism operates by deploying primitive accumulation in a cyclical form to provide continued access to Indigenous land for the colonial settlers. This interpretation is neither ahistorical nor romantic. Coulthard shows how Marx himself understood colonialism not as an afterthought of capital relations but as a direct source of its operation. Here the fight for Indigenous self-determination and liberation needs to go beyond the State and capitalism. It is a process that necessarily confronts the politics of recognition and the cycles of primitive accumulation. For this, Coulthard develops a framework based on the relations to land, what he calls *grounded normativity and place-based solidarity* (Coulthard 2014: 63).

This framework sees Indigenous struggles against capitalism as struggles oriented around the question of land, that is,

> *struggles not only for land, but also deeply informed by what the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship, [which] ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our*

surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way (Coulthard 2014: 60, emphasis in original).

Coulthard hinges on this definition by contrasting how Western narratives focus on time (i.e., in world-historical developmental terms) instead of Indigenous ontologies in which place and land are the departing points of reference. This distinction between space and time is key to producing resistance to the occupation of land by building a sense of place, that is,

a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; and sometimes these relational practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistance against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our sense of place (Coulthard 2014: 61).

Coming back to the work of thinkers proposing a resurgence of political subjectivity (see Hardt & Negri 2009; Zibechi 2012; Barkin & Sanchez 2020; Arboleda 2020), the struggles of Indigenous people in Latin America for survival and re-existence enable a possible opening for political ontology. Political ontology provides the possibility to look beyond the traditional notions and the 'toolkits' developed from orthodox Marxism (i.e., strikes, sabotages and labor disputes), class politics and other forms of revolutionary subjectivities that became relevant to the constitution of capitalism in the last two centuries. From this perspective, the challenge is to enable a dialogue of knowledges, understood as the encounter of cultural beings constituted by their knowledge and their ways of being-in-the-world and a dialogue of livings (i.e. interculturality in practice) where identities do not collapse in one another, but where actual understandings are produced recognizing the limits of our possibility of understanding *the Other* (Leff 2017; Esteva 2019). These dialogues could provide a platform to support emancipatory struggles that move beyond the categories of capitalist societies (money, abstract labor, commodity fetishism and value) and open a possibility to imagine politics beyond the State and capitalism (Postone 2003; Holloway, 2010; Jappe 2017; Esteva 2020).

Following the Caribbean feminist poet Audre Lorde (1985), we cannot continue to rely on *the master's tools to dismantle the master's house*. Political ontology, pluriversal politics and the genealogy of Latin-American environmentalism offer the possibility of learning from these historical struggles against capitalism while also placing the historical constitution of Latin America as part of the Modern world-system. As Enrique Leff (2017: 248) argues,

Political ontology is not reduced to a politics of cultural difference; it brings into play the existential ontologies of peoples linked to the environmental conditions of their territories, i.e., the cultural meanings associated with ecological potentials and geographical conditions for the reconstruction of their sustainable ways of life.

Endnotes

1. For a detailed account of Bernier's thesis see: Tambiah (1992) What did Bernier actually say? Profiling the Mughal empire. *Indian Sociology* 32(2): 361–386.

2. We could add to these other experiences in Latin America and other parts of the global south as well. The current experience of México being a case in point (see Ansótegui 2021; Tornel 2020).

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