

ARTURO ESCOBAR



**Book review: Designs for the Pluriverse Radical
Interdependence, Autonomy, and the
Making of Worlds, Arturo Escobar (2018)**

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Designs
Pluriverse
Interdependence, Autonomy

Book review: Designs for the Pluriverse Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds, Arturo Escobar (2018)

(Spanish version: Autonomía y diseño. La realización de la comunal (2016)

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Arturo Escobar's work *Designs for the Pluriverse - Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* is an in-depth intention to look at the possibilities for life-sustaining other worlds. The book becomes only more and more relevant standpoint in the current multicrisis, bringing economical volatility, political tensions and socio-ecological emergencies, all of them experienced in Bolivia as well as in numerous other contexts. Escobar calls for deeper understanding of the ontological roots behind the woeful situation, and even more, to ask if there are any alternatives for the current paths of development. While the expanding idea, that the current socio-ecological crisis would be a structural consequence of capitalism, is still considered as a radical claim, Escobar dives even deeper,

and explores the ontological questions behind the capitalist development and modern thinking, being an eminent thinker at the field of post-developmental studies. The Colombian anthropologist scholar has worked decades with communities in the Colombian Cauca territories and draws his theoretical thinking from these empirical experiences in the territorial struggles.

The first version of the book, *Autonomía y diseño. La realización de la comunal* was published in Spanish in 2016, serving the local “ontological designers” when discussing Latin American thinking and movements. Its English version *Designs for the Pluriverse, Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of worlds*, published two years later in 2018, broadened its readers in other continents, and has been a great inspiration for scholars and students at several fields, illuminating the limitations of the euro-modern worldviews and visions. The direct citations of this book review refers to the English version.

The book provides a comprehensive introduction to radical relationalist thinking, explaining carefully the crucial ontological concepts with their real-life consequences. At the same time, the empirical cases of transforming the ontological set-ups provide inspiration and useful tools for social movements for building their frameworks. The work initiates from exploring the concept of design as a tool of capitalist development yet taking a critical stand and reflecting the usefulness of the concept in cultural studies. The second part introduces ontological questions of rationalism and dualism in modern thinking and outlines prospects to challenge them with ontological design. Escobar’s approach to design draws from Goodwin’s, Maturana’s and Varela’s (1991) self-organization, autopoiesis, and complexity, which are carefully introduced for the readers. The third part of the book examines empirical examples in cases which Escobar finds taking part in the ontological design, drafting imaginaries for transformation beyond the modern development and discuss the relational initiatives with the concept of pluriverse; a relationalist “set-up”, which does not deny all rationalist euro-modern thinking, but places them as being only one world in “the world where many world fits”, dismantling its colonizing domination. The author does not make a philosophical argument per se but claims on the effects of a rationalist tradition in orienting people’s ways of thinking and being, and connects this broad cultural phenomena with the ecological crisis and with the cultural and political struggles around nature and difference in Latin America.

Modern vs. ontological design for pluriverse

According to Escobar, *design* is one of “the central political technologies of patriarchal capitalist modernity and a key element in modernity’s constitution of a single globalized world.” (p. xiii) The problematics of modern design appear in its detachment from place, nature, landscape and time, while during the most human existence throughout history the world has been built from localities, from “here and now”. The development of modern institutions and expert knowledge placed the expert-driven processes to define the social norms, which were hence sundered from the life-world. In this development the

communities lost their possibilities to generate the social norms from their inner relations, named as “ontonomy” and in the local political processes, i.e. autonomy.

Escobar’s aim is to explore prospects to transform design from the expert-driven process within a taken-for-granted social and economic order toward “design practices that are participatory, socially oriented, situated, and open ended and that challenge the business-as-usual mode of being, producing, and consuming.”(p. 27) The proposal “highlights design frameworks that pay serious attention to questions of place, the environment, experience, politics, and the role of digital technologies in transforming design contexts.” (p. 27) In the transition from the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology, ontological design offers means to think about and contribute to a pluriverse of socio-natural configurations, hence “designs for the pluriverse becomes a tool for reimagining and reconstructing local worlds”(p.4).

Ontological transformation beyond the modern “One-World World”

In the chapter 3, *In the Background of Our Culture: Rationalism, Ontological Dualism, and Relationality* or *En el trasfondo de nuestra cultura: racionalismo, dualismo ontológico y relacionalidad*, the book presents the crucial problematics in the rationalistic tradition in critical literature, and this chapter could serve independently the studies of the field. The exploration initiates from “the cartesian license” (Sagan et al, 1997) which separates mind and matter, body and soul and life from nonlife in science, and places a man above other forms of being. Escobar presents Varela’s critics of the cartesian understandings as a fundamental limitation for our thinking and action. To reconnect mind, body and the world Varela et al. (1991) re-defines cognition as being “the enactment of a world and a mind” in “the ceaseless and always-changing flow of existence that constitutes life” (p.81). This “enaction” (embodied action) assumes fundamental unity of being and world. Maturana’s critics on rationalism point to the determinative role of emotions even behind rational thinking, which is always an emotional decision itself, and hence breaks the modern illusion separating emotion and reason. Dualisms are not to be rejected per se, but the modern hierarchies between them.

Escobar defines four fundamental beliefs grounding from rationalist and cartesian thinking, which conduct **into** harmful social structures and restrict transformative action toward life-sustaining worlds, and thus should be acknowledged and overcome in ontological design. The belief in independent individuals replaces communal and place-based forms of relating and is most strictly contradicted in Buddhism, which underlies how everything interexists, but nothing exists by itself. In ontological design Escobar calls for relational personhood to become the default setting in a post-individualist world, replacing individualistic lifestyles toward hopeful conditions for collaborative design. The second belief is the objective real, which in the rationalistic tradition grounds on experiences and science. For Escobar this objectivist stance directs to justify human mastery over nature in the patriarchal culture, and “disempowers us for partnering with nature and other humans in a truly collaborative, earth- wise, and stream-of- life manner” (p.85). Internalizing the idea

of a single real world, which requires us to accept only one truth about it, is a fundamental error. This colonizing “one-world world” (Law, 2011) tends to subjugate all other ontologies under the euro-modernity, in which the neoliberal globalization is one of its “One truths”, yet widely contested by social movements. The belief in real is connected with the third belief: the science, which is the only foundation of valid knowledge in modern societies. In addition to the feminist, philosophical and post-modernist critics on positivism and objective science, indigenous, local, and traditional ecological knowledges accept the plurality of knowledges, taking part in the epistemic decolonization. Separating cognition and affect, and ideas from emotions in pursuing objectivity, enables scientists to avoid taking responsibilities from their destructive discoveries, which “contributes to heightening modernity’s tendency toward pathologies of isolation and violence”(p. 89).

The increasing dependency on market-based vested interests is another limitation of organized science to be a trusted ally against authoritarianism. The fourth belief, the economy, and specially market economy, grounds on the earlier mentioned beliefs, in a set-up, where economy is separated from thought and action. In its essentialism, and even fundamentalism, the market economy tends to deny the diverse alternatives for it, such as social and solidarity economies, degrowth in Europe and alternatives for development in South America.

The rest of the book analyses forms and possibilities of ontological design from this radical relationalism. While Escobar’s ontological approach proposes autonomy in defining norms, it draws on the assumptions that collective and autonomous action would build life-sustaining forms of being based on love for life, connecting anthropology and biology with spirituality, claiming that co-existence is a core aim of any entity. With the concept of design, it avoids the tradition versus modern debate, perceiving constant change.

From a critical point of view, the post-developmental approach tends to build a eurocentric modernity versus non-modern local autonomies dualism and simplistic historical narrative, where all non-European colonizing empires are excluded. Understandably, the history of the current power structures grounding from the European conquer of the Abya Yala, as a dramatic shift, is a relevant point of focus, however acknowledging the significance of the pre-Columbian political powers, such as the Inca imperium, could illuminate formation of the highly antiauthoritarian cultures and structures, such as of the Guaraníes, rather than take them for granted or “natural”.

During the current “post-truth era”, the relationalist criticism towards “real” and “science” turns to become a more sensitive standpoint, when “truth” and “science” are placed at the mainstream stage of political battles. While the critical studies expose central structural problems, the conspiracy theories, deepfake artificial intelligence and other forms of disinformation only confuses people from perceiving a comprehensible real. The climate activist Greta Thunberg’s famous demand “Listen to the scientists!” is at the same time crucial when unpleasant studies on environmental and social concerns are denied, yet might turn to be problematic, under the rising authoritarian control over academics, with highly

commercialized universities and research. Thus, the relationalist critics are still relevant, yet they require all the time more careful understanding in the increasingly complex environments.

Development and pluriverse in the Bolivian Chiquitania

My own research project on the civic and communal action against the Chiquitanian forest fires, grounds on the presented post-developmental framework and explores the existing pluriverse and its possibilities to extend from the extractivist domination in the observed activities and networks. Like critics on the economy, address certain kind of economy (market), being separated from other aspects of life, yet not denying economical needs to maintain wellbeing, the critics on development concerns the fundamentalist priority of the modern development based on the essentialized market economy, which puts priority on the growth of GDP despite its possible social and ecological consequences. This does not mean rejecting the change or improving wellbeing, nor resisting technological innovations which can be useful tools for the communities self-determined aims. The mainstream development is often marketed by claiming that democracy, equality, and even ecological sustainability, would be dependent on it, while the critical reading exposes its structural obstacles to gain these goals. In the case study the problematics appears in the empirical context of “the Santa Cruz model’s”, expanding agroindustry, consequences for the local communities and biodiversity, specifically in the forest fire disasters.

However, my research in Bolivia does not aim to point out that this certain State or government would be conducting destructive politics, in that case I would focus on my home country and Finland’s sort-singed environmental politics prioritizing the interests of the forest industry. Instead, the still existing pluriverse of diverse ontologies facing the rapid modern development gives inspiration to explore the ontological and epistemological questions behind the inter-connected ideas, affects and emotions driving for the urgent action and contesting the extractivist politics. The highly visible contradictions provide a fruitful panorama to understand the wider structural frameworks, vital to discern in the global crises, to avoid dead ends. As an example, in Bolivia the development of *vivir bien* seeking for harmonious conviviality provided a promising model based on local ontologies yet the model faced its limitations under the euro-modern colonizing structures, such as a modern state having sovereignty over localities, in the global neo-liberal world-economy, pushing for extractivist practices.

In co-laboration with local actors, discussing on the ontological questions, often invisible in everyday life, might contribute to the understandings on the rural communities challenges in the changing conditions, turning away from racist degrading or unrealistic romanticization, thus away from essentialized identities towards worldviews and the consequences of the colonizing structures.

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Notes

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Su tesis doctoral examina la acción cívica y comunitaria contra los incendios forestales de la Chiquitania de Bolivia, haciendo uso de la ecología política posdesarrollista como marco teórico. Ha sido investigadora visitante en el Centro Interdisciplinario PROEIB Andes, Universidad Mayor de San Simón, entre el 2023-2024 y junio 2026, combinando estas visitas con el trabajo de campo en la Chiquitania. En la Universidad Mayor de San Simón, coordina su trabajo con J. Fernando Galindo, quien guía su investigación como cotutor local.

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