

Another Possible Is Possible

These are bold perspectives, but in the short term we can't afford the luxury of working to reproduce mechanical scenarios. If possible, the experience of collective global coexistence in recent years, the practice of sociocultural diversity, of political ecology, and of a humanizing environmental history will allow us to design new though imprecise civilizational horizons.

—HÉCTOR ALIMONDA (1949–2017), IN MEMORIAM

(Voz de mujer)

Tú no puedes comprar el viento
Tú no puedes comprar el sol
Tú no puedes comprar la lluvia
Tú no puedes comprar el calor
Tú no puedes comprar las nubes
Tú no puedes comprar los colores
Tú no puedes comprar mi alegría
Tú no puedes comprar mis dolores. . . .

(Woman's voice)

You can't buy the wind
You can't buy the sun
You can't buy the rain
You can't buy the heat
You can't buy the clouds
You can't buy the colors
You can't buy my joy
You can't buy my sorrows. . . .

(Coro: voces de mujeres)

Vamos caminando
Vamos dibujando el camino
Aquí se respira lucha

(Vamos caminando)
Yo canto porque se escucha
(Vamos caminando)
Aquí estamos de pie
¡Que viva la América!

(Chorus: women's voices)
Let's keep walking
Let's trace the path
Here we breathe the struggle
(Let's keep walking)
I sing to be heard
(Let's keep walking)
Here we're standing up
Viva América!

— CALLE 13, "LATINOAMÉRICA"

Reality is a proposition that we use as an explanatory notion to explain our experiences. Moreover, we use it in different ways according to our emotions. This is why there are different notions of reality in different cultures or in different moments of history. . . . We live the "real" as the presence of our experience. I saw it, I heard it, I touched it.

— HUMBERTO MATURANA, "METADESIGN: PART II" (1997), 3

This is a series of essays about the politics of the possible, about our ideas about the real and the possible and how they determine our political practice, from the personal to the collective, as well as our sense of hope. We could have turned to any number of theories, from quantum physics or complexity theory to anthropological analysis, to show how we live with a fairly naive concept of the real, but in the end, as Maturana suggests in the epigraph, we make decisions with our emotions, or at least not entirely with our reason. This is why I suggest we must *sentipensar* (feel-think) new notions about what is real and thus what is possible.

To put it as succinctly as possible, I would say that we base our conventional notions of what is real on a belief that we interact with the world as individuals separate from that world; the world seems external, outside of us, a

predictable context within which we move about freely. The scientific principles we learn in our formal schooling (and that the media rely on) teach us that we can understand this world by gazing on it as neutral and objective observers. The conventional scientific approach thus instills in us a cosmivision that divides the world into subjects and objects, a world we can understand and manipulate at will. The entire edifice of modern Western civilization (with its particular forms of patriarchy, racism, and capitalist exploitation) is based on this objectivizing operation—on this dualist ontology, as we will call it—because it is based on a strict separation between subject and object, reason and emotion, and many other dualisms that we will uncover in this book, and yet more dualisms that readers will go on to discover on their own.

Now, although this dualist ontology of self-contained subjects and objects has already raised a wide range of critiques and inquiries, as I explain in the first chapter, it is still hard to understand its serious implications for the way in which we live our lives, construct our worlds, and conduct our politics. Questioning these notions is not easy, because we grow up and live with them; we bring them to life with our actions. What could be more solid than the world on which we are standing? What could be more real than the world surrounding us, in which our minds seemingly wake up every morning? It is hard to deny. Whenever we leave the house, whenever we walk about the world, we have to take for granted that doors, streets, offices, computers, people, and so on exist. These are no illusions.

At the same time, as we will see, all these things, including ourselves, do not exist quite so independently of one another as we suppose. The question is how this basic fact of experience has become a belief in an “objective reality” about an “external world” consisting of “entities” distributed through space, each of them independent of the multiplicity of interactions that produce them. This objectivizing stance leads to the ethos of human dominion over nature that forms the basis for patriarchal culture and capitalist societies. It prevents and disempowers us from coexisting with the full range of human and nonhuman beings in a collaborative manner that is wiser in its relationship with the Earth and with the flow of life. It creates a single reality from which all other realities and senses of the real are excluded, thus profoundly limiting the scope of the political.

Questioning this belief in a single reality means developing another, entirely different understanding of what change and transformation are, and thus of what politics can be. The real, the possible, and the political are all joined at the hip. It is precisely because other possibles have been turned into “impossibles” that we find it so difficult to imagine other realities. Speaking of

other possibles and other realities forces us to rethink many of our everyday practices and politics.¹

Reflecting critically on politics from this perspective is crucial if we are going to have a horizon from which we can move toward open-ended civilizational (nontotalitarian) transitions. If all we have is a political practice based on the conventional understanding of the real/possible, it will be extremely difficult for us to extract ourselves from the current global politics of war that underlies capital accumulation. Our current understandings are inadequate to confronting the capitalist hydra. We would end up in a struggle for mere survival, functioning on behalf of a system that has been constantly expanding for five hundred years, at war with the planet and with all of life.² We can see that the capitalist system depends on this objectivizing and dualist conception of the real in so many of its dimensions: the idea of self-contained spheres (“economics,” “society,” “politics,” “culture,” and so on), as if the ceaseless flow of matter/life could be squeezed into these neatly organized pigeonholes; the construct of the autonomous “individual” who maximizes his “utility” through market decisions; the idea of a self-regulating market, as if it were not linked by multiple strands to the whole meshwork of the real; the concept of nature as a “resource” rather than as life itself; and the mode of understanding that it relies on, the so-called science of economics, a veritable Cartesian castle in the sky founded on these same presuppositions. These premises, and many more, form the ontological basis of capital and its practice of plunder and destruction.

The questions posed in this book are based on two interrelated points. The first concerns the rise in recent decades of so many realities that hegemonic discourses about the real had previously deemed inexistent or else implausible alternatives to what exists (Santos 2014), including most social groups located on the oppressed side of colonial binaries: black and indigenous people, women, peasants, marginalized urban dwellers of all sorts. From many of these subaltern realities, we now get a wide variety of proposals for “worlding” life on new premises; in other words, for constructing other worlds. For instance, the proposal of the indigenous Nasa people of southwestern Colombia (see chapters 2 and 3), which they base on their statement on the liberation of Mother Earth, arises from an utterly different notion of the real/possible and other practices of world making.

The second underlying point is the awareness that all existence is radically interdependent. Everything exists in relation, arising and developing in meshworks of relations. Perhaps to make it manageable, we modern humans have invented the powerful fictions of the individual (the ego), the economy,

free markets, nature, and many more, each of them as an irrefutable reality that exists intrinsically on its own. These beliefs work quite effectively, for they end up producing us as such. But are we really the autonomous individuals we imagine ourselves to be? Can we really separate something called “the economy” from the endless, ceaseless flow of life? Aren’t we humans also “nature,” so that all the things we have invented as “nonhuman” (food, air, water, minerals, microorganisms) also constitute us? When we appeal to reason, when we call for “thinking with a cool head,” aren’t we paradoxically making an emotional and selective decision? Asking ourselves these questions marks the beginning of a long journey toward a life consonant with other ontologies, a journey toward a profound consciousness of the relationality and interdependence of all that exists, which is in turn indispensable for imagining other possible worlds.

A main objective in gathering these texts under the rubric of *Another Possible Is Possible* (the title of the Spanish-language edition) is to provide political-theoretical tools to counter a powerful tendency of experts, politicians of the Right, and many intellectuals of the Left, to delegitimize all arguments favoring local struggles to transform the world and to exclude proposals by subaltern groups from serious consideration, because—they argue—such proposals will never suffice to change the situation substantially. In the case of the Right, only the “major players,” such as science and technology, corporations, states, and institutions like the World Bank, are capable of dealing with the serious problems of poverty and environmental degradation. For the traditional Left, local alternatives will never be powerful enough to overthrow the “monsters” of capitalism, imperialism, or globalization. From their perspective (often enough shared by the average person in the street), the alternatives proposed by these groups are too local, small, partial, utopian, and unrealistic, or else they think that the groups proposing them “are trying to make us go backward.” But perhaps the most common and devastating label that they plaster on them is *romantic*. In the final analysis, both Right and Left use their respective premises of what is real and possible to arrive at the same place: they reproduce the world as we know it. At this level, they are all the same. Talking about “another possible” offers an antidote to these accusations of romanticism.

I would also suggest that, given the gravity of the multiple crises the planet is now dealing with (crises of the environment, the climate, society, and meaning), subaltern pluriversal proposals are proving that we have a more urgent need today than ever for new thinking about the real/possible. At a time like this, we can apply the well-known principle (often attributed to Einstein) that “we cannot resolve the problems of one era using the same mental frame that

created them,” or the formulation of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “we have modern problems for which there are no modern solutions”—such as climate change. We might also decide to accept, in the words of a young Afro-Colombian activist from the Pacific rain forest on the border between Colombia and Ecuador that is currently being ravaged by “development,” that “we cannot think about our world in the same way; either we take a step forward, or we’ll fall twenty years behind.”³ It is, in the final analysis, a matter of making the unthinkable thinkable, and the thinkable believable and possible. This is an essential principle for the civilizational transitions that so many groups and activists are now calling for.

The following chapters are an invitation to stop thinking about our worlds with the dominant categories that created these crises, and instead to move forward in a process of relearning the real/possible, beyond the certitudes of modernity and the conventional categories that, it is worth underlining, are the very ones used by the institutions perpetuating the crisis: the World Bank, the great corporations, most states, organized religions, and also to a large extent the academy. Their categories replicate the conception of the world held by the powerful. The nightly news shows repeat them day after day in their reports on “the way things are,” *as if the world really were that way*. We cannot reconstruct the world and create genuinely new worlds using the same categories by which we are destroying it! I hope these texts may help us to develop antidotes to the accusation of romanticism, or at least to radically invert it. Aren’t the true romantics the people who insist that more of the same (more corporate solutions, more World Bank-style development, more “green economies”) will lead to lasting improvements? We should arrive at the conclusion that we can’t expect anything good—for life, for land, for people—to come out of such institutions.⁴

In everyday language, believing in a single notion of the real/possible usually translates into “being realistic.” Maybe we can now add a question mark or two to this expression. What does “being realistic” mean? It means believing that in the final analysis there is a single correct way to see and understand things (based on rationality and science); believing that these (our) universal truths must prevail against all others, which in our view are less correct, or false; being convinced that we live in a world made of a single world, and being shocked by the opposite possibility; and being sure that the truth of this single (usually Western) reality—which obviously we all share, as we should!—is the space from which we ought to promote our projects (whether they be for becoming very rich or for resisting capitalism). Often, it also means we believe that the knowledge of men, of whites, of Euro-Americans and Euro-Latin

Americans (whether or not we belong to these groups), is superior to that of all other social groups and that their lives are more desirable. It means thinking that those who insist, in their obstinacy, on defending principles other than these are hopeless romantics who really don't have to be listened to. It means, finally, giving up the right to dream. How small this "reality" shrinks by the time we have filtered it through our questions. The world of the *incurable realists* is reduced to a CNN version of life, to the realpolitik of nation-states, and to self-help schemes that serve the big corporations.

Finally, a word on the subtitle of the Spanish edition of the book, *Abya Yala/Afro/Latino América*. In the prologue, I referred straightforwardly to Latin America. As we will see in chapter 2, that name conceals the colonial histories of conquest and enslavement that constitute it. Renaming this continent is a first step toward participating in a politics of the real and of the possible. From that point forward, we should dig more deeply into the pluralization of the worlds that inhabit it, and begin to think from the viewpoints of those cosmovisions that have always conceptualized and constructed their existence from below and with the Earth.

Guide to the Book

Allow me to present briefly each of the chapters that follow, including the context in which each was produced.

Chapter 1, "Theory and the Un/Real: Tools for Rethinking 'Reality' and the Possible," uses a theoretical reflection to draw links between a series of domains—some theoretical, others not—within which we may investigate other concepts of the real and the possible. We find a first series of spaces in many ancestral traditions, from the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples, animism, and matriarchal societies to Buddhism and Earth-based spiritualities. The second series derives more directly from the academy; it includes cybernetics and the sciences of complexity, self-organization, and emergence; the attention that is once more being given to ontology in social theory, in what is known as the ontological turn; and finally the notion of a pluriverse. Far from being mere holdovers from a bygone time, the first series of spaces still drives the construction of contemporary worlds. The second evinces noteworthy attempts to think beyond the idea of a single world, a single reality, a single form of the possible. These trends will help us to derealize the realist that each of us carries within ourselves, and to think-live with a more complex and effective awareness of the inexhaustible *tejido* (weave) of interdependence that sustains life and allows it to flourish, which is to say, the pluriverse.

Chapter 2, “From Below, on the Left, and with the Earth,” was first prepared for the Seventh Latin American and Caribbean Conference on Social Sciences organized by CLACSO (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales), which took place in Medellín, November 9–13, 2015. Held every four years, this is the most prominent event in the social sciences in Latin America, attracting a huge number of participants, especially young scholars. I was interested in showing that Latin American critical thought is not in crisis, as some have argued based on the apparent end of the progressive cycle in Latin America, but rather that it is in fact more vibrant and dynamic than ever. The theoretical contributions to a rethinking of the region resonate all across the continent—in meetings among native peoples; in *mingas de pensamiento* (collective thought activities); in debates among urban and rural movements and collectives; in assemblies of communities in resistance; in mobilizations of young people, women, peasants, and environmentalists; and undoubtedly in some of the sectors that have traditionally been considered the quintessential spaces for thought, such as the academy and the arts. Here I use the Zapatista expression for thinking about alternatives, “from below and on the Left,” but I explicitly add the dimension of Earth as essential to any critical thought in the present. Thinking from below brings me back to reflecting on the current bumper crop of writing on the notions of territory, autonomy, and communality, to which I pay special attention. Finally, for useful ideas about how to think with the Earth, I turn not to the thought of ecologists (important as it is) but to the cosmovisions or relational ontologies of territory-peoples (indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants, in particular), for they are closely in tune with the Earth.

Chapter 3, “The Earth~Form of Life: Nasa Thought and the Limits to the Episteme of Modernity,” continues exploring thought about the Earth, though in a somewhat more academic register. The essay was originally prepared for the opening address in honor of the new doctorate in the cultural history of Colombia at the Universidad del Valle in Cali on November 1, 2016. I first presented it a few days earlier at the International Colloquium of Multiple Knowledges and Social and Political Sciences (Universidad Nacional, Bogotá, October 18–21, 2016). In it I outline a potential line of research based on Michel Foucault’s archaeological analysis of discourse. But my basic motivation for writing this text was something else: to construct an argument based on a statement that the Nasa people of the northern Cauca region in Colombia proposed more than a decade ago, the Liberation of Mother Earth, which I bring up at the end of chapter 2. Taking off from this Nasa statement, the chapter sets up a conversation between the Nasa proposal and discourse analysis. A

detailed reading of the Nasa archive allows me to propose the adoption of the notion of the Liberation of Mother Earth (a genuine concept-movement) as a potent principle for all political action and design work. This principle will show us a path toward undertaking, from wherever we happen to be, the task of “weaving life in freedom.” The lucid knowledge of this indigenous people from northern Cauca imbues us with the idea of a civilizational change, from the Man-form (that of anthropocentric modernity) to the Earth~form of life (relationality and biocentrism).

Chapter 4, “*Sentipensar* with the Earth,” prepared for the International Colloquium on Epistemologies of the South, held at Coimbra, Portugal, July 10–12, 2014, reflects on how the concept of the epistemologies of the South proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos can serve as a framework for recognizing the diversity of ways of understanding the world and giving meaning to existence. It aims at highlighting the ontological dimension of the epistemologies of the South. Working on this framework, the chapter describes the concept of “relational ontologies,” illustrating other sorts of theoretical tools for those who wish no longer to be complicit in the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences on the part of Eurocentric globalization. Up against the hegemonic idea of “One World made from one world”—the capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial globalized world—the text suggests a transition to “a world in which many worlds fit,” the pluriverse. It offers examples of popular resistance against extractive mining, which involve not only physical occupation but also what I term the “ontological occupation” of territories. The text then suggests that the knowledges derived from subaltern groups are more appropriate to the profound social transformations needed to face the planetary crisis than many forms of knowledge produced in the academy.

Chapter 5, “Notes on Intellectual Colonialism and the Dilemmas of Latin American Social Theory,” was written at the invitation of Maristella Svampa for a special issue of the sociology journal of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata in Argentina. Maristella asked authors to address two issues: first, how we should think about intellectual or epistemic dependence with respect to the theoretical currents of the central countries; and second, questioning the conditions for producing a more independent social science. I respond in the first part of the chapter by questioning whether it is possible to think outside the modern episteme, which I describe based on Foucault’s concept of episteme. In the second part I briefly discuss some areas of emerging research in Latin America that, in a variety of ways, are all poking around the boundaries of the episteme, so to speak: relationality, Buen Vivir (Good Living), nature rights, decolonial feminisms, and civilizational transitions, among others. In the fi-

nal section I present at greater length a few examples of autonomous social theory production with which I am somewhat familiar, from Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and Argentina. These experiences involve the explicit creation of interepistemic spaces in which the primacy of academic understandings is subverted in favor of a determined stance for the “knowledges otherwise” of subaltern groups.

Chapter 6, “Postdevelopment @ 25: On ‘Being Stuck’ and Moving Forward, Sideways, Backward, and Otherwise,” is a conversation with Gustavo Esteva, perhaps the most perceptive and persistent critic of development, originally prepared for a special issue of *Third World Quarterly* on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the English translation of *The Development Dictionary*, edited by Wolfgang Sachs. In our discussion of postdevelopment, we reassess the critiques of the concept and openly discuss what “living beyond development” means today. The topics we cover include how development discourse continues to shape mentalities and practices; the tensions and contradictions in the institutional world, which remains trapped in its compulsion for development and particularly with the so-called sustainable development goals, established by the UN for the 2015–2030 period; the new forms and manifestations of resistance to development; and the relevant experiences that give us a glimpse of worlds that exist beyond development and are heading toward the pluriverse, worlds that are at work creatively constructing a contemporary art of living. Along the way, we propose a few ideas about rethinking “development cooperation” in terms of effective acts of solidarity for civilizational transitions, both in the Global South and in the Global North, perhaps ultimately dissolving that border.

Chapter 7, “Cosmo/Visions of the Colombian Pacific Coast Region and Their Socioenvironmental Implications,” was prepared for the forum “Pacific Vision: Sustainable Territory,” organized by *Revista Semana* of Bogotá (the most important weekly in Colombia), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which took place in Bogotá on May 18, 2016, with participants from the government, major economic interests, the academy, and a handful of activists. The economic and social crisis assailing the planet has put the Pacific region of Colombia—and other regions with similarly high levels of biological and cultural diversity—in a particularly vital position. As I argue in this text, however, realizing this planetary vocation will require us to collectively establish a novel way of looking at things that is quite unlike the so-called development strategies currently prevailing throughout the region. By accepting this historical challenge, the Pacific would be signing up for an ambitious transition strategy in which territorial

sustainability equates to the sustainability of life as a whole—a view far from the economic concepts of productivity, competitiveness, and efficiency. As I try to show, many of the ideas necessary for this transition toward *Otro Pazi-fico Posible*, “Another Possible Pacific”—the motto of an international campaign defending the region—already exist in the proposals and practices of some territorial-ethnic communities and organizations in the region, and in some academic approaches. Promoting a transition vision for the Pacific with any resoluteness, however, will require a true codesign strategy in which many people committed to genuine intercultural dialogue would have to participate. In such a strategy, we will find a different form of conceptualizing social action for the so-called postconflict period.

Finally, chapter 8, “Beyond ‘Regional Development,’” explores the potential of codesign, as conceived by and for the autonomy of local subaltern communities. It centers on the generation of a transitional imaginary for a particular region in the Southwest of Colombia, the geographical valley of the Río Cauca, whose largest urban center is the city of Cali. For more than a century, this region has been subjected to a capitalist model based on sugarcane plantations in the flatlands and extensive cattle ranching in the foothills. The ecological devastation caused by this model is already evident in the hills, aquifers, rivers, forests, farmland, and wetlands, as is the massive, profoundly unjust, and painful social and territorial dislocation of the peasants and communities of African descent in the region. This region can be reimagined as a true bastion of agricultural production of organic fruits, vegetables, grains, and tropical plants, and as a genuinely multicultural region of small and mid-size agricultural producers, and a functional, decentralized network of towns and midsize cities. Imagining an end to sugarcane and to the upper-class and middle-class ways of life supported by the agroindustrial model, however, is still unthinkable for the elites and governing officials, and also for most of the people. In this chapter, I use an ontological design perspective to work out the rudiments of an autonomous design proposal, as a collective exercise in codesign toward a new socionatural configuration that will be quite unlike what we have now, including in the cities. To imagine this beautiful, fertile, and now utterly devastated valley from both the historical perspective of the self-organization and relationality of life and that of the cosmovisions and desires of subaltern groups and other interested groups, we have to go far beyond all known schemes of regional development and prevailing notions of urban planning. In terms of theory, this chapter tries to show that “another design is possible,” for it is based on a different reading of reality. It behooves us to take seriously the hypothesis that another possible is possible.

Taken as a whole, these chapters may be considered essays in political ontology and pluriverse studies. They form part of the collective project to move beyond (or behind or sideways of) the modern onto-epistemic formation. However, and perhaps more relevantly, they are also an effort to contribute to realizing the communal and pro-autonomy worlds that keep popping up, with more and more insolence, and perhaps more forcefully as well, in some regions of Abya Yala/Afro/Latino América, come hell or high water, and glimpses of which can already be seen in the most unexpected corners of the planet, including the Global North. Out of all these dissident imaginations and epistemic insurrections, with all the doubts, obstacles, and contradictions of their concrete practices, we may be witnessing the slow rebirth of the pluriverse.