



Pluriverse and the Politics of Friendship

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We present a revised and adapted translation of the Afterword to the Italian translation of Pluriverse. A Post-Development Dictionary, edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta (Tulika Books, 2019). Against and beyond the world of the powerful, there is a world with room for everyone; a world made up of many worlds.

Pluriverse. A Post-Development Dictionary can be read in many ways. Perhaps it is more appropriate to say in many versions. The suffix 'verse' comes from the Latin 'versum' = 'turned', so a universe is a world turned into one whole, a pluriverse is a world resisting such unification. The book is one of those where one can start from different points and take equally divergent routes, capturing assonances and dissonances between themes, concepts, reflections. The title says it all: in the search for ways out of the deadlock into which modernity has driven itself there is no single way of conceiving the world, of being in the world, of imagining human and more-than-human relationships.

However – this I believe is a crucial point – the pluriverse, which the book feeds before and more than describes, is not a kaleidoscope of (in)differences; it does not depict or declare a purely differential reality, equivalent in and by its infinite variation. This is the reality of capital; what late-modern capitalism in particular tries in any possible way to impose. A reality where the commodity-form has reached an extension and intension far exceeding Polanyi's analysis, since at stake is no longer the production of a fictitious image of parts or elements of the world, in order to be able to exchange them in the market, but the revelation of the original and integral character of commodity of the world itself.

Many authors, while criticizing capitalist society and the Cartesian ontology that constitutes its original frame of meaning, have arguably come too close to this reality – if they did not actually, if unwittingly, contribute to building its foundations, as argued by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999) and Paolo Virno in *Do you remember counterrevolution?* (1996) with regard to post-Fordist capitalism's acquisition of the 'artistic critique' of the movements of the 1970s. More recently Bruno Latour (*Why has critique run out of steam?*, 2004), Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway (*Merchants of Doubt*, 2011), Lee McIntyre (*Post-Truth*, 2018) and others have advanced a similar claim concerning the ever-more systematic use of science deconstruction for reactionary purposes.

Against the reality of capital and its operational interface, developmentalism, the authors of *Pluriverse* move, united in their subscribing to the Zapatista declaration for which, against and beyond the world of the powerful that leaves room only for big names and their courtiers, there is a world with room for everyone; a world made up of many worlds. The three parts of the book –

crisis of the development paradigm; reformist approaches; emerging alternatives at the intersection of non-modern traditions and alter-modern experiences – define its rhythm. An inverse rhythm compared with the one marking the public discourse and global politics. The shortest part is actually the section dedicated to the dominant paradigm. As if to say: its crisis is overt, a matter of fact that almost no one tries any longer to deny. Thinking about it is important to understand its causes, but more important is to proceed further.

Crisis of the development paradigm

The growth paradigm has failed, as has the attempt to make it ‘sustainable’. It failed for two main reasons, only analytically separable. The first is the universalistic assumption on which it is based. This assumption is undermined by an original contradiction: between the historical-cultural specificity of a model and the pretence to give it general validity; between a post-colonial aim and the colonial logic underlying the action by which such aim is pursued; between promise of emancipation and impossibility of fulfilling it, since the ‘advanced’ world with which the rest of the planet should catch up owes its position not to some historical destiny but to the perpetuation of unequal relationships. The growth paradigm has failed also for its ecological contradiction: the dependence on resource extraction and waste dejection increasingly frantic and expensive for capital itself, as well as for a vast number of individuals and communities, no longer located just at the margins of the empire but also, increasingly, at its centre.



Of course, it is possible to object that the failure is not complete; that capitalist globalization has also brought benefits, as shown by the rise of new middle classes in countries like China and India. However, this rise takes place at ever higher environmental and human costs and it is unlikely that it can continue until the affluence enjoyed by western middle classes, now in decline, will be reached. This not only for the physical limitation of the planet. Even a well-being completely sunk in the sphere of commodities is never made up only of the materiality of things. Commodities live also – and, beyond a certain threshold of accumulation, above all – a symbolic life, made up of desires and distinctions. If that is the case, then the more accessible the realization of such desires and distinctions becomes, the more it recedes for this very reason towards an unattainable vanishing point.

In *Social Limits to Growth* (1976) Fred Hirsch had noted this at the beginning of the great decline: the limits of development are social beyond and in a certain sense before than material. In other words, what Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen call the *Imperial Mode of Living* (2021) cannot be

exported on a planetary scale except as a normative ideal (no less productive of ecological disasters, of course). And this even by subscribing to the most optimistic technological utopias, for the simple reason that history does not repeat itself. The conjunction of cultural orientations, political arrangements and access to cheap and abundant raw materials (land, energy, labour) that led to the planetary domination of the West is bound to remain unique in human history, whatever good or bad it has produced.

Reformist approaches

The failure of the growth paradigm is also reflected in the attempts at a reformist revival on which the second part of *Pluriverse* focuses. The watchwords we find in the headings of the contributions (circular economy, ecosystem services, green economy, smart cities and agriculture, and of course sustainable development), although continually evoked by governments, companies, political parties, civil society actors, appear today tarnished. This not only in the eyes of anti-capitalist critique. When the daily existence and the life plans of ever larger portions of the population, both in the South and in the North of the planet, go in the opposite direction to smartness, it is difficult for the slogan to continue to hold as years ago. It is not hard to predict a similar ending for the last mantra, the industry 4.0.

Reformist proposals eventually come down to reiterate the dogma of growth, with skewed but no less problematic outcomes than the original version. As noted in the introductory pages of the book and in various contributions, the way the development paradigm is deployed in the new millennium – in particular according to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) advocated by the United Nations and welcomed all too enthusiastically by states, political factions, businesses, the world of science and culture – shows that what is at stake today is the very survival of humanity, or at least the guarantee of acceptable living conditions, rather than development; conditions which, moreover, many are already denied, as shown by migratory pressures. The growing feeling, not only in the global North, is that there is nothing left to be gained. For those who have something to lose, there is only to avoid losing too much, or all.

This is the new, paradoxical, promise of sustainable development. And yet, even in this twilight declension of sustainability, an analysis of the structural conditions of poverty and ecological degradation is lacking and the assumption is renewed that their connection is an objective fact to be remedied rather than an induced link that must be broken. An uncritical opening of credit to productivism, globalization, technology, is also renewed. The same combination of crepuscularity and compulsion to repeat is also encountered in the discourse of the Green Deal, once purified of its celebrative tones; a discourse already registering fractures between neoliberal variants (the ‘new’ European green economy) and neo-Keynesian ones (the ‘new’ American liberal progressivism), and above all substantially confirming the ideological pillars of sustainable development: productivism, techno-optimism, universalistic assumptions about problems and solutions.



With different accents, the authors who engage in the analysis of reformist proposals highlight that, at best, these are unable to give effective answers to the problems they recognize, since they avoid dealing with the latter's core. Can homeopathic remedies in ever more massive doses cure the disease? Can the market respond to its own failures, without questioning its own foundations and its ascent to the status of an overarching social institution? Can technology solve problems that derive from its own application and, before that, its own conception? Can one still believe in the eschatological virtues of innovation, without asking: innovation why, for whom, at what costs? Questions and objections of this kind are widespread not only in the pages of *Pluriverse* but in the broader debate involving the social and human sciences and, albeit still in a minority way, the sciences of life and matter.

Answers are not univocal, in the sense that openings of credit are mixed with sentences without appeal. If there was a real rethinking, it is said, then technology and the market could be used to rebalance human and more-than-human relationships. But how profound has this rethinking to be?

Among the issues which, in my opinion, remain conspicuously unaddressed, both in the book (where the theme is treated tangentially and dealt with directly by just one entry, on negentropic production) and in the general debate, there is the question of work: that is, whether it is only an issue of rethinking work outside capitalist relations or of rethinking it entirely, as an ontological category that has taken shape in the course of modernity in close connection with the thermodynamic conception of the planetary physics and biology, as brilliantly documented by Cara Daggett in *The Birth of Energy* (2019). This question goes hand in hand with the one about the import of the Anthropocene, as a geological phenomenon and as a governmental narrative. Like work, the notion of Anthropocene is also not directly discussed in the book: the term appears only once in the volume, in the entry on earth system governance, while representing, I think, the quintessence of what the pluriverse is opposed to.

Connected with these questions is the one over technology – hardly new yet ever more pressing. Heidegger's reflection on the essence of technology has been criticized as inconsistent and misleading. There is nothing, it is said, at the heart of technology: only innumerable, if not infinite, possibilities of creation and use – these indeed amenable to critique. However, modern technology presents ambivalences with which no one, it seems to me, has so far been able to deal with properly and thoroughly. At least, no more than authors like Ivan Illich or Theodor W. Adorno: the former speaking of a renewal of technology in a 'convivial' direction, that is, not devoted to an extractive and productive intensification as an end in itself; the latter of a science capable of reconciling humanity and nature on a path towards liberation from the sufferings that both share.

These may seem abstract ruminations, but have important governmental correlates, addressing which is urgent. One may wonder, for example, whether it is possible to deploy the idea of convivial technology in terms of 'responsible research and innovation' (RRI). This concept was developed in the framework of the European Union as a new approach to the governance of technology, and people's 'unease' with it. Yet, contrary to Illich (or André Gorz, to give another name), there is hardly any willingness to question productivism and the supremacy of the market already at the level of definitions (see for example René Von Schonberg's *A vision of responsible research and innovation*, 2013). To answer the issue of whether, or under what conditions, RRI – or the 'open science' of which the new EU's framework program for research (2021-2027) prefers to speak – could be a vehicle for convivial technologies, one should start from acknowledging that it is not enough to give space to unheard voices without questioning the frames of meaning adopted to address innovation and the different agency of the stakeholders involved. In the absence of such questioning the risk is of an (unwitting?) expansion of what Ulrich Beck called 'organized irresponsibility' – a further, gigantic relief from liability for those who really make the decisions.



Relief that builds also on the Anthropocene narrative. The latter has however the merit of pointing out that the current state of affairs cannot be taken as one of the cyclical crises of capitalism, as it is provided with novel characteristics. This is a point of agreement for authors otherwise contrasting in their reading of the situation, like Dipesh Chakrabarty (*The climate of history: four theses*, 2009) and Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (*The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative*, 2014).

Emerging alternatives

In short, if the idea of a renewal of technology remains inscribed in a reformist matrix, one can hardly count on its capacity to change things. Capacity that the bulk of the book assigns to approaches understood and presents as truly transformative. This first of all because they abandon, or never subscribed to, the idea of a ‘one-world world’ (to use John Law’s expression: see *What’s wrong with a one-world world*, 2015), affirming and practicing the multifarious reality that Mario Blaser, Marisol de la Cadena and others describe in *A World of Many Worlds* (2018). It is pointless here to retrace the variety of themes that this section of *Pluriverse* develops: some well-known, others less so, at least for the reader with an average acquaintance with the post-colonial and alter-globalist debate. Rather, it is worth reflecting briefly on the points of convergence and some open questions that seem to me to emerge from this section.

Convergence concerns not only the adherence to the idea of the world’s multiple giving and making of itself, but also the where and the how of this multiplicity. The reference area is on the one hand radical thinking and practices of the global North (eco-anarchism, ecofeminism, eco-villages, agroecology, pacifism, slow movement, degrowth, etc.); on the other, the landscape of non-modern global South: varied but, as said above, anything but purely differential. Just think of the family feeling of ways of thinking-acting such as – just to make one example – the Andean *sumak kawsay* and the South African *ubuntu*. What unites these innumerable imaginations and life

practices is the rejection of the Cartesian conception of reality as a reading of the web of relationships – the inter and intra-actions of which Karen Barad talks in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) – that constitute it. And likewise the rejection of the dialectical correlate of Cartesianism: the *universal-universalism* (I dwell on this expression below) of a world made up of just one world. The claim that all authors make is that only from a world made up of many worlds, human and more-than-human, can an authentic *after* or *beyond* development come. Yet the claim is also that this after and beyond is not a utopia lost in the horizon of the future, but a heterotopia already present, in progress, albeit to be consolidated and spread.

Here some questions arise, partly foreshadowed in the text but to be considered above all as an appeal to further theoretical-practical elaborations. Three in particular seem to me worthy of note: *hybridization*, *coordination*, and *friendship*. It is hardly necessary to point out that, even here, the distinction is analytical: one question holds together with the others.

Hybridization

The theme of hybridization concerns the ontology of the pluriverse. In recent years there has been an increasingly intense exchange between the global North and South, in an effort to learn from one another on how reality is to be conceived. Thus, on the one hand, philosophy and the social and human sciences have looked at non-modern ways of configuring the existent and its relations in order to overcome both Cartesian dualism and linguistic constructivism (which actually constitutes a variant of the former, since it reaffirms the ontological distinction between mind, or culture, and the world). On the other hand, indigenous ontologies have been developed, above all thanks to intellectual figures such as, in the Latin American area, Alberto Acosta, Arturo Escobar and Eduardo Gudynas, who acted as mediators, making them accessible to the global North – sometimes even to indigenous communities hit by the forces of globalization. The best known and most evident example is *buen vivir*, a notion which, as *Pluriverse's* dedicated entry underlines, is subject to continuous elaboration.

This is an indication of dynamism, adaptive capacity, but also of a plasticity not necessarily beneficial. Hybridizations have a risk, on which some scholars are drawing attention, as Philipp Altmann does in his *The commons as colonisation – the well-intentioned appropriation of buen vivir* (2020). The risk is of reproducing an unequal exchange; that western conceptual categories end up emptying of their transformative force non-western notions. This risk, on closer inspection, is inherent in the rather uncritical enthusiasm that has been surrounding the idea of hybridization. An idea that should instead be handled with care, without assuming that the process occurs on an equal footing or entails emancipatory outcomes, and taking into account the contradictory character of the notion itself. Namely, to create a hybrid, recognizable as such, non-hybrids must meet. In this way identitarian substances are reintroduced. Or, if one claims that what is assembled is in turn the result of previous hybridizations, then we get to the purely differential conception of reality dear to poststructuralist thinking but also, unfortunately, to late-modern capitalism. It is important to reflect, in this regard, that non-modern ontologies such as the Amerindian ones have little to do with the celebration of a completely fluid and contingent reality made by western intellectual avant-gardes. These ontologies do not describe a world populated by perennially changing human and non-human assemblages, but different worlds inhabited by different, well-defined types of beings, among which a complex but not hierarchically ordered game of roles and relationships takes place. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among the others, has documented this in well-known works such as *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2014).

Coordination

And yet, if to escape the risks of hybridization one goes to the opposite extreme, supporting the incommunicability of worlds, the unbridgeable discord of discourses of which Jean-François Lyotard talked in *Le différend* (1984), not only is western ontology surreptitiously reproduced (from *just one* world to many worlds *each on and for their own*), but above all any political project based on the pluriverse, that is, on thinking locally in order to act globally, is blocked in the bud. Here the problem of coordination arises; a problem continually raised by those involved in alter-

globalism, concrete utopias, prefigurative movements, and which historical anarchism and eco-anarchism had to face as well. Problem these were unable to solve and still not easy to address, since the politics of the pluriverse can be based neither on the replacement of current institutional hierarchies with others that reproduce their rigidity and consequent forms of domination, nor on subscribing to the headless and (in)different horizontality of the network (or at least of its ideology). I certainly do not pretend to solve the question here. However, in my opinion some important clues are available.

We find one in the pages of *Pluriverse*, and namely in Onofrio Romano's reflections on the Mediterranean or 'Meridian' thought as an example of a political ideal based on the coexistence and mutual affection of different worlds. An ideal located halfway between the universal-universalism of humanity as such, as resurfacing in mainstream Anthropocene narratives, and countless, continuously refashioned communal and identitarian claims; between rootedness in the land and openness to the sea horizon, and therefore to the possibility of an elsewhere and an otherwise. Meridianism has not translated so far into an actual political movement, yet this does not affect its value and potential. That the Mediterranean is today a crucial point of friction between the global North and South indicates precisely the opposite.



Another clue comes from an idea developed by the philosopher Michael Walzer: that of 'reiterative universalism' and of a minimal or 'thin' social criticism and morality. By reiterative universalism Walzer means that, contrary to the assumption of universal-universalism ('covering law universalism' is his expression), any place, any community, any time – any world – has its own way to emancipation from domination and suffering; a way that does not correspond to the others' one but which is nonetheless recognizable as such and for which it is possible to work together, as long as, in Walzer's words (*Two kinds of universalism*, 1990), 'liberation is a particular experience, repeated for each oppressed people'. Likewise, Walzer (*Thick and Thin*, 1994) claims that it is possible to draw from one's own critical or moral categories (thick normativity) shared minimal elements (thin normativity) that allow understanding and responding to requests for justice that come from all over the planet.

Thinking in terms of reiterative universalism, whose thin normativity should not be confused with the narrow or shallow one of the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*, can help avoid a pitfall present in post-colonial thought: that is, to conceive of the pluriverse as composed of worlds not only separate but also self-contained, and of western universalism as something to be condemned as a whole and without appeal. Conception and condemnation which, on closer inspection, have as a premise the comfort zone of rights and freedoms ensured by the latter, and shared by the global North together with that part of the South – cultured, urbanized, often endowed with international academic experiences – whose mediating role I have mentioned above. Conception and condemnation, above all, that hinder a full understanding of the attraction, not only due to the glitter of goods, that the West continues to exercise in the eyes of those who embark on a risky journey, and that restrict the space for criticism, squeezed between the nostalgia for community (forgetful of how stifling its embrace can be) and the denunciation of any objection to ‘local customs’ as an expression of imperialism (forgetful, among other things, of how capitalism has shown to adapt fairly well to social and cultural conditions very different from those in which it flourished).

If there is anything that modernity can deliver to the pluriverse it is precisely the value of criticism: not as a transcendent gaze but as an immanent possibility in every experience of life. Not that criticism is the exclusive prerogative of the West, of course; on the contrary: a reciprocal knowledge of the forms of critique present in any fold of the pluriverse is very important if one wants to give it the value of a political project. And yet it seems to me that the idea of immanent critique that Foucault, in *Qu’est-ce que la critique?* (1978) summarizes in the question of ‘how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them’, constitutes the most precious contribution of the West to the subterranean connection that runs through the pluriverse.

The politics of friendship

Romano talks of meridian thinking as an opening to a politics of conviviality, and we have seen this theme emerges with regard to the rethinking of technology and science. Illich and Adorno talk about it; the latter referring to Walter Benjamin, who in the *XI Thesis On the Concept of History*, against the idea of a nature to be ravaged of the goods it ‘freely offers’, but also against the idea of a condemnation without appeal of technology, speaks of ‘a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials’. In other words, for Benjamin and Adorno it is possible a politics of friendship in which humans, thanks to the position of first among equals allowed by the ability to combine conceptualization and practice in an inclusive gaze, proceed together with non-humans towards the overcoming of the shared condition of suffering and injustice from which they tried to escape through technological domination. Of a politics of friendship, on which Derrida’s reflections remain important, speak today above all feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, extending the lexicon of care from social relations to those between humans and non-humans. Of course, Benjamin and Adorno, but in part also the feminist ethics of care for the world (which is first of all an ontology) express themselves through western categories. And yet, if we admit that something like reiterative universalism can exist, what they say is not alien to the other worlds of the pluriverse, even if the language spoken is not the same. Furthermore, this minimal sharing helps taking distance from an ambiguity emerging in some areas of western social theory. Calling it ‘geopower’ or the ‘intrusion of Gaia’ in human affairs, Elizabeth Grosz, Elizabeth Povinelli, Isabelle Stengers, Myra Hird, Nigel Clark, Bruno Latour and others depict climatic and viral or bacterial dynamics with the same accents once attributed to sovereign power and later to the market – overwhelming, indifferent, unjustified and unjustifiable. Gaia or geopower, in other words, are understood without stepping aside from human dominative relation with biophysical forces, but in terms of an inversion, and therefore a confirmation, of such relation. The eventually acknowledged supremacy of Gaia is then claimed to require a governance style provided with unmistakable neoliberal flavour – preparation for surprise, resilience, flexibility, invention, endless experimentation. Latour, as in other circumstances, is most explicit in this regard. Politics, he notes

in *Down to Earth* (2018), can only focus more and more on the critical area, a few kilometres thick, between the atmosphere and the mother rocks in which humans and non-humans dwell and relate. But this politics, ‘terrestrial’ rather than planetary, is no longer – as the French sociologist had claimed in *Politics of Nature* (1999) – a question of parliamentarizing non-human demands that knock on the door; an exercise in the diplomatic art of reconciling them with human ones. If coming to terms with other living beings is necessary, he claims, then the deal has to be made not in friendship, welcoming a foreigner no longer felt as adverse, alien, but under the yoke of a ‘form of sovereignty, [...] a power that dominates the heads of state’, to which one cannot but bow, being clear however that ‘there is no other politics than that of humans and to their own benefit’, and no possibility of living ‘in harmony with so called “natural agents”’.



These statements come from a leading exponent of a reformist intelligentsia that realizes how the situation has become dramatic but, it seems to me, persists in believing that the world in which it thrived, and which therefore it sees as the best of all possible worlds, can be safeguarded in its fundamental coordinates. Against such a vision, imbued with a crepuscular warmongering, the heterotopia of the pluriverse shows that a ‘concordance of discords’ or a ‘discordant harmony of things’ (to take up Horace’s famous expression) is not just the only route worth trying, but many have already taken it, for a while or since the beginning. Of this route *Pluriverse* is a fascinating illustration and viaticum.

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