

1

POSTDEVELOPMENT @ 25

On 'being stuck' and moving forward,
sideways, backward and otherwise¹

Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

Arturo

It's been almost 30 years since that memorable week of September 1988, when we sat around the convivial table at Ivan Illich's house on Foster Avenue in University Park (where Penn State University is located), summoned by Wolfgang Sachs and Ivan. Out of the intense and enjoyable discussions of those days there emerged the task of writing our respective chapters for what a few years later would emerge as *The Development Dictionary*. The book made a 'splash' of sorts when it made its debut in print. For some, the splash has been enduring and one of the most essential elements behind what came to be known as the postdevelopment school. Other, less generous, retrospective analyses of the *Dictionary* (and postdevelopment) argue that it was interesting but ineffective and that, in any way, it is superseded by now since development has certainly not died, as the *Dictionary* appeared to prognosticate. Many mainstream scholars and development practitioners, harsher in their appraisal, consider it to have been a terribly misguided endeavour and a disservice to the poor.

Aram Ziai's invitation comes at an auspicious time to take stock of what has gone 'under the bridge' of the *Dictionary* and postdevelopment waters in the intervening years, and to renew our understanding and critique. You were not only one of the pioneers of the critique but your position regarding development has, if anything, become even more radical than in 1992 – at least that's how I read your most recent texts on the subject (Esteva, Babones & Babicky 2013). To remain for now on a historical register, I would like to ask you, to start this conversation: how do you see now the intellectual-political ferment of those early days, when the radical problematisation of development was first launched, as compared with the conditions that exist today for radical critiques? Is there something you think that our

22 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

group could have done differently? Where do you hear echoes from those conversations in current debates?

Gustavo

‘Development’ is no longer an unquestionable category. At the grassroots, I have seen in recent years open resistance and opposition to development itself, not only to certain forms of development – and some have a long history. Such opposition is now fully incorporated in people’s discourses, something they did not dare to do before. In my contribution to the *Dictionary*, I celebrated the emergence of new commons, which I saw as an alternative to development. *The Ecologist* described such emergence that very year. And the commons movement is today in full swing, everywhere, in what we can legitimately call a post-economic society, not only beyond development.

Salvatore Babones’ classification of the current development panorama is very effective. He associates it with three Sachs (Esteva, Babones & Babcicky 2013: 22–23).

The ‘Goldman Sachs’ approach expresses a pretty general consensus that dominates in governments and international institutions. It defines development through their commodities trading desks, their infrastructure projects and their exploration units. It means an oil platform located 10 km offshore, safe from harassment by local indigenous militants.

The ‘Jeffrey Sachs’ approach blindly believes in development and capitalism but is concerned with massive hunger and misery, which they see not as consequences but as insufficiencies of both. Well-meaning people like Sachs, Gates and major US and European NGOs focus on the alleviation of obvious suffering – they stand for a chicken in every pot, a mosquito net over every bed and a condom on every penis.

The ‘Wolfgang Sachs’ approach circulates in critical development studies circles and departments and among indigenous leaders, independent intellectuals and a motley group of people basically ignored by academia and the 1%. In my view, this approach corresponds today to the awareness and experience, not necessarily the discourse, of millions, perhaps billions, of ordinary men and women around the world who are increasingly ‘beyond’ development.

The adventure of the *Dictionary* started for me a few months before that meeting in Foster Avenue. Ivan invited us to his house in Ocotepc, Cuernavaca, Mexico to talk about ‘After development, what?’ Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert and Wolfgang were there. One of the things that I remember very well of that meeting was that we abandoned the expression ‘after development’, with an implicit periodisation that Wolfgang retained. We knew that the developers were still around and would continue their devastating enterprise. We wanted to explore how *to be* beyond development.

As you know, I am not a scholar. I read a lot, but my ideas, my words, my vocabulary, my inspiration, come from my experience at the grassroots, in my

world of *campesinos*, *indios* and urban marginals. Ivan knew that. At one point in the conversation, he asked me: 'Gustavo, if you had only one word to express what is to be beyond development, which is the word you will use?' My immediate answer was 'hospitality'. Development is radically inhospitable: it imposes a universal definition of the good life and excludes all others. We need to hospitably embrace the thousand different ways of thinking, being, living and experiencing the world that characterise reality.

This was not an occurrence: it came from my experience. In the early 1980s those classified as 'underdeveloped' were frustrated and enraged with always being at the end of the line. We knew by then that 'development' as the universalisation of the American Way of Life was impossible; that we would not catch up with the developed, as Truman promised; that we would be permanently left behind. For many of us such awareness became a revelation; we still had our own notions of what is to live well and they were feasible. Instead of continuing the foolish race to nowhere, we should reorient our effort. In my experience, it was not dissident vanguards attempting development 'alternatives' or alternatives to development, but many grassroots groups reaffirming themselves in their own path, in many cases for sheer survival in the dramatic 1980s, what was later called 'the lost decade' in Latin America. For me, they were already beyond development.

I bought into underdevelopment when I was 13 years old. That implied that I fully assumed my 'lacks': I wanted development for me, for my family and for my country, in order to satisfy all the 'needs' suddenly created. Let me clarify this. When I was a child the word 'need' had only one practical application: shitting. It was used when my mother told us: 'Once you arrive at your uncle's house, ask him where you can make your needs'. We *made* the 'needs'; we did not *have* them. This way of talking applied to everything: our 'needs' were defined by our own capacity, our tools and the way we used them, and were strictly personal, imponderable and incommensurable. It was in the course of my lifetime that all current 'needs' were created and we were transmogrified into needy, measured and controlled people. Professionals defined the needs and we were classified according to them.

When I was a child, people were talking to me. Words were symbols, not representations or categories, and only one of every ten of them addressed me as an undifferentiated member of a crowd. As I grew, words became categories and I was addressed as a member of a class of people: children, skinny, underdeveloped... according to our 'needs': education, nutrition, development.

As you know very well, in the early 1970s, the recognition that the development enterprise was causing hunger and misery everywhere produced the Basic Needs Approach. The goal became to satisfy a package of 'basic needs'. There was no consensus about the definition of those needs, but such orientation still characterises most development efforts... and shaped the UN Millennium Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) today.

In 1976, I was in the immediate danger of becoming a minister in the new administration of the Mexican Government, after my success as a high officer

24 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

for more than ten years in conceiving and implementing great development programmes. I quit. I started to work autonomously with people at the grassroots. By then I knew that instead of ‘development’ the people looked for autonomy, as expressed in the name of an independent organisation I created with some friends (*Autonomía, Descentralismo y Gestión*). I also knew that the ‘State’ was a mechanism for control and domination, useless for emancipation. After observing the damages done by professionals, as the transmission belts for the creation of ‘needs’ and dependence, I began the complex process of deprofessionalising myself.

In the early 1980s, there was increasing awareness of the failures of the development enterprise and the foolishness of adopting a universal definition of the good life. The idea of postdevelopment started to circulate; people were reclaiming their own, feasible, ways of living well. In the 1985 conference of the Society for International Development in Rome, invited by Wolfgang to discuss the future of development studies, I suggested it lay in archaeology: only an archaeological eye could explore the ruins left by development. I was seeing development in my past, not in my present and even less in my future. I was exploring those ruins in my own world and already looking for hospitality for our ways of being... the ways captured in the expression *buen vivir* now coming from your area of the world.

A few years ago, when Salvatore Babones approached me with a proposal to write a book about development, he observed that ‘we’ in the postdevelopment school don’t use statistics. He was right; we hate them. Salvatore is a quantitative sociologist, well acquainted with development statistics. He wanted to incorporate them to our analysis. He also observed that people studying development are often concerned with the real problems of the world, interested in making a difference. But we closed the door on them by proclaiming a firm ‘No’ to development. Can we open a decent door to them? He was right. And he appeared at a time when I was adopting, with many others, the position of ‘One No and Many Yeses’, following the Zapatista suggestion to create a world in which many worlds can be embraced. Yes, I agreed, we can share a common ‘No’ to development but be open to a thousand ‘Yeses’: the many paths people are following around the world beyond development; people studying development can accompany and support them. That is why we wrote and published *The Future of Development: A Radical Manifesto*.

Arturo

There are so many interesting dimensions to your answer, Gustavo. I would like to explore a few, and perhaps provide a counterpoint on some of them (as in the musical counterpoint, where a theme is developed in various directions). But first there is something I remembered as I read your comment on ‘needs’, something I heard Ivan saying once, I am not sure whether it was at Penn State or perhaps at Berkeley in the early 1980s when he came to do his then controversial

lectures on *Gender. Homo faber*, he said, had given way to *homo miserabilis* (the ‘man of needs’) which eventually gave rise to *homo oeconomicus*. The history of needs was one of Ivan’s long-term interests, and it still has to be worked on, for instance, in today’s digital age and given the expansion of middle classes in many world regions, for whom ‘needs’ have seemingly skyrocketed. How do we treat needs ‘postdevelopmentally’?

Here I arrive at my first substantive question. It is a question often asked of me, so I thought we ought to give it our best answer. I think it is a significant obstacle in getting many people to embrace the thinking of postdevelopment. And it is: You speak about the grassroots as the space par excellence to explore how *to be* beyond development. In doing so, are we not romanticising the grassroots (in your case) or ethnic communities and social movements (in mine)? Are they not also, now and increasingly, the subject of needs and desires, including those that ‘development’ and capitalist modernity promise and eventually delivers (though in limited ways: cheap cell phones, more consumer goods, second-rate overcrowded schools and health services)? Let me give you my answer to this issue, and then I would like to hear yours. The first part of my answer is a simple reversal: faced with the social and ecological devastation brought about by patriarchal capitalist modernity, coupled with the fact that things are not getting better (skyrocketing inequality, climate change), isn’t it more romantic to think that ‘more of the same’, in whatever guise (new World Bank recipes, green economy, SDGs or the new ‘Green Revolution for Africa’ advocated by J. Sachs), is going to lead to lasting improvement? In this context, more genuinely realist and less romantic are the alternatives emerging at the grassroots and with social movements. I would rather bet on them than on the world bankers and mainstream NGOs.

This links up with the historical dimension of my reply to the ‘romanticism’ charge. I was remembering Walter Benjamin’s injunction: ‘To articulate the past historically [...] means to seize it as it flashes up at a moment of danger’. He associates this moment with ‘the politicians’ stubborn faith in progress’ (Benjamin 1986). Are we not going through one of these moments again, with technology promising humans anything they wish, from unlimited information and immediate communication to eternal life, a ‘life beyond biology’? At the same time, we are, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, at a juncture where we are facing modern problems for which there are no longer modern solutions. And yet the slogan of the moment seems to be: ‘Everything for the corporations! Everything for the super-rich!’ What is the danger, then? That of an even more profound ontological occupation of people’s territories and lives. Land grabbing and extractivism are the ugliest heads of it, but they also include growing consumerism and individualism. It is not romantic, in my mind, to be on the side of those who oppose these tendencies, especially when Earth itself is ‘on our side’, considering the warnings she is giving as we wound her ever more deeply and extensively.

Finally, on the theoretical side, I am pondering the question of how to understand ‘really existing communities’ without falling into the trap of endorsing or

26 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

re-enacting modernist traps. Here I find the recent debates on autonomy and the communities (or ‘communalitarian’, as you would say) that have emerged in Chiapas, Oaxaca and the Norte del Cauca in Colombia’s southwest new and hopeful. Both of us have written about this recently (though largely in Spanish) (Escobar 2014). Here we might also locate the intense South American debates on *buen vivir* of the last decade. This is not the place to even try to summarise these currents of thought and action. But I’d like to refer, however briefly, to recent works that conceptualise communities in all of their entanglement with global forms of capital and modern technology without reducing them to the terms of capitalism or modernity. I am referring to the recent work by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Veronica Gago (Gago 2014; Rivera Cusicanqui 2014). As they show, communities are also the site of intense forms of capitalist exploitation, patriarchal domination and consumerism. They are significantly affected by globalisation and yet they are not completely determined by it. Rivera Cusicanqui points at this feature of many of today’s indigenous and popular communities by referring to their capacity to define their own forms of modernity, more convivial than the dominant ones precisely because they also find nourishment in their own histories, intricately weaving indigenous and local practices with those which are not and resulting in worlds made up of different cultural strands without nevertheless fusing into one. They find sustenance in the complementarities among diverse worlds without overlooking the antagonisms, articulating with market economies while anchored in indigenous knowledge and technologies; she says (emphasis added):

There is no ‘post’ nor ‘pre’ in this vision of history which is not linear nor teleological but rather moves in spirals and cycles, that always traces a path but never fails to return to the same point. *The indigenous world does not conceive of history as linear; the past-future are contained in the present.*

(Rivera Cusicanqui 2014: 57)

I would say that social groups in struggle, at their best, move in several directions at once: adding to and strengthening their long-standing practices, while engaging selectively and effectively with the ‘modern world’ and its practices and technologies. This ability is crucial for deepening the autonomous and communalitarian foundations of social life. I suspect you’ll have much to add in this regard.

The second aspect of your reply that caught my attention was the idea of ‘opening a door’ to those genuinely concerned with the world’s problems. You go on to state that what you mean is one No to ‘development’ and many Yeses to ‘the many paths people are following around the world beyond development; people studying development can accompany and support them’. Are you here suggesting opening a door to those working with progressive development organisations? Could you please clarify? I want to offer a reflection that came to mind recently as I was responding to an interview on ‘development cooperation’ in Barcelona. I came up with three paths for thinking about cooperation, as

follows: (1) *Cooperation as development aid*: this is the standard form of cooperation, practiced by institutions such as USAID, the World Bank and mainstream NGOs. It takes for granted the dominant world (in terms of markets, individual actions, productivity etc.). Cooperation under this rubric might lead to some improvements for some people but it can only reinforce colonialist understandings of development and, so, dispossession. To this I'd say: let's keep the doors tightly closed on them; (2) *cooperation as, or for, social justice*: this is the kind of cooperation practiced with the intention of fostering greater social justice and environmental sustainability; it embraces human rights (including gender and ethnic diversity), environmental justice, the reduction of inequality, direct support for grassroots groups and so forth. Oxfam might serve as a paradigm for this second trajectory. In this case I'd say: let's keep the door open, while applying pressure on them to move towards the third trajectory; (3) could go under several names, such as *cooperation for civilisational transitions* or *cooperation for autonomy*: those practicing this option would be, in my view, radical postdevelopment's natural allies. What is interesting is that this form would go beyond the binary of 'us' (who have) and 'them' (who need), and embrace all sides in the same, though diverse, movement for civilisational transitions and inter-autonomy, that is, coalitions and meshworks of autonomous collectives and communities from both the Global North and the Global South. There are no ready-available models for this third kind of solidarity cooperation, but there are groups here and there that approach it (like a few I know in Catalunya).

Do you see any value in this distinction? Is it helpful to raise the question of 'allies' for the project of moving beyond development?

Gustavo

My hope, Arturo, is that some readers may enjoy our conversation as much as I am enjoying it!

You are right, of course: we still have a lot of work to do about 'needs'. A good starting point is the chapter on 'Needs' by Ivan Illich for the *Dictionary*. He clarifies how, for thousands of years, 'human' implied communal submission to the rule of necessity in a particular place and time. He explains the transition to prescribed universal needs, to the needy addict, and tells the story of *homo miserabilis*.

We must remember that in classical political economy, for Malthus, Ricardo or Marx, a vague 'standard of living' alluded to an acceptable subsistence income, the cost of the reproduction of labour force. That notion, however, was transmogrified into a *desired* form of living presented as a condition to reach, and finally a normalised definition of a *necessary* standard defined by basic needs. In that process, the idea of the good became a quantity. The very different ways of the art of living vanished and were substituted by standards that homogenised individual searches. Serge Latouche, also in the *Dictionary*, urges us to view with scepticism this fetishistic object 'standard of living', and to rediscover the multidimensionality of life.

28 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

To discuss 'needs' today requires acknowledging that more than ever they are created through dispossession, in the classical tradition of the enclosure of the commons that marked the beginning of capitalism. The commoners, dispossessed of their means of subsistence, became people in need of jobs, shelter, food, everything. As Illich explained in the *Dictionary*, development changed the human condition by transmogrifying necessities and desires into prescribed 'needs'. For the dominant mind it is difficult to understand that the commoners, before the enclosures, were eating, learning, healing, settling... within the limits imposed by nature and their culture to their desires and necessities.

We should also explore questions like those examined by Agnes Heller in her critical analysis of the notion of 'needs' in Marx. What she and others observed in the Soviet Union as the dictatorship of needs (Feher, Heller & Markus 1986) can be applied today to the functioning of contemporary societies, through other means, like compulsory schooling, marginalisation of alternative ways of healing, repression of the art of dwelling, elimination of self-mobility in a world organised to create dependency of the automobile and other vehicles and so forth.

In exploring what grassroots people are doing we must carefully draw a line between market- and state-imposed needs and people's own uses of technology. Around the year 2000, more than half of people on Earth had never made a phone call. Even when phone booths came to their villages, many people never used them because they did not have anybody to call; their family and friends had no phones. Today the situation is entirely different. Even the poorest people have access to a cellular phone and use them intensely. Yes, as we all know, many young people are now pathologically plugged into this technology and alienated from their communities. But there are people of all ages that are effectively using it for their own purposes in their own way. In a conversation with David Cayley, Ivan Illich observed that the change he anticipated took finally the form of millions of people 'misusing' or tweaking for their own purposes the failing counter-productive institutions as well as the market (Cayley 2005).

Of course, we must resist any romanticisation of the people at the grassroots. 'Don't idealise us', insists the Zapatista Subcomandante Moisés all the time. All kinds of horrors happen at the grassroots. If women are taking the lead in many communities, in a very radical post-patriarchal attitude, it is because for them the combination of traditional patriarchy and modern sexism has become a kind of hell.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that these communities, particularly the indigenous communities, are today a source of inspiration for all of us. They have been struggling for centuries with the predicaments we are facing today; they have the experience. They know well how to deal with 'modernity'. Many of them successfully resisted modernisation and were able to protect their own traditional ways. We need to seriously explore the hypothesis that we will not have modern solutions to modern problems... because modernity itself already collapsed. We are in the transition to another era (which is not postmodernism), with the uncertainty created by the fact that old rationalities and sensibilities are

obsolete and the new ones are not yet clearly identified. Using the experience of similar periods in the past, we must turn to the artists – who often smell the new era and produce their creations not with the old logic but with new insights.

The communities were never isolated; this was an invention of British anthropology. We can find all the global forces affecting and infecting the communities and *barrios* everywhere. But what we also observe is the creative construction of a contemporary art of living. The Zapatistas are amazingly autonomous and self-sufficient. They don't get any funds from the government. They don't need the market or the state to live their lives. If a total siege were suddenly imposed on them, their way of life would basically remain the same. But they have X-rays and ultrasound equipment in their health clinics and they buy in the market equipment for their community radios, mobile phones, computers, bikes, vehicles and so on, but they know how to use those technologies instead of being used by them.

An increasing number of people are resisting old and new enclosures, thus preventing the creation of new needs. Yes, they are exposed to all kind of pressures and many times surrender to old or new dependencies. But what I am increasingly observing at the grassroots is how people dismantle the 'need' for state apparatuses or the goods and services offered by the market. Many people are producing their own food (small farmers, mainly women, feed 70% of the people on Earth); learning in freedom (beyond the school system, escaping from education); 'healing from health' (trusting again their own healers and their own notions and traditions of how to be sane or heal... with a little help from modern technologies); recovering the art of dwelling (building by themselves their houses and buildings) and so forth. This is, in my view, to live beyond development. It is not going back to the Stone Age, but saying no, for sheer survival or in the name of old ideals, to a tragic path destroying Mother Earth, dissolving the social fabric and dooming millions to hunger, misery and homelessness... even in prosperous societies like the US.

Silvia is right, of course. If you live among indigenous people, sometimes you don't know if what they are talking about is happening now, happened yesterday or a thousand years ago or will happen tomorrow. Time is not real for them. They pack into the present as much past and future as they can. They live in cycles, natural and social cycles, and the image of the spiral of the Zapatista *caracoles* may represent changes in which they come back to the same place but at a different level.

I agree with all your reflections on aid and cooperation. In 1994 and 1995 there was a flow of people and goods coming to help the Zapatistas. At one point, the famous subcomandante Marcos produced a communiqué in which he stated that he was now forced to carry in his backpack a red high heel, just to remember what was happening. In one of the many boxes with charity for the communities came that red high heel, just one, not the pair, for the jungle. It was for him a symbol of what was happening.

30 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

If you want to offer help to these poor Indians, struggling against a bad government, thanks... but no thanks. We don't want or need your help. However, if you think that our struggle is also your struggle, please come. There are plenty of things we need to talk about [...] and to do together.

Yes, we need more than ever alliances and coalitions. There are many things that we can do together with people that want to make a difference in this tragic world in which we all live today, people that also want to resist the horror, the destruction of Mother Earth and culture and social fabric and hunger and misery. We can join forces with them.

After the US election on 8 November 2016, it seems evident that very diverse groups in the US should join forces and find new forms of articulation. Instead of issue struggles – for the environment in the face of climate change, against racism or racist police violence, against all forms of *machismo* and sexual discrimination, against chronic debt, unemployment or homelessness – what is needed is to struggle together: to resist the horror – to resist specific measures, policies, decisions, behaviour, offensive language; to construct a better society, more humane and sensible. This is the time to come together, to hold each other tight, both inside every country and between people of different countries.

I don't see a lot of conventional developers around me these days. Public developers no longer have large enough budgets. Private developers are increasingly concentrated on grabbing and dispossession, not really on development. The rich are accumulating more money than ever, but that money is not transformed into capitalist social relations, into hiring workers. Many of us are increasingly becoming, as the Zapatistas warned, disposable human beings. What we are calling *extractivismo* in Latin America (mining, urban, financial *extractivismo* but also labor and services *extractivismo*) cannot be described as development... with any notion of that concept of monumental emptiness, as Wolfgang used to say.

The long agony of development as a myth and as an enterprise is clearly ending. Do we really think that the American Dream is intact? That the American Way of Life is still the universal definition of the good life?

In my view, development is no longer a myth, a taboo, a promise or a threat. It is an obsession, an addiction, a pathological mania that some people suffer, in their minds, their emotions or their behaviour... and also a tool of domination and control. I don't see people mobilised to get development in all its masks and shapes as they were in the past. Of course, we still have capitalism. But can we really call capitalism this society in which we have many zombies – capitalist enterprises blaming anyone for falling profits, whether the banks, the state, immigrants or what have you – controlled and mined by a group, a very small group, of vampires, sucking from them and from all of us the blood of profit, income, goods, everything? As everybody knows, the vampires are not only devastating the planet to the point of endangering the survival of the human species. They are also killing the goose of the golden eggs... by accumulating

through extraction and speculation, instead of production; by reducing both salaries and employment and exhausting resources, thus preventing or limiting the reproduction of the very system in which they thrive.

We are no longer in the time of TINA (There Is No Alternative). There are now thousands of alternatives and a new one emerges every day; many of them, perhaps most of them, are alternatives to development or express conditions beyond development, in spite of the ominous march of vampires and do-gooders in governments, international institutions, NGOs and academia still threatening or harassing the social majorities and the planet itself.

Arturo

Your answers pose many challenges, Gustavo. I shall take two of them only, for the sake of space: the idea that modernity has already collapsed, and what you so insightfully refer to as ‘the creative construction of a contemporary art of living’ by many communities resisting capitalism and development. They are inter-related, and there is a reason why I want to take on the question of modernity here, and this is the angst that the ‘death of modernity’ causes among so many friends and potential allies, particularly otherwise critical academics in both the North and the South.

I have found the following paraphrase to be true: that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of modernity. I would like to attempt two displacements of modernity’s centrism, starting with Ashis Nandy’s telling reversal that the pathologies of science-driven modernity have already proven to be more lethal than the pathologies of tradition (Nandy 1987: 51). And yet we seem utterly unwilling to consider the creative retrieval of traditions’ history making potentiality, a task that Nandy’s ‘critical traditionalism’ embraces. Beyond a handful of philosophical treatises, critical academics rarely entertain seriously the end of modernity; most scholars react disdainfully against such proposition, disqualifying it as utopian or even reactionary. It is, however, implicit (though rarely stated out loud) in most discourses that speak of the need for civilisational transitions. The revered Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has spoken openly about it in his critique of consumerism (he could well be referring to development as addiction): ‘[T]his civilisation of ours will have to end one day. But we have a huge role to play in determining when it ends and how quickly... Global warming may be an early symptom of that death’ (Nath Hanh 2008: 43, 44). He goes further, inviting us to actively accept the end of our civilisation by meditating on this thought: ‘Breathing in, I know that this civilization is going to die. Breathing out, this civilization cannot escape dying’ (Nath Hanh 2008: 55). He is calling us to move beyond a civilisation that has become antithetical to the ontology and ethics of interexistence.²

For us moderns (I include myself here), actively facing the ontological challenges posed by the idea of the end of modernity – of a world significantly different than the current one – is not easy; it induces a type of fright that is deeply

32 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

unsettling. How do we articulate this civilisational anxiety in effective ways? After all, most other worlds have had to exist (still do) with the fright and, not infrequently, the reality of their vanishing.

I have found two responses among European and Latin American academic friends. First, that what they perceive as a condemnation of modernity is not fair because the West itself is plural, inhabited by dissenting voices and plural modernities. This is an important corrective to the tendency, in our critiques, to homogenise the West/modern. We need to acknowledge the many non-dominant, peripheral and alternative forms of modernity, the non-dominant Wests that exist within the West. At the same time – I say to these colleagues – we need to do it decolonially and postdevelopmentally, in other words, without disavowing the privileges accorded to all things European (especially white European), and without reinforcing Western modernity as the de facto (naturalised) site of reason, progress, civility and so forth in contrast to the alleged barbarism or unviability of other worlds. And, in my view, the best way to do so is to see clearly how we are all in this together, that is, that the Liberation of Mother Earth (as the indigenous *Nasa* people of Colombia put it) and the defence of the pluriverse ('a world where many worlds can be embraced', in the Zapatista dictum) is a project we should all embrace, from wherever we are, whether in the Lacandon forest or in the heart of Europe or Cali or Mexico City.

Our critique is in not really 'anti-European' or 'anti-West', but in pro of the Liberation of Modern Earth and the pluriverse, and the Earth and the pluriverse are all of us, not just 'indigenous peoples'. These concepts have not been created by indigenous and ethnic movements just for them, but for all. They apply to all. It is incumbent upon those of us 'in the belly of the beast' who would like to defend those other non-dominant modernities to set into motion *effectively* their differences with the dominant West, thus joining forces with those opposing the assemblages of patriarchal, Eurocentric and racist capitalist modernity from the peripheries of the Global South, those struggling daily to construct territories for re-existence in mutually enriching ways with the planet. This is the meaning, for me, of inhabiting ethically and politically the civilisational crossroads in which we are enmeshed at present. And this means that we all need to make serious efforts at *vivir entre mundos*, to live in-between, with and from multiple worlds, as we attempt the re-communalisation of our daily existence.

Said differently, we need to resist endowing 'modernity' with the ability to fully and naturally occupy the entire field of the social, making invisible or secondary other ways of instituting it, including what have been called 'traditions'. This brings me to the second aspect of your answer I want to comment on, that of constructing other forms of re-existence. This would include the question of how we might cultivate ourselves as subjects who desire non-capitalist, non-liberal and non-modern forms of life – more autonomous, convivial and communal. In the field of transition visions and narratives, re-localisation (of food, energy, transportation, health etc.) and the re-communalisation of social life (reconnecting with other humans and non-humans, including the spiritual worlds)

are emerging as two principal criteria for moving in this direction; these are the *sine qua non* conditions for living beyond development. *Autonomía* is the name given by Latin American grassroots struggles to this attempt at creating conditions for re-existence and a thoroughly contemporary art of living. Again, this concept is not just for those in the peripheries, but for all. How do we think about autonomous living and communities everywhere, and perhaps particularly in the densest and most consumption-oriented liberal worlds, namely, those of today's middle classes worldwide? This is one of today's greatest challenges, and debates on degrowth and postdevelopment have lots to contribute to making it tangible and realisable.

Gustavo

The end of modernity, in my view, comes first in the form of disillusionment, as Wolfgang Dietrich brilliantly describes in his *Call for Many Peaces* (Dietrich & Sützl 1997). Modern people increasingly doubt the universal truth of the modern paradigm – a societal project characterised by Newtonian physics, Cartesian reductionism, the nation-state of Thomas Hobbes and the capitalist world system. This doubting comes from everyday experience. The subsequent scholarly reflection has not been very productive. As a consequence, we have confusion, a loss of values and orientation, or the insight of a pluriverse; instead of dissolving plurality, the idea is to celebrate it, to demand respect for and coexistence with difference, as expressed in the Zapatista dictum you already mentioned – a world in which many worlds can be embraced.

Many academics and universities are already engaged in the search for a new unitary system of reference, as a substitute for the exhausted modern paradigm. But such a search is becoming something like the old definition of metaphysics: the search in a dark room for a black cat that does not exist. As Einstein observed, we cannot find a solution for a problem within the frame that created it. Some of us are beginning to believe that the new paradigm already exists, not in academic rooms but in reality – in the form of an alternative practice that is in itself a theory. The Zapatistas are the best example, but many groups are engaged in the same path. It is not the impossible attempt of going back in history or of discarding everything that modernity has brought about. It is the autonomous construction of a contemporary art of living. Instead of cutting a head off the capitalist hydra, only to see how it regenerates other heads, people are drying up the soil on which the hydra can grow, that is, escaping from the habit of 'needs' and thus dissolving their dependence on the market and the state.

That is the very nature of autonomy for many in Latin America. And this is the attitude, by the way, that the so-called 'progressive governments' in Latin America don't want to understand.

Indigenous peoples have a long experience in dealing with modernity and they are a source of inspiration for those imagining its end. I see again a very

34 Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar

creative alliance with those inside modern thinking looking for alternatives. Foucault, for example, talked repeatedly about the insurrection of the great diversity of subjugated knowledges, when erudite knowledge is juxtaposed with empirical knowledge to generate historical knowledges of struggle. Similarly, the commons movement is today everywhere, not only in the so-called Global South. Everywhere, people exposed to hyper-individualism, consumerism, exploitation and climate change seem to have had enough. They are rescuing old terms to give them new meanings to name their contemporary social constructions – even if often in contradictory ways – which in my view are clearly beyond development ... and the conventional, modern, capitalist paradigms.

A recent UN report, prepared for the Quito Conference Habitat III in October 2016, called *Urbanisation and Development: Emerging Futures* has some pertinent gems, buried in the mass of bureaucratic jargon. It mentions the failure of urban policies that can be translated as the failure of development policies – entirely visible and of devastating consequences. For the report, prosperity was described as a tide raising all vessels and boats... but it is clear now that it raises only the yachts. I can adopt without reservation that kind of obituary for development. I don't think we said in the *Dictionary* (nor today) that developers are dead; they continue their destructive enterprise. What is dead is its promise. We can no longer argue seriously that development may bring justice, sustainability, dignity or a good life, or that it eliminates hunger and misery – that it is a tide raising all vessels.

Of course, we must continue exploring the conditions that shaped the desire to be led and to have others legislate life, which generates a herd instinct, massively displayed in the 1930s and still at work today. Foucault made these observations 50 years ago, in his preface of the *Anti-Oedipus* of Deleuze and Guattari (Foucault 1983). They are today more pertinent and urgent than ever, given the increasingly destructive ethos of the dominant economic and political system we now suffer. We need to resist the current horror, and the best way to resist is to construct a new society, in the many shapes it will take in our pluralist world.

Arturo

Unfortunately, Gustavo, we must bring this conversation to an end... for now. To conclude, could you summarise succinctly how your views on development have changed over the past 25 years?

Gustavo

Have I changed my views about 'development' in the last 25 years? Yes, and no.

Today, I am insisting in my call to public debate and action to stop the current madness still packaged as 'development' or 'progress'. Today, like 25 years ago, I denounce the cynicism of those still promoting 'development', even when they pose as 'do-gooders' and pretend to help the poor.

But there is a change. Twenty-five years ago we were not explicit enough in showing how ‘development’ was just the slogan used by capital to facilitate the implementation of a neocolonial enterprise. We all know well that capitalism has permeated the whole society through every pore.

I am fully aware that today there are still many millions whose desires are shaped by the belief that ‘development’ defines a universal norm of the good life. Many people still believe in the Western or American Way of Life, no matter how much they experience its consequences: the immense price to be paid by adopting it in terms of decency, joy, freedom and humanity; the radical impossibility of extending it to all people on Earth; the measure in which it endangers the survival of life on the planet.

I am also aware that the current ecological, economic, social and political limits to that irresponsible race are stimulating violent and blind reactions, of a fundamentalist character. We are living in a moment of extreme danger that was not so clear 25 years ago.

Yet today, most of all, I am enjoying the surge of a new hope. I wrote, 25 years ago, that it was ‘time to recover a sense of reality, time to walk with one’s own feet, on one’s own path, in order to dream one’s own dreams, not the borrowed ones of development’. Millions, perhaps billions, are following that path and experiencing what is to be beyond development. Capitalism is not an almighty and omnipresent monolith. The current wave of violence and destruction is fostering struggles against capital, which involve the heart, the head and the hands of people increasingly discontent with the situation. A new social force, transforming rebellion and indignation into a political revolution, is thus beginning to take shape.

There is no place for optimism, in this tragic circumstance of the world, in this transition to a new era. Many of those millions are struggling for sheer necessity and everywhere the struggle requires lots of courage and lucidity. But there is room for hope, the opposite to the expectations defining the economic society, ‘development’ and capitalism; hope is not the conviction that something will happen in a certain way, but the conviction that something makes sense, whatever happens. What makes sense today, like always, is to reclaim our human condition and decency.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was originally published as Esteva, G. & Escobar, A. (2017) ‘Post-development @ 25: on “being stuck” and moving forward, sideways, backward and otherwise’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol 38, no 12, pp 2559–2572.
- 2 This idea has found a recent lucid expression in the domain of insurrectionary politics: ‘The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is *already dead* [...] [its end] has been clinically established for a century’; Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 29. For this group, it is the West that is the catastrophe – nobody is out to ‘destroy the West’, it is destroying itself.

References

- Benjamin, W. (1986) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Cayley, D. (2005) *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Dietrich, W. & Sützl, W. (1997) *A Call for Many Peaces*. Peace Centre Burg Schlaining, November 1997. www.friedensburg.at/uploads/files/wp7_97.pdf.
- Escobar, A. (2014) *Sentipensar con la Tierra [Thinking-Feeling with the Earth]*. Medellín: UNAULA.
- Esteva, G. (2015). 'Para sentipensar la comunalidad' ['To think-feel the communal']. *Bajo el Volcán*, vol 16, no 23, pp 171–186.
- Esteva, G., Babones, S. & Babcicky, P. (2013) *The Future of Development: A Radical Manifesto*. Chicago: Policy Press.
- Feher, F., Heller, A. & Markus, G. (1986) *Dictatorship over Needs*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Foucault, M. (1983) 'Preface'. In Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (eds.), *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* pp xi–xiv. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gago, V. (2014) *La razón neoliberal [On Neoliberal Reason]*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón.
- Invisible Committee (2015) *To Our Friends*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Nandy, A. (1987) *Traditions, Tyrannies, and Utopias*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Nath Hanh, T. (2008) *The World We Have*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Books.
- Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2014). *Hambre de Huelga [Hunger for the Strike]*. Querétaro: La Mirada Salvaje.