

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

# Epistemologies of the South

JUSTICE AGAINST EPISTEMICIDE



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BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

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# Preface

**T**HREE BASIC IDEAS underlie this book. First, the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. Second, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Third, the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorized.

A critical theory is premised upon the idea that there is no way of knowing the world better than by anticipating a better world. Such anticipation provides both the intellectual instruments to unmask the institutionalized, harmful lies that sustain and legitimate social injustice and the political impulse to struggle against them. Critical theory is therefore meaningless without a search for truth and healing, even if in the end there is no final truth or definitive cure. History shows that the most entrenched social lies have been limited in scope and duration, even if, while in force and dominant, they appear to be the very source of truth and healing.

Viewed from the perspective of the excluded and discriminated against, the historical record of global capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy is full of institutionalized, harmful lies. It is a record of social regulation in the name of social emancipation, appropriation in the name of liberation, violence in the name of peace, the destruction of life in the name of the sanctity of life, violation of human rights in the name of human rights, societal fascism in the name of political democracy, illegal plundering in the name of the rule of law, assimilation in the name of diversity, individual vulnerability in the name of individual autonomy, constitution of subhumanities in the name of humanity, putting price tags on convictions in the name of priceless values, commodification in the name of redemption, standardization in the name of choice, massification in the name of freedom, racism in the name of tolerance, constitutional wrongs in the name of constitutional rights, ontologies of inferiority in the name of Immanuel Kant's *Was ist die Aufklärung?*, inequalities after the law in the name of equality before the law, compulsive consumption in the name of happiness, and hypocrisy in proclaiming principles (St. Thomas's *habitus principiorum*) in order to cover up for the most hideous negations of *recta vita*.

Given the peculiar pervasiveness and intensity of the institutionalized, harmful lies running our contemporary world, the adequate recognition of injustice

and the possible overcoming of oppression can only be achieved by means of an epistemological break. The focus on such an epistemological break is what best distinguishes the theory expounded in this book from the Western-centric critical tradition. The latter, of which the most brilliant exemplar is the Frankfurt School, has failed to account for the emancipatory struggles of our time, in part at least because it shares with the bourgeois thinking it criticizes the same epistemological foundations that suppress the cognitive dimension of social injustice, and thus renders universal the Western understanding and transformation of the world. Moreover, it sees itself as a vanguard theory that excels in knowing about, explaining, and guiding rather than knowing with, understanding, facilitating, sharing, and walking alongside.

This book aims to depart from this Eurocentric critical tradition. It proposes a *teoría povera*, a rearguard theory based on the experiences of large, marginalized minorities and majorities that struggle against unjustly imposed marginality and inferiority, with the purpose of strengthening their resistance. The critical theorizing laid out in this book seeks to be non-Eurocentric because it prepares the ground for both valorizing non-Eurocentric conceptions of emancipation or liberation and for proposing counterhegemonic understandings and uses of Eurocentric concepts, such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, and socialism. This book stands on its own but it will benefit from a reading in conjunction with my forthcoming *Epistemologies of the South: Reinventing Social Emancipation*. The wager of this latter book is that vast political landscapes of emancipation and liberation will emerge once the epistemological work proposed in the current book is accomplished.

This volume starts with a preamble presented in a counterpoint mode, a counterpoint between an imagined manifesto for good living/*buen vivir* and a minifesto thus designated in order to challenge the grandiose purposes underlying modernist manifestos. The manifesto presents the imagined voices of social movements with which I have been working over the years. The minifesto presents my own response, highlighting the limitations of writing at a time of impossible radicalism, as this book intends to show. In order best to visualize the counterpoint structure, the manifesto is printed on the even pages, the minifesto on the odd pages.

In the introduction I defend the need for creating a distance in relation to Western-centric political imagination and critical theory. I show the reasons why the Western-centric critical tradition (Marxism included) fails to account for the forms of struggle, social actors, and grammars of liberation that have developed in the last twenty years. In the past decade the World Social Forum has provided a dramatic illustration of this failure.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, I show that in order to be solid and convincing the critique of Western modernity must take into account the complexity and internal diversity of this social, political, and cultural paradigm. What is usually called Western modernity is a very complex

set of phenomena in which dominant and subaltern perspectives coexist and constitute rival modernities. Critiques of predominant Western modernity tend to ignore this fact. To that extent they run the risk of becoming reductionist and of being like the very conceptions of modernity they criticize, that is, mere caricatures. In Chapter 1, drawing on a famous essay by the nineteenth-century Cuban intellectual-activist José Martí, I identify some Calibanesque views on America and Western modernity. In Chapter 2, I resort to Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* in order to analyze the turbulence that is currently shaking one of the grounding metaphors that underlies modern identities (or, rather, modern processes of identification): the double metaphor of roots and options. In Chapter 3, I ask whether a non-Occidental West is possible. Resorting to two early modern philosophers, Nicholas of Cusa and Blaise Pascal, I show how alternative understandings of Western modernity were set aside because they failed to fit the capitalist-colonial enterprise.

In the second part, by means of various approximations, I expound my criticisms of the dominant epistemologies (Northern epistemologies) and present my own epistemological proposal, which I have been calling epistemologies of the South, a set of inquiries into the construction and validation of knowledge born in struggle, of ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. In Chapter 4, the central chapter of my postcolonial or decolonial approach, I analyze the abyssal lines drawn by the dominant abyssal thinking of our time through which both human and nonhuman realities existing on the other side of the line are made invisible or even actively produced as nonexistent. This results in the most radical forms of social exclusion. In Chapter 5, I approach invisibility from another angle, which I call the *epistemology of blindness*. Taking the epistemological foundations of modern economics as an extreme example, I show the different mechanisms through which the immense lot of the unseen is generated. In Chapter 6, and still from another perspective, which I term the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences, I show how the laziness of dominant modern forms of reason leads to an enormous waste of social experience that otherwise might be useful to identify emancipatory possibilities. In Chapter 7, I focus on ecologies of knowledges; I present the outline of the epistemologies of the South by showing how the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences open up the possibility both for ecologies of knowledges and for intercultural translation. Finally, in Chapter 8, I deal with intercultural translation that I conceive of as the alternative both to the abstract universalism grounding Western-centric general theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures.

This is a book soaked in tragic optimism, neither radical pessimism nor radical hope. Nothing is so oppressive as to eliminate the sense of a nonoppressive alternative. But, on the other hand, no such alternative is strong or convincing enough to avoid running the risk of somehow conflating itself with oppression.

If the human condition were slavery, there would be no need for the institution of slavery. Conversely, if the human condition were freedom, there would be no need for constitutions and human rights. The human condition is the condition of humans carrying a heavy load of history on their shoulders and half-blindly choosing ways of making the load easier to carry.

I have worked on this book for many years. I am indebted to much precious support from many colleagues and collaborators over the course of that time. I am afraid I will not be able to mention them all. This book owes a lot to Maria Irene Ramalho, to our many stimulating dialogues and challenging interdisciplinary exchanges, and to her inspiration regarding my incursions into literary theory. She has also helped on occasion to render some of my ideas into English. My committed research assistant of many years, Margarida Gomes, has once again brought competence and professionalism to support my research and to prepare the manuscript for publication. Over the years my books in English have benefited from the invaluable support of Mark Streeter as an outstanding copy editor. The invisible hand of my devoted secretary, Lassaete Simões, makes itself present, directly or indirectly, in everything I have written for the past twenty years. My colleagues João Arriscado Nunes and Maria Paula Meneses were precious collaborators in crucial moments of my research. Over the years, my doctoral and postdoctoral students at the Universities of Coimbra, Wisconsin–Madison, Warwick, and London were a constant source of inspiration for me to embark on novel topics and perspectives. At different moments of my research, I could always count on the unfailing support of collaborators, colleagues, and friends: Agustín Grijalva, Alison Phipps, Allan Hunter, Ana Cristina Santos, António Casimiro Ferreira, António Sousa Ribeiro, Armando Muylema, Bill Whitford, Carlos Lema, Cesar Baldi, César Rodríguez-Garavito, Claire Cutler, Conceição Gomes, Cristiano Gianolla, David Larraz, David Schneiderman, Diane Soles, Efuá Prah, Élide Lauris, Emílios Christodoulidis, Erik O. Wright, Gavin Anderson, Heinz Klug, Immanuel Wallerstein, Ivan Nunes, James Tully, Javier Couso, Jeremy Webber, João Pedroso, Joaquin Herrera Flores, John Harrington, José Luis Exeni, José Manuel Mendes, Joseph Thome, Juan Carlos Monedero, Juan José Tamayo, Len Kaplan, Liliana Obregón, Luís Carlos Arenas, Marc Galanter, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Maria José Canelo, Mario Melo, Mary Layoun, Michael Burawoy, Michael Wall, Neil Komesar, Raul Llasag, Raza Saeed, Rebecca Johnson, Sara Araújo, Sílvia Ferreira, Tiago Ribeiro, and Upendra Baxi. My heartfelt thanks to all of them, and I just hope the end result will not disappoint them. Last but not least, a very special word of gratitude to Dean Birkenkamp of Paradigm Publishers for the extraordinary incentive he gave me for the swift completion of this book and its timely publication.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This book was completed in the framework of the research project “ALICE—Strange Mirrors, Unsuspected Lessons” ([alice.ces.uc.pt](http://alice.ces.uc.pt)), coordinated by me at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra, Portugal. The project has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013)/ERC Grant Agreement n. 269807.

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# Epistemologies of the South

# Manifesto for Good Living/ *Buen Vivir*<sup>1</sup>

It is time to change the conversation. The past had better be large and demand little. The future had better come closer. Let's enlarge the present and the space of the world. Let's move on. Let's travel with crude maps. Between theory and action there may be correspondence, but there is no sequence. We will not necessarily reach the same place, and many of us will not even reach any recognizable place, but we share the same starting point, and that's enough. We are not all headed to the same address, but we believe we can walk together for a very long time. A few of us speak colonial languages; the large majority of us speak other languages. Since only a small number of us have voice, we resort to ventriloquists, whom we call rearguard intellectuals, because they go on doing what they have always done well: looking back. But they have now received a new mission from us: to care for those of us who lag behind and bring them back into the fight and to identify whoever keeps betraying us at the back and help us find out why.

We know Marx, even though Marx may not know us. The grand theory is a recipe book for famished people. We are neither universal nor eternal. We discard all the philosophies that do not value what we are. We know Gandhi, and Gandhi knows us. We know Fanon, and Fanon knows us. We know Toussaint L'Ouverture and Toussaint L'Ouverture knows us. We know Patrice Lumumba, and Patrice Lumumba knows us. We know Bartolina Sisa, and Bartolina Sisa knows us. We know Catarina Eufémia, and Catarina Eufémia knows us. We know Rosa Parks, and Rosa Parks knows us. But the large majority of those who know us are not well known. We are revolutionaries with no papers.

We have heard that there are many accredited intellectuals who specialize in certifying ideas that supposedly concern us. They dwell on what for them is this side of the line, that is to say, in inaccessible neighborhoods and fortified institutions they call universities. They are erudite libertines and cherish impunity.

*Who are we?* We are the global South, that large set of creations and creatures that has been sacrificed to the infinite voracity of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy,

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1. The concept of good living/*buen vivir* derives from the Quechua word *sumak kawsay* and is central to the conception of social emancipation whose epistemological foundations are laid out in this book. The political implications of this concept are analyzed in detail in my forthcoming *Epistemologies of the South: Reinventing Social Emancipation*.

# Minifesto for Intellectual-Activists

This book begins by acknowledging its limited capacity to contribute to the success of all those rallying for good living/*buen vivir*—if for no other reason than because it is written on this side of the line. To be sure, its thinking is on the other side of the line, but its life, as a book, cannot but be on this side of the line. It will be read by those who least need it. Those who, in my judgment, might benefit from it will not be able to read it. If they could, they would probably have no interest in doing so, and if they did, they would most probably not understand it. This book is thus, at best, a reluctant ally, even if the solidarity it expresses is not reluctant at all. In any case, an ally is, at most, a relative.

The second reason for its scanty contribution is that, unlike in other eras—for instance, the extraordinary seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe—in the global North of our time radical ideas are not translated into radical practices, and vice versa; radical practices do not recognize themselves in available radical ideas. This double opacity is due to several reasons that will be analyzed in the book. One of the most important is no doubt the fact that the established powers today have efficient means with which to prevent the encounter between ideas and practices beyond what befits the genetic code of the status quo. Radicalism has become antinature, *aberratio entis*. It has been a long time since 1677, when the European powers mobilized (for example, by hiring spies) to find out if, in his last living moments, Spinoza had renounced his “pantheistic atheism” and converted to Christianity; the impact of Spinoza’s capitulation to the “evidence” that human beings are natural believers was eagerly expected.

In our time, genuine radicalism seems no longer possible in the global North. Those who proclaim themselves as radical thinkers are either fooling themselves or fooling someone else, since their practices are bound to contradict their theories. Most of them work in institutions such as universities that require protective hats and gloves to deal with reality. One of the tricks that Western modernity plays on intellectuals is to allow them only to produce revolutionary ideas in reactionary institutions. On the other hand, those who act radically seem to be silent. Either they have nothing intelligible to say, or if they were to speak, nobody would understand them outside their circle of action, or they might even be thrown in jail or killed.

Given the above circumstances, how is one to write about social emancipation? To avoid misleading anyone and being misled in turn, it would be better



and all their satellite-oppressions. We are present at every cardinal point because our geography is the geography of injustice and oppression. We are not everyone; we are those who do not resign themselves to sacrifice and therefore resist. We have dignity. We are all indigenous peoples because we are where we have always been, before we had owners, masters, or bosses, or because we are where we were taken against our will and where owners, masters, or bosses were imposed on us. They want to impose on us the fear of having a boss and the fear of not having a boss, so that we may not imagine ourselves without fear. We resist. We are widely diverse human beings united by the idea that the understanding of the world is much larger than the Western understanding of the world. We believe that the transformation of the world may also occur in ways not foreseen by the global North. We are animals and plants, biodiversity and water, earth and Pachamama, ancestors and future generations—whose suffering appears less in the news than the suffering of humans but is closely linked to theirs, even though they may be unaware of it.

The most fortunate of us are alive today but afraid of being killed tomorrow; they have food today but are afraid of having none tomorrow; they till the land they inherited from their ancestors today but fear lest they be expropriated tomorrow; they talk with their friends in the streets today but are afraid that tomorrow there will be only wreckage; they care for their families today but are afraid of being raped tomorrow; they have jobs today but are afraid of being laid off tomorrow; they are human beings today but are afraid of being treated like animals tomorrow; they drink pure water and enjoy virgin forests today but fear lest tomorrow there will be neither water nor forests. The least fortunate of us are those whose fears have long since become reality.

Some of us were able to participate in the meetings of the World Social Forum in the first decade of the third millennium. We are solidary with the participants, even though they have not said everything about us, let alone the most important things. In any case, they have shown that we are many more than our enemies think, that we think better than they do about their world and ours, and that we are bold enough to act under the conviction that, in certain circumstances, it is possible to fight aircraft-carrier-ideas with kite-ideas, even though an aircraft carrier is an aircraft carrier and a kite is a kite. This is exactly what some of us have been demonstrating while venting our outrage at the beginning of the second decade of the millennium, in the streets of Cairo and Tunis, Madrid and Athens, New York and Johannesburg—in a word, in the streets of the world where it has recently been discovered that the wealthy countries are merely the countries of the wealthy people (whereas the 99 percent, the poor and their families, live outside the neofeudal enclaves that belong to the 1 percent, the superrich families). Many of those outraged at indignity are not, like us, on the other side of the line, but we hope to be able to build alliances with them.

*Where are we going?* Some of us are headed toward social emancipation, others to socialism of the twenty-first century, *buen vivir* socialism, others to communism, others to *sumak kawsay* or *sumak qamaña*, others to Pachamama or *umma*, others

to acknowledge the impossibility of being radical and to write from such an acknowledgment. The radical acknowledgment of said impossibility is all that is left over from the radicalism of Western modernity. What is left over is not negligible and therefore must not be viewed with nostalgia. It is, on the contrary, the sole way of imagining the new. Before us there are more ruins than well-defined plans. But ruins may be creative too. Starting anew means rendering creativity and interruption possible under hostile conditions that promote reproduction and repetition. The point is not so much to imagine new theories, new practices, and new relations among them. The point is mainly to imagine new ways of theorizing and of generating transformative collective action. By acknowledging how powerful the constituted impossibility of radicalism is, we will be better equipped to imagine new constituent possibilities.

To write from the perspective of the impossibility of radicalism means to start by acknowledging two impossibilities and to go on writing between them: the *impossibility of communicating the unsayable* and the *impossibility of collective authorship*.

*The impossibility of communicating the unsayable.* For the last two hundred years, the relation between knowing and acting has lost its general character and been reduced to the relation between knowledge validated by modern science and rational social engineering (Santos 2007b). As a result, all that was arbitrarily conceived of as being outside this highly intellectualized and rationalized field was ignored or stigmatized. Outside was the dark world of passions, intuitions, feelings, emotions, affections, beliefs, faiths, values, myths, and the world of the unsayable, which cannot be communicated save indirectly, as Kierkegaard would say. Various kinds of positivism managed to demonstrate that what was left out either did not exist (was an illusion) or was unimportant or dangerous. Such reductionisms allowed for geometrical correspondences between theory and practice. However, as both theory and practice became disembodied from their unsayable “halves,” it became impossible to account for the complexity and contingency of the relationships between them. Being imagined as reflected in the same mirror, both theory and practice became reciprocally blind. Now, blind people guided by blind people are not doubly blind, but they do not see better either.

Theoreticians and intellectuals in general are not prepared for either joys or sorrows, for either mourning or the celebration that the ralliers for good living/*buena vida* talk about. The former know how to name these affections, as Spinoza called them, but do not live them; moreover, they are incapable of making the absence of such affections into a problem for thought or reason. They are not prepared to integrate that which thought has separated, meaning life itself. If life could make distinctions, it would make many, but certainly not this one between affections and reason, lest it deny itself as life. This is particularly true of the life of transformative action in which the reality consists of giving life to what does not yet exist and can only come about by reasonable affections and affectionate

to *ubuntu*, still others to human rights, others to real and true democracy, others to dignity and respect, others to plurinationality, others to interculturality, others to social justice, others to *swadeshi*, others to *demokaraasi*, others to *minzhu*, others to food sovereignty, others to solidary economy, others to ecosocialism and the fight against large dams and megaprojects. We have been warned that every concept tends to become a conceptual monster. We are not afraid.

What we all have in common is that we all have to fight against many obstacles in order to live with dignity—that is to say, to live well. There are many obstacles, but they all have a family resemblance: capitalism among humans and between humans and nature, colonialism, patriarchy, fetishism of commodities, monocultures of knowledge, the linear time of progress, naturalized inequalities, the dominant scale, and the productivism of economic growth and capitalist development. The obstacles to a life with dignity are very different, but they all have something in common: to wit, the infinite accumulation of unequal differences on the unjust behalf of very few. We are the dispossessed of the earth because we are considered ignorant, inferior, local, particular, backward, unproductive, or lazy. The immeasurable suffering we get from this and the waste of world experience it brings about are unjust, but they are not historical fatalities. We fight against them under the conviction that they can be eliminated. But our struggle depends less on our objectives than on the quality of our actions and emotions in striving to attain them.

*What do we want?* The world is full of opportunities to live well, both regarding ourselves and mother earth. We want to have the opportunity to take advantage of them. We know better what we do not want than what we want. Those living in what they themselves call “this side of the line” think a lot about us. For the most fortunate of us, they organize fairs in our villages with many bazaars and stalls for counseling. They display transgenic foodstuffs, bibles, intellectual copyrights, certified consultants, empowerment recipes, structural adjustments, human rights, private property, nicely wrapped democracy, bottled water, and environmental concerns. We read once that Socrates, walking through the square and seeing many deluxe products, remarked, “So many things in the world that I do not want!” Socrates would be today a rallier for good living/*buen vivir*. We do not want to be spoken about. We want to speak for ourselves. We do not want to be seen on the other side of the line. We want to eliminate the line.

*Where do we live?* We live in Chiapas, in the Andes, in Amazonia, in the squatter settlements of big cities, in the lands coveted by new and old colonizers in Africa and Asia, in the ghettos of global cities, on the banks of rivers where they want to build dams and on the hills where they want to mine for ore and minerals and destroy life, in the new plantations using slave labor in the United States, Brazil, and Bangladesh, in the world’s maquiladoras, where we produce, with sweat and sorrow, the consumerist pleasure of the masters. We actually live where tourists never go or, if they do, where they would never deign to live. The world is divided by two kinds of borders: those we accept with reservations and those we refuse without reservation. The former are the national borders wherein

reasons. The concern of intellectuals is the life of thought, and that has little to do with the life of life. *Lived life*—as much as Spinoza's *natura naturata*—is supposed to be less than thought, but *living life* and *natura naturans* are surely more than thought.

By calling myself an intellectual-activist I wish to suggest a possible way of living the impossibility of communicating the unsayable in a productive way, thereby creating new possibilities. This book resorts frequently to indirect communication; it was itself thought through on the basis of much indirect communication.

*The impossibility of collective authorship.* As far as authorship goes, this book has diffuse limits. In recent years I have been an activist in the World Social Forum process and have been deeply involved in the struggles of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. I am unable to determine to what extent my thoughts are part of a collective without a name and without clear outlines. Of my own is only what is expressed individually and with full awareness of a double absence: the absence of that which could be formulated only collectively, were it susceptible to rational formulation, and the absence of that which cannot be rationally formulated, either individually or collectively. Half this book will forever remain unwritten. I write what I am able to write with this in mind. I am part of a collective by being aware of how I separate myself from it in order to write.

To write from the perspective of the impossibility of radicalism is today more promising than before owing to three factors: *the end of the game of dogmas*; *the mission of the rearguard theory* with which the ralliers have entrusted the intellectuals; and *the inexhaustible diversity of the world* and what it shows, or what it lets be seen, regardless of the possibility of its being spoken.

*The end of the game of dogmas.* For the past two hundred years the social struggles against the old dogmas have almost always been fought on behalf of new dogmas. As a consequence, social emancipation became a new social regulation, and the old orthodoxy was replaced by the new one. What was a means became an end; what was rebellion became conformity. Now the social movements rallying for good living/*buen vivir* show that it is possible to fight against old dogmas without doing it in the name of new dogmas.

According to such movements, social emancipation presupposes social regulation; an emancipated society that is not regulated is not conceivable. But there is a difference between regulating emancipation and emancipating regulation. Regulating emancipation consists of applying to the new conditions the same logic of regulation (if not necessarily the same kind of regulation) that presided over the old conditions, now overcome; emancipating regulation, on the other hand, consists of establishing as a new kind of regulation the condition for that which it aims to regulate. If the purpose of social emancipation is to build a democracy-without-end, emancipating regulation involves deepening and diversifying democratic solutions as transformative practices create the need for them. Only this will prevent means from becoming ends; new idols from replacing old ones and demanding of citizens the same kind of submission as before;

we were born or raised. We accept them to save our energies and because we think they are a lesser obstacle compared to the other borders. The others are the walls, trenches, ditches, barbwire fences, cordons of police cars, and checkpoints; above all, they are the maps that have traced the abyssal lines in people's minds, laws, and politics and banished us to the other side of the line. The worst borders are the borders that cannot be seen, read, heard, or felt on this side of the line, that is to say, in Kakania, whose capital is Excrementia. We live on the other side of the line that someone traced while thinking of us but aiming at not thinking of us anymore. We are invisible, inaudible, and illegible because the success of previous revolutions decided not to include us. If our here is invisible, our now is even more so. According to those revolutions, we have, at most, a past, but no future. We were never allowed to write the history books.

*How do we live?* Always at risk of dying for causes other than illness, of being wounded or killed but not in friendly games; on the verge of losing home, land, water, sacred territories, children, grandparents; always at risk of being displaced long distances to flee war or of being confined in our barrios or in concentration camps; at risk of finding that our popular, solidary, cooperative savings may be worth nothing because they do not count toward the GDP; at risk of seeing our rivers contaminated and our forests deforested in the name of what they call development; at risk of being humiliated, without the power to respond because we are of an inferior gender, race, class, or caste; at risk of being the target of wealthy kids' tricks, which may prove fatal to us; at risk of impoverishment, of being helped as poor without giving a bad conscience to those helping us; at risk of being considered terrorists for wanting to defend our mother earth; at risk, indeed, for facing so many risks, of ending up conforming.

*What kind of passion urges us?* The most subjective and diverse passion because grounded in the most intensely and diversely lived truth: that we deserve a life with dignity, a free life because free from the fear of violence and dispossession, a life to which we are entitled, and that fighting for it is possible and that we might succeed. We are the children of a passionate truth and a truthful passion. We passionately know that reality is not reduced to what exists and that most of what does not exist could and deserves to exist. Time does not allay our passion. Our brother Evo Morales had to wait five centuries to become president after Pope Paul III stated in his 1537 bull that Indians had souls. It was a cunning bull from which we started to arrive at where we are now.

*Against whom do we fight?* On this side of the line everything is seductive; on the other side of the line everything is scary. We are the only ones who know, from experience, that there are two sides to the line, the only ones who know how to imagine what they do not live. Our context is the urgency of a life with dignity as a condition for everything else to be possible. We do know that only a civilizational change can guarantee it, but we also know that our urgency can bring about such change. We must live today in order to live a long time, and vice versa; we have to live a long time in order to live today. Our *durées* and times

new rules from being naturalized as necessities of life, as was the case with the old rules; the struggles against the elimination of alternatives from leading to a society without alternatives; political actions adopted to restore politics vis-à-vis technical solutions from becoming a solution of political technique; limits to freedom of action and creativity from becoming exactly the same as the old ones; nonconformity, which made change possible, from turning into change-hindering conformity; the emotions, fantasies, and aspirations invested in social change from being condemned for what they are; the new functions that broke with the old ones from becoming structures blocking new functions; the historicization of that which was considered ahistorical from turning into a new ahistorical truth; the necessarily relative unconsciousness of all those engaged in change involving risks from becoming the maximum possible consciousness of those benefiting from the change. The aim is, in sum, to prevent the weapons of the once oppressed from becoming the weapons of the new oppressors. I believe that, according to the good-living ralliers, this is the only way to turn the journey toward the end in view into a journey without end.

This new stance poses a huge challenge to intellectual-activists. Particularly in the global North, the protagonism of intellectuals has been largely due to games of dogmas and orthodoxies. Dogmas are as intense concerning formulation (precise words) as direction (precise and binding instructions for action and behavior). They are so intensely directive that they confuse the reality of direction with the direction of reality. They create autonomous forms of life. Intellectuals living inside and off such games have no need of any other life. They were trained for that sort of life, and their mission is to reproduce it. Under these conditions, the challenge posed to the intellectuals by the ralliers is almost dilemmatic: either they must untrain and reinvent themselves, or they will continue to be what they already are—irrelevant. Before they choose untraining, intellectuals do wonder about the dilemma: how is it possible to fight against dogmas without resorting to other and more potent dogmas? Would leaving everything open not be the same as letting the enemy loose? Can the attempt to integrate life and thought not bring about the disintegration of both? Is anti-dogma not another kind of dogma after all?

What is promising at the beginning of the new millennium is that the ralliers for good living/*buen vivir* have created possibilities not previously foreseen or deemed admissible theoretically. These new possibilities show that irrationality is not the only alternative to what is currently considered rational, that chaos is not the only alternative to order, and that concern about what is less than true (the messy reasons and affections underlying the struggles for uncertain results) must be balanced by concern about what is more than true (the *habitus* of disapproved grand theories of claiming truthfulness in their explanations of previous failures). The new possibilities emerge from new actions acted out by new players with new discourses and conceptions. They are actually not new; some of them are very old indeed; they are ancestral. They became more visible because



only stress what is useful for our struggles. Our times are not flat or concentric; they are passages between the No Longer and the Not Yet.

To a certain extent, the age of our side of the line coincides with the age of their side of the line, but the two ages are not to be confused. We and they are contemporaneous in distinct ways. Our age is potentially more revolutionary than all the previous ones. Never was so much unjust suffering caused to human and nonhuman beings; never were the sources of power and oppression so diverse and so powerful. Never as today was it possible for human beings on this planet to have any idea, however vague and distorted, of what is happening.

This is a time of reckoning at a planetary level, involving humans and mother earth. It is a time of reckoning as yet without any rules. On the one side, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and all their satellite-oppressions. This is what we call the global North, a political, not geographical, location, increasingly more specialized in the transnationalization of suffering: workers losing their jobs in displaced plants; peasants in India, Africa, and Latin America expropriated by the megaprojects, agribusiness, and the mining industry; indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia who survived genocide; women murdered in Ciudad Juárez; gays and lesbians of Uganda and Malawi; people of Darfur, who are so poor and yet so rich; Afro-descendants murdered and displaced to the confines of the Colombian Pacific; mother earth struck in her vital cycles; those accused of being terrorists, tortured in secret prisons all over the world; undocumented immigrants facing deportation; Palestinians, Iraqis, Afghans, and Pakistanis who live, work, and celebrate under constant bombardments; the impoverished North Americans, shocked by the fact that capitalism and colonialism treat them with exactly the same contempt and arbitrariness with which they have treated all the other peoples of the world; the retired, unemployed, and unemployable who are prey to the law of pillaging of the financial pirates.

On the other side, our time is the time of the return of the humiliated and degraded. This is what we call the global South. We are not victims; we are victimized and offer resistance. We are many, and we use our new learning in very different ways. We do not always agree, and we even suspect that there are traitors among us. We are experts at exposing them.

Despite everything else, we have problems in common with our enemies, and our destinies have some affinities. The suffering they inflict on us and have recently increased will end up turning against them. The sanest of them have already realized as much. As the sage Voltaire used to say, the cause of all wars is theft. Now those who learned how to steal outside the house are stealing from the people inside it. If suffering, murder, humiliation, and destruction continue to escalate, the survival of the planet may be at stake. Could our enemies be already thinking of colonizing another planet where they won't need closed condominiums?

We know that the first of our struggles is against ourselves. The sage Marx said that after the philosophers were done with interpreting the world, the world would have to be changed. But there is no change without self-change, for the

the repertoire of social emancipation that had been intellectually certified has collapsed, because the fashion show of the new, which actually is the old-in-new-forms, has failed totally.

The absence of dogmas is not easy to describe, but it is felt in the pulse and easy to see. It can be seen in the urge not to squander actions, energies, aspirations, or knowledges. It can be seen in the changes in conversation and in the agreed upon silence to facilitate joint action.

To acknowledge the ralliers' novelty does not mean much. It is just a solidary manner of protecting them from being silenced. To be sure, the ralliers know by their own experience the extent to which Western modernity has specialized in techniques for silencing insurgent actions. According to dominant common sense, they deserve being silenced because they are being carried out by ignorant, inferior, backward, retrograde, local, unproductive people—in sum, by people who are supposed to be obstacles to progress and development. How to counter this powerful silencing machine without giving rise to an alternative but also silencing machine—such is the greater challenge facing intellectual-activists. Herein lie their untraining and self-reinvention.

*The rearguard theory.* The second reason why I consider that writing from the perspective of the impossibility of radicalism is promising has to do with the mission ascribed to intellectual-activists by ralliers for good living/*buen vivir*: to contribute to the elaboration of theories of the rearguard (more on this throughout the book). This mission is almost impossible, but to the extent that it can be accomplished, it constitutes the greatest novelty at the beginning of the millennium and is the best piece of news for those who genuinely believe that capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and all other satellite-oppressions can be overcome.

These political experiences witnessed by ralliers for good living/*buen vivir* cause surprise because they were not conceived of, let alone foreseen, by the political theories of Western modernity, including Marxism and liberalism. Particularly significant, among many other examples, is the case of the indigenous peoples' movements in Latin America and their contribution to recent political changes in some countries. The surprise is due to the fact that both Marxism and liberalism have ignored the indigenous peoples, both as social and political actors. The great Peruvian Marxist José Mariátegui was stigmatized as "romantic" and "populist" by the Communist International for having ascribed a role to the Indians in the construction of Latin American societies. Such a surprise poses a new question to theoreticians and intellectuals in general—namely, whether they are prepared to experience surprise and wonder. This question has no easy answer. Critical theoreticians are particularly trapped in this difficulty since they have been trained in vanguard theorizing. Vanguard theory, by its nature, does not let itself be taken by surprise or feel wonderment. Whatever does not fit the vanguardists' previsions or propositions either does not exist or is not relevant.

To answer positively to the challenge of allowing oneself to be surprised presupposes that the process of untraining and reinvention is in progress and



obstacles to life with dignity, or to living well, reside in ourselves, to the extent that we conform to indignity and deny that the difference between what is imposed on us and what we desire is much smaller than we think.

*What certainties do we have?* As all human and nonhuman animals, we specialize in possibilities, passages between the No Longer and the Not Yet. The only certainties we have concern possibility and the wager. All other certainties are paralyzing. We have partial knowledge of the conditions that allow us to proceed and believe that such conditions are partial themselves. We follow the sage Fanon, according to whom each generation must find its own mission from within relative opacity and then go on to fulfill or betray it. Our possibilities are far from being infinite, and they only become definite according to how we move. We reflect as we run. Our way is semi-invisible and semiblind. The very certainty concerning the shackles from which we wish to free ourselves is treacherous because, with time, the shackles may feel comfortable and turn into ornaments. And they may also induce us to put shackles on those close to us.

*What kinds of knowledge are available to us?* Our knowledge is intuitive; it goes straight to what is urgent and necessary. It is made of words and silences-with-actions, reasons-with-emotions. Our life does not allow us to distinguish life from thought. All our everydayness is thought of every day in detail. We think of our tomorrow as if it were today. We have no important questions, only productive questions.

Our knowledge flies at low altitude because it is stuck to the body. We feel-think and feelact. To think without passion is to make coffins for ideas; to act without passion is to fill the coffins. We are voracious in getting the diversity of the knowledges we are interested in. There are many knowledges looking for people eager to know them. We squander no knowledges that might help us in our struggle to live well. We mix knowledges and combine them according to logics that are not limited to them. We do not want authors' copyrights; we want to be authors of rights.

Our kind of knowledge is existential and experiential; it is therefore both resilient and flexible, disturbed by all that happens to us. Unlike what goes on in Kakania, here among us, ideas are people; they have weight and pay fines for excess weight; they wear clothes and may be incarcerated for indecent exposure; they make appeals and get killed for that.

*How do we get educated?* We are the educators with the fewest credentials in the world. Our bodies and our lives are the squandered knowledge of the world, the knowledge that is objective vis-à-vis ourselves and subjective vis-à-vis our enemies. All we know of them is theirs and ours; all they know of us is theirs. Universities have a full inventory of departments, books, careers, computers, reams of papers, uniforms, privileges, erudite discourses, chancellors, and officials; yet they do not educate at all. Their mission is to turn us into ignorants so that we may be treated as ignorants in conscience. At most, they teach us how to choose

proceeds successfully. Intellectuals willing to let themselves be taken by surprise are those who are no longer surprised by the imagined novelties, however extravagant and seductive, of vanguard theories, having reached the conclusion that the time of vanguard theories (the time of linearity, simplicity, unity, totality, and determination) is over. Once intellectuals enter the untraining process, the academicist, overintellectualized, and stagnated character of vanguard theories becomes gradually more obvious.

I wrote this book having in mind the creation of an affective-intellectual horizon in which rearguard theories may emerge through their contributions to the success of the struggles of ralliers for good living/*buen vivir*. Rearguard theories can only validate themselves by their practical results, by the evaluation of the changes made by all their protagonists, among whom the intellectual-activist is always a minor figure. That is to say, rearguard theories are, borrowing from Schopenhauer, *parerga* and *paralipomena*, minor parts of nontheoretical forms of life. They are actions of theoretical intervention woven inside forms of life. They do not wash their hands like Pontius Pilate; nor are they a Greek chorus. They specialize in skeletons, drawings, registrations, envelopes, and postal addresses—important things but far from important enough.

*The inexhaustible experience of the world and indirect communication.* The third reason why I consider the present moment promising for writing from the perspective of the impossibility of radicalism is today's increased awareness that the cultural, cognitive, social, ethnic-racial, productive, political, and religious diversity of the world is immense; besides its capacity to be described and represented, such diversity can be seen, shown, felt, and poetically expressed. Many factors account for this, and some of them will be analyzed in the book, but the most important one is the recent visibility of ralliers for good living/*buen vivir* and the internal diversity they reveal and celebrate. This is a kind of diversity that totally subverts the monocultural diversity of *National Geographic* or eco-ethno-cultural tourism. It is diversity with its own criteria for diversity, which, unlike monocultural diversity, turns inert simultaneity into complex contemporaneity. Unlike the touristic or entertaining gaze, which creates acts of simultaneity among noncontemporaneous people, the diversity of the ralliers for good living/*buen vivir* creates encounters among different contemporaneities—that is to say, among different forms of being contemporaneous. It reveals the polychromy and polyphony of the world without turning them into discontinuous and incommensurable, radical heterogeneity.

Unity lies in no essence. It lies in the task of building good living/*buen vivir*. Herein reside the novelty and the political imperative: to enlarge contemporaneity means to amplify the field of reciprocity between the principle of equality and the principle of the recognition of difference. Thus, the struggle for social justice expands in unsuspected ways. To the injustice regarding wealth distribution, based on the conventional concept of social justice, many other dimensions of injustice are added, having varied temporal durations and hence carrying distinct

between two evils. We educate ourselves by learning how not to choose between either. When some day we enter the university—that is to say, when we occupy and decolonize it—we will not merely open the doors and redecorate the walls. We will destroy both so that we may all fit in.

*What are our weapons?* All weapons of life, none of death. In truth, only those weapons with proper names in our own languages belong to us. All the others are taken from our enemies as war trophies or unintended heirlooms: democracy, human rights, science, philosophy, theology, law, the university, the state, civil society, constitutionalism, and so on. We learn that, when we wield them autonomously, they frighten the enemy. However, borrowed weapons are efficacious only when used together with our own weapons. We are competent rebels. We follow sage Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, according to whom top politicians do not understand anything; above all, they do not understand the essential: that their time is over.

Joy and celebration are what the victims feel when they stop being victims, when their suffering is turned into resistance and fight. We are artists embodied in life, and ascendant is our art. The only ugly and sad truths are those imposed on us. The truths with which we offer resistance are beautiful and joyous.

*On which kinds of allies can we count?* Even if we are a large majority, there are very few of us. We must get together before others try to come together with us. We ask for help but use it only to become independent of it. As we free ourselves from help, we free help itself. We ask democracy for help in order to free democracy. Democracy was invented out of fear of us, and we have always been afraid of it. Today we are not afraid, but neither do we have any illusions. We know that when we take possession of democracy, our enemies will go back to their old inventions: dictatorship, violence, theft, the arbitrary manipulation of legality and illegality. We will fight for the democratization of democracy until it frees itself from the fraud into which they have turned it. We will ask the help of human rights in order to render them unnecessary. They turned us into a global multitude of objects of human rights discourses. When we all become subjects of human rights, who will remember the concept of human rights? Could the human contain the nonhuman? We ask for the help of liberation theology to free us from theology.

Our allies are all those who are solidary with us and have a voice because they are not on our side of the line. We know that “solidarity” is a trap word. To decide unilaterally with whom one is solidary and how one is solidary is to be solidary with oneself alone. Unlike what has been the case up until now, we put conditions on solidarity. Alliance with us is demanding because our allies have to fight against three kinds of enemies: our enemies, their enemies, and the commonsensical view that there is no connection at all between the two previous kinds of enemies. Specific enemies include comfort and discomfort once certified by the same indifference-producing factory; laziness and its older sister, the laziness of whoever commands action; temporary apathy and equally

modes of contemporaneity: the historical injustice of colonialism and slavery; the sexual injustice of patriarchy, gynophobia, and homophobia; the intergenerational injustice of hatred against the young and against sustainable models of development; the ethnic-racial injustice of racism and xenophobia; and the cognitive injustice committed against the wisdom of the world on behalf of the monopoly of science and the technologies sanctioned by science.

Structural (not functional) diversity is as seductive as it is threatening. It is seductive for those who see in it the reason for the end of dogmas and the opportunity to imagine and create other life possibilities. If the diversity of the world is inexhaustible, then utopia is possible. All possibilities are finite, but their number is infinite. The constituted experience is nothing more than a provisional and localized concretization of the constituent experience. The fact that the existing reality is so far away from ideals does not prove the impossibility of the latter; rather, it only proves that current reality is without ideals. However, such diversity is also threatening, particularly in the global North, because it reveals the isolation of the West. The affirmation of the diversity of the world marks a turning point in Western exceptionalism. Once seemingly originary (*archetypus*) and ascendant, showing the way forward to the "rest," it has become derivative (*ectypus*) and descendent, a conception of the world and a mode of experiencing society and nature that are being proven unsustainable.

Acknowledging this autonomous and enabling diversity is perhaps the crucial feature of the process of untraining, as partly reported in this book. It is from this perspective that I propose epistemologies of the South. Such an acknowledgment works as a safety net against the abysses into which one falls when one loses the certainty that scientific knowledge is the only valid kind of knowledge and that beyond it there is only ignorance. It is the most efficacious antidote against Wittgensteinian silencing, which is totally prey to monolanguage and monoculture. What cannot be said, or said clearly, in one language or culture may be said, and said clearly, in another language or culture. Acknowledging other kinds of knowledge and other partners in conversation for other kinds of conversation opens the field for infinite discursive and nondiscursive exchanges with unfathomable codifications and horizontalities.

The three reasons mentioned above as favoring writing from the perspective of the impossibility of radicalism may indirectly facilitate the emergence of intellectual-activist or rearguard intellectuals, as ralliers for good living/*buen vivir* call them. On the other hand, some ralliers may eventually read this book and even become interested in their reading. As far as I am concerned, however, what remains written in this book is a thought-action experiment, a gym of ideas in which I prepare myself to become a rearguard intellectual, hence a competent rebel. What the ralliers may learn from me is but a faithful mirror of what I go on learning from them.

temporary enthusiasm; the paradox of running risks just in order not to run risks; lack of arguments and excess of arguments to justify both action and inaction; abstract thought without body or passion; catalogues of principles to read rather than to live; understanding and representations geared to statistical homogeneity; criticism without irony, satire, or comedy; the belief that it is normal to be thought of as a whole and only act individually; the desire to please those who despise us while despising everybody else; a preference for still life and dread of living nature; the twin obsessions of being a client or having clients; the twin fears of losing wealth or losing poverty; the twin uncertainties of whether the worst is over or about to come; the obsession of obsession, the uncertainty of uncertainty, the fear of fear. Only later come our enemies, those against whom we must rebel together.

In part, the enemies against whom our allies have to fight are themselves, how they came to be what they are and have to stop being themselves if they want to be our honest allies. As our comrade Amílcar Cabral once said, they will have to commit suicide as a class, which cannot be easy.

*How do we build our alliances?* The world is oversized for human beings and nature. The oppressive world is oversized for the oppressed. No matter how many the oppressed are, they will always be few, and fewer they will be if they are not united. Unity makes strength, but the best strength is the strength that builds unity. We have neither leaders nor followers. We organize ourselves, mobilize ourselves, reflect, and act. We are no multitude, but we do aspire to be a multitude of organizations and movements. We follow the sage Spinoza, but only to the extent that he does not contradict the sages Gandhi and Rosa Luxemburg: spontaneity disorganizes the status quo only to the extent that it organizes itself in order not to turn itself into a new status quo.

We start from purpose and action. Our problems are practical, our questions productive. We share two premises: our suffering is not reduced to the word “suffering,” and we do not accept unjust suffering and instead fight for the something better to which we are entitled. Ambiguity does not paralyze us. We do not have to coincide; we have to converge. We do not have to unify; we must generalize. We translate into one another reciprocally and are very careful lest some engage more in translation than others. It is not important to agree on what it means to change the world. It is enough to be in agreement about the actions that contribute to changing it. To such an agreement many emotions and sensations contribute, which assert and criticize without words. Translation helps us define the limits and possibilities of collective action. We communicate directly and indirectly by means of smiles and affects, by the warmth of hands and arms, and by dancing, until we reach the threshold of joint action. The decision is always autonomous; different reasons may lead to convergent decisions. Nothing is irreversible, except the risks we run.

I hope this book will be read by others besides the ralliers. The latter may not be able to buy it or, in any case, have enough interest in it. Although this book was written on this side of the line, it was generated on the other side of the line. It will be intelligible and promising only for those who can imagine the end of the abyssal line I will be writing about in the following pages.

The attempt to contribute to the emergence of rearguard theories calls for repeated exercises of self-reflexivity about the ongoing untraining and reinvention. The context is similar to St. Augustine's eloquent statement as he was writing his *Confessions: Quaestio mihi factus sum* ("I have become a question for myself"). The difference is that the question is no longer the confession of past errors but rather participation in the construction of a personal and collective future, without ever being sure that past errors will not be repeated again.

Readers are no doubt aware that my writing from the perspective of the impossibility of radicalism is still an attempt, albeit hopeless or hopelessly honest, to retrieve radicalism by ways that catch the established powers distracted or off guard. Let me add right away: I have no way of knowing if I have succeeded. I do not know, therefore, if I am a competent rebel. I do not feel the pressing urge to write what I write, which is not troublesome. What is troublesome is not to feel the need to silence what should be silenced. The last sentence of Spinoza's *Ethics* is terrifying: *Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara* ("All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare").

This is why this book, to a large extent, will remain incomplete.

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# Introduction

## *Creating a Distance in Relation to Western-centric Political Imagination and Critical Theory*

THE GLOBAL NORTH is getting smaller and smaller in economic as well as political and cultural terms, and yet it cannot make sense of the world at large other than through general theories and universal ideas. Observed from the outside, such a *habitus* is less and less convincing and can be viewed as the expression of a somewhat anachronistic manifestation of Western exceptionalism, even if it remains very destructive when translated into imperial politics. In sum, from this perspective, the global North seems to have little to teach the world. Is this all that important?<sup>1</sup> Would not the historical opportunity for the global North to learn from the experiences of the global South lie precisely here? The truth of the matter is that, after five centuries of “teaching” the world, the global North seems to have lost the capacity to learn from the experiences of the world. In other words, it looks as if colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in noncolonial terms, that is, in terms that allow for the existence of histories other than the universal history of the West.

This condition is reflected in all the intellectual work produced in the global North and, most specifically, in Western, Eurocentric critical theory.<sup>2</sup> A sense of exhaustion haunts the Western, Eurocentric critical tradition. It manifests itself in a peculiar and diffuse uneasiness expressed in multiple ways: irrelevance, inadequacy, impotence, stagnation, paralysis. Such uneasiness is all the more disquieting because we are living in a world in which there is so much to be criticized, in a world, moreover, in which an ever-growing number of people live in critical

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1. Presently, I coordinate a research project, “ALICE—Strange Mirrors, Unsuspected Lessons: Leading Europe to a New Way of Sharing World Experiences,” funded by the European Research Council (<http://alice.ces.uc.pt/en>). This project aims to develop a new theoretical paradigm for contemporary Europe based on two key ideas: the understanding of the world by far exceeds the European understanding of the world; and the much-needed social, political, and institutional reform in Europe may benefit from innovations taking place in regions and countries that European colonialism viewed as mere recipients of the civilizing mission.

2. On the difficulties of constructing a new critical theory, see Santos (1995, 1998).



conditions that imply both crisis and critique. If there is so much to criticize, why has it become so difficult to build convincing, widely shared, powerful, critical theories, theories that give rise to effective and profound transformative practices?

For the past thirty years, growing difficulties—often presented as perplexities before unintelligible political repertoires, unpredicted mobilizations and solutions, impasses attributed to a supposed lack of alternatives, and a variety of more or less sophisticated protocols of surrendering—have beset Western critical thinking both in its Marxist and libertarian streams. Three such difficulties are somewhat dilemmatic insofar as they occur at the level of the very political imagination that sustains both critical theory and, in the last instance, emancipatory politics. Three others refer to the impact of perplexities and political impasses on theory making. Taken together these difficulties call for some distance vis-à-vis the Western critical tradition.

In this introduction I analyze these difficulties and show the root causes of the uneasiness they generate. The first set of difficulties concerns the shrinking of the emancipatory political imagination. In short, they may be designated as strong questions and weak answers, the end of capitalism without end, and the end of colonialism without end.

### Strong Questions and Weak Answers

One reason for the need to create a distance from the Eurocentric critical tradition is that the latter is providing only weak answers for the strong questions confronting us in our time. Strong questions address not only our specific options for individual and collective life but also the societal and epistemological paradigm that has shaped the current horizon of possibilities within which we fashion our options, the horizon within which certain options are possible while others are excluded or even unimaginable. Such questions are paradigmatic in nature since they confront the very criteria for inclusion and exclusion of specific options. They arouse, therefore, a particular kind of perplexity.

Weak answers, on the contrary, are those answers that do not challenge the horizon of possibilities. They assume that the current paradigm provides answers for all the relevant questions. They therefore fail to abate the perplexity caused by the strong questions and may, in fact, increase it. Indeed, they discard and stigmatize this perplexity as the symptom of an irrational refusal to travel according to historically tested maps. But since perplexity derives in the first place from questioning such maps, the weak answers are an invitation to immobility.

*The first strong question* can be formulated in this way: If humanity is one alone, why are there so many different principles concerning human dignity and social justice, all of them presumably unique, yet often contradictory? At the root of the perplexity underlying this question is a recognition that much has been left out of the modern and Western understanding of the world. The

Western-centric critical answer to this question is that such diversity is only to be recognized to the extent that it does not contradict universal human rights.<sup>3</sup> This is a weak answer because, by postulating the abstract universality of the conception of human dignity underlying the concept of human rights, it dismisses the perplexity underlying the question, which precisely questions the possibility of such an abstract universality.<sup>4</sup> The fact that such a conception is Western-based is considered irrelevant, as the historicity of human rights discourse does not interfere with its ontological status.<sup>5</sup>

However fully embraced by conventional political thinking and also by critical theory, particularly in the global North, this is a weak answer because it reduces the understanding of the world to the Western understanding of the world, thus ignoring or trivializing other non-Western understandings of the world, for example, decisive cultural and political experiences and initiatives in the countries of the global South. This is the case of movements or grammars of resistance that have been emerging against oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, whose ideological bases often have very little to do with the dominant Western cultural and political references prevalent throughout the twentieth century. When they resort at all to the grammar of human rights to formulate their struggles, these movements do so in terms that fully contradict the dominant understanding of human rights. The most salient examples of such movements and grammars are those of the indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples who have become very politically active in the last thirty years, particularly in Latin America. But we could also mention movements and grammars focusing on the revival of non-Western ethical, cultural, and political imaginations in Africa, Asia, and the Islamic world. They start out from cultural and political references that are non-Western, even if constituted by a resistance to Western domination. Conventional human rights thinking lacks the theoretical and analytical tools to position itself in relation to such movements; even worse, it does not understand the importance of doing

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3. We know that human rights are not universal in their application. Four international regimes of human rights are consensually distinguished in the world in our time: the European, the Inter-American, the African, and the Asian regimes. For an extended analysis of the four regimes, see Santos (1995: 330–337, 2002b: 280–311) and the bibliographies cited there.

4. The conventional understanding of human rights includes some or all of the following characteristics: they are universally valid irrespective of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they operate and the different human rights regimes existing in different regions of the world; they are premised on a conception of human nature as individual, self-sustaining, and qualitatively different from nonhuman nature; what counts as a violation of human rights is defined by universal declarations, multilateral institutions (courts and commissions), and established, global (mostly North-based) nongovernmental organizations; the recurrent phenomenon of double standards in evaluating compliance with human rights in no way compromises the universal validity of human rights; the respect for human rights is much more problematic in the global South than in the global North.

5. See more on this in Santos (2007b: 3–40).

so. It applies the same abstract recipe across the board, hoping that thereby the nature of alternative ideologies or symbolic universes will be reduced to local specificities with no impact on the universal canon of human rights.

*The second strong question* confronting our time is the following: What degree of coherence is to be required between the principles, whatever they may be, and the practices that take place in their name? This question gains a particular urgency in contact zones between the global North and the global South, or between the global West and the global East, because it is there that the discrepancy between principles and practices tends to be highest. More and more frequently we witness the massive violation of human rights in the name of human rights, the destruction of democracy in the name of democracy, the killing of innocent civilians in the name of supposedly protecting them, the devastation of livelihoods in the name of development, and the massive deployment of surveillance techniques and restrictions of basic freedoms in the name of preserving freedom and security. The ideological investments used to conceal such a discrepancy are as massive as the brutality of such practices.

In this case, too, the answer given by Eurocentric critical theory is a weak one. Though it denounces the discrepancy between principles and practices, it tends to subscribe uncritically to the idea that the principles of human rights, democracy, development, humanitarian intervention, and so on do not lose credibility despite their increasingly more systematic and glaring violation in practice, both by state and nonstate actors alike. Eurocentric critical thinking continues to visit with curiosity the fairs of the human rights industry, which feature ever-more new products (the Global Compact, the Millennium Goals, the War on Poverty, the War on Terror, and so forth), even though on its way there it must travel through an increasingly ungraspable graveyard of betrayed promises.

*A third strong question* emerges out of the rising presence of spirituality and religion in political struggles and the ways in which they confront the Western critical tradition. Is the process of secularization, considered to be one of the most distinctive achievements of Western modernity, irreversible? What, if any, might be the contribution of religion to social emancipation? Again, the Eurocentric critical tradition answers on the basis of Enlightenment premises and the conventional human rights they give rise to. Thus understood, human rights take secularization for granted, including the secular nature of their own foundation. Religion belongs to the private sphere, the sphere of voluntary commitments; therefore, from a human rights perspective, its relevance is that of a human right among others: the right to religious freedom.<sup>6</sup> This is a weak answer because it assumes as a given precisely what is being questioned, that is, the idea that freedom of religion is only possible in a world free of religion. What, then, if that is not the case?

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6. For an extensive analysis, see Santos (2009).

*The fourth strong question* asks, Is the conception of nature as separate from society, so entrenched in Western thinking, tenable in the long run? It is becoming widely accepted that one of the novelties of the new millennium is that it will see capitalism reach its ultimate, ecological limits, that the insatiable exploitation of nature must have an end, lest human life on the planet become unsustainable. This is perhaps the strong question that raises the most perplexity, since all Western thinking, whether critical or not, is grounded on the Cartesian idea that nature is a *res extensa* and, as such, an unlimited resource unconditionally available to human beings.

The answer that Western thought gives to this question is weak because it only recognizes the problems that can be discussed within the Cartesian epistemological and ontological model. Evidence of this is found in the ideas of sustainable, integral, or human development, as well as in the environmental policies derived therefrom. No matter how many qualifiers are added to the concept of development, development keeps intact the idea of infinite growth and the unstoppable development of productive forces. Actually, global capitalism has never been so avid for natural resources as today, to the extent that it is legitimate to speak of a new extractivist imperialism. Land, water, and minerals have never been so coveted, and the struggle for them has never had such disastrous social and environmental consequences.

Thus, the Cartesian paradigm does not at all address the fundamental problem underlying this strong question. Moreover, and most importantly, it fails to understand the strength and logic of the social movements that for the past few decades have been organizing their struggles on the basis of a non-Eurocentric conception of the relation between nature and society, according to which nature appears as mother earth, a living organism to which we belong and that is entitled to its own rights. From a Cartesian point of view, the fact that the Ecuadorian constitution includes a whole section devoted to the rights of nature is juridically and ontologically absurd, a true *aberratio entis* (more on this below).

*The fifth strong question* may be formulated like this: Is there any room for utopia in our world? After the historical failure of so many attempts to build noncapitalist societies, and with such tragic consequences, is there really an alternative to capitalism? For how long will we continue to “solve” the problems caused by capitalism with more capitalism? Why is the economy of reciprocity and cooperation not a credible alternative to the economy of greed and competition? The perplexity caused by these questions is grounded on an even stronger question: Is it not below human dignity—if not even below human intelligence—to accept that there is no alternative to a world in which the five hundred richest individuals take in as much income as the poorest forty countries, meaning 416 million people? Is it not below Mexican human dignity that the wealth of a single Mexican citizen, Carlos Slim, constitutes 4 to 6 percent of the country’s GDP and equals the combined wealth of several million Mexicans?

The concept of an alternative society and the struggle for it were the backbones of both critical theory and left politics throughout the twentieth century. The historical strength of Marxism has resided in its unique capacity to articulate the idea of an alternative future with an oppositional way of living in the present. But in recent decades, much of critical thinking and left politics, particularly in the global North, seems to have lost the capacity to formulate the idea of a credible postcapitalist future (see section below). The problem is that without a conception of an alternative society, the current state of affairs, however violent and morally repugnant, will not generate any impulse for strong or radical opposition and rebellion. This fact has certainly not escaped the political Right, which has grounded its exercise of power since the 1980s not in political consensus (based on preferences among alternatives) but rather in political resignation (based on the absence of alternatives).

### **The End of Capitalism without End**

The second difficulty haunting the Western political imagination is a specification of the fifth strong question mentioned in the preceding section. It may be formulated in the following way: it is as difficult to imagine the end of capitalism as it is difficult to imagine that capitalism has no end. If it is true that the fall of the Berlin Wall had a devastating effect on the idea of postcapitalist futures, it is no less true that it is hard to believe that capitalism may escape the fatality of all historical phenomena, that is, the fatality of having a beginning and an end. Hence, the double difficulty. This difficulty has split Eurocentric critical thinking, both in the global North and in the global South, into two strands that have been sustaining two different political options for the Left.

The first strand gets blocked by the first difficulty (imagining the end of capitalism). As a consequence, it has stopped worrying about the end of capitalism, focusing its creativity, rather, on developing a *modus vivendi* with capitalism capable of minimizing the social costs of capitalist accumulation and its grounding principles of possessive individualism, competition, and the infinite expansion of exchange values. Social democracy, Keynesianism, the welfare state, and the developmentalist state of the 1960s in what was then called the Third World are the main political forms of such a *modus vivendi*. The bankruptcy of this strand is today dramatically evident in the financial and economic crises of Europe and the United States. It has found a second life in the Latin American subcontinent, particularly in Brazil, first under President Lula da Silva and now under President Dilma Rousseff. It points to a new kind of strong state involvement in economic development, based on public/private partnerships, and wealth redistribution, based not on universal rights, as in the case of European social democracy, but rather on significant, means-tested money transfers targeted to vulnerable social groups. It leads to a new state form, the neodevelopmentalist

state. This state form combines a mitigated economic nationalism—based on a strong economic public sector and an active economic diplomacy on behalf of Brazilian multinational corporations—with either passive compliance or active complicity with the institutions of global capitalism. Contrary to its European precedent, this model does not aim at confronting the fault line between rich and poor and indeed may deepen it. It believes in neoliberal economic growth as much as it disbelieves in trickle-down economics.

The other, minority strand of the Eurocentric critical tradition does not allow itself to be blocked by the first difficulty. On the contrary, it is strongly convinced that capitalism will end one day and better sooner than later. But it experiences very intensely the second difficulty (imagining how the end of capitalism will come about and what will follow it). The Latin American subcontinent offers the most vivid political manifestations of this difficulty. It is experienced in two very contrasting ways. On the one hand, it consists of imagining postcapitalist alternatives after the collapse of “real socialism” (the debate over the “socialism of the twenty-first century”);<sup>7</sup> on the other, it consists of imagining postcapitalist alternatives by reinventing precapitalist alternatives prior to the conquest and colonialism.

Imagining postcapitalism after capitalism haunts the Eurocentric Left in its multiple forms, as illustrated in the last ten years by the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Imagining postcapitalism before capitalism haunts the indigenous movements throughout Latin America. The debates and political struggles over the plurinational state, the *sumak kawsay*, the *sumak qamaña*, and the rights of nature in Ecuador and Bolivia are telling examples.<sup>8</sup> Attempts at combining the two imaginations are visible in such hybrid conceptions as the “socialism of *sumak kawsay*” in Ecuador or “communitarian socialism” in Bolivia. They seem to be failing because imaginings of postcapitalism on the basis of the current capitalist state of affairs (privileged by the governments) and postcapitalism on the basis of real or invented precapitalist ways of life (privileged by the indigenous movements) are reciprocally unintelligible without an effort at intercultural translation, which so far has not been attempted (more on this below). However, common to both is the idea that capitalism and colonialism belong together as forms of domination.

The two responses to the difficulties facing emancipatory political imagination, as exemplified by the case of Brazil, on one side, and the cases of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, on the other, while quite distinct, share the fact that they came about through political processes based on very strong popular mobilizations. By dramatically raising the expectations of the popular classes, they make

7. On the topic of socialism of the twenty-first century, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Socialism, 21st Century,” CES, [www.ces.uc.pt/opinioao/bss/182en.php](http://www.ces.uc.pt/opinioao/bss/182en.php).

8. This topic will be developed in *Epistemologies of the South: Reinventing Social Emancipation* (forthcoming).

new demands on the democratic mandate that, if not met, may lead to intense social frustration and possibly to violent repression. The two responses take advantage of a certain leeway that global capitalism has created (mainly through the rise of the exchange value of commodities, land, and minerals typical of extractivist imperialism) without challenging it in any significant way, even when the official rhetoric is anticapitalist and anti-imperialist, as in the cases of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In different ways, they reflect the current limits of counterhegemonic globalization as illustrated by the process of the World Social Forum (WSF) during the past decade.

### The End of Colonialism without End

The third difficulty confronting Eurocentric emancipatory political imagination has to do with colonialism. It can be formulated in this way: it is as difficult to imagine the end of colonialism as it is to imagine that colonialism has no end. Post-colonial or decolonial studies and struggles in the past three decades have shown how entrenched colonialism is in both private and public life, even many decades after the end of historical colonialism. On the other hand, as in the case of the end of capitalism without end, it is hard to believe that colonialism will escape the fate of other social phenomena and have no end. In this case as well, Eurocentric emancipatory imagination and politics have been split into two main responses. A first strand is blocked by the first difficulty; incapable of imagining the end of colonialism, it denies the existence of colonialism itself. According to this strand, the political independence of the colonies meant the end of colonialism; since then, anticapitalism has been the only legitimate political objective of emancipatory politics. This line of Eurocentric critical thinking focuses on class struggle and hence does not acknowledge the validity of ethno-cultural-racial struggles. On the contrary, it valorizes hybridity (*mestizaje*)—which, for instance, it identifies as a key feature of Iberian colonialism—as extra proof that colonialism has been overcome. Accordingly, the idea of racial democracy,<sup>9</sup> rather than being defended as a legitimate aspiration, is celebrated as being already fully accomplished.

On the other hand, a second strand of the critical tradition reads the historical processes leading to independence as showing that internal colonialism has continued to exist after independence until today. It is very difficult to imagine an alternative to colonialism because internal colonialism is not only, or mainly, a state policy; it is rather a very wide social grammar that permeates social relations, public and private spaces, culture, mentalities, and subjectivities. In sum, it is a way of life, a form of unequal conviviality that is often shared by both those who benefit from it and those who suffer its consequences. According to this

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9. In Brazil's case, racial democracy was first systematized by the anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (1946).



strand of the critical tradition, the anticapitalist struggle must be fought side by side with the anticolonial struggle. Class domination and ethno-cultural-racial domination feed on each other, which means that the struggle for equality cannot be separated from the struggle for the recognition of difference. According to this strand, the postcolonial challenge has been inscribed in all the regions of the world that were once subjected to European colonialism, and the inscription has lasted from the conquest, invasion, or occupation into our time. It has been formulated most eloquently by Frantz Fanon (1967a) and before him by José Mariátegui, when, while referring to Peruvian society (though his statement is applicable to other Latin American societies as well), he mentioned the original sin inscribed in it by the conquest: “the sin of emerging and becoming without the Indian and against the Indian” (1974a [1925]: 208).

In a paradoxical way, the militant postcolonial, decolonizing struggles and movements of the last thirty years, which have been so influential in discrediting the first strand, have also contributed to discrediting the second strand due to their inability (glaring in the case of indigenous and Afro-descendent movements) to articulate ethno-cultural struggles with class-based struggles and thus to build broader political alliances that might prevent their social and political isolation.

These difficulties confronting the progressive political imagination are reflected in four other difficulties that have an even more direct impact upon the theories that have been developed to account for emancipatory social transformation. In short, they can be designated thus: urgency versus civilizational change; the very old and the very new; the loss of critical nouns; and the ghostly relation between theory and practice.

### **The Paradox of Urgency and Civilizational Change**

We live in a time torn apart by two extreme and contradictory temporalities disputing the time frame of collective action. On the one hand, there is a sense of urgency. A long series of phenomena seems to demand that absolute priority be given to immediate or short-term action because the long term may not even exist if the trends expressed in those phenomena are allowed to evolve without control. Here are some of the phenomena that come to mind: global warming and the imminent ecological catastrophe; the destructive impact of unregulated financial capital upon the lives and expectations of people; the vanishing sustainability of the livelihoods of vast populations (as in the case of water, for example); the uncontrolled drive for eternal war and the violence and unjust destruction of human life it causes; the increasing scale of the depletion of natural resources; and, finally, the exponential growth of social inequality that gives rise to new forms of social fascism, that is, social regimes regulated only by extreme power differences or status hierarchies of a new kind, the seemingly neofeudal hierarchies. To be sure, the specific phenomena and the mixes among them that



create the pressure of urgency vary in the global North and the global South, but most of them seem to be present everywhere, albeit in different forms and with different intensities.

On the other hand, there is a sense that our time calls for deep and long-term civilizational changes. The phenomena mentioned above are symptoms of deep-seated structures and agencies, which cannot be confronted by short-run interventionism insofar as the latter is as much a part of the civilizational paradigm as the state of affairs it fights. The twentieth century proved with immense cruelty that to take power is not enough and that, rather than taking power, it is necessary to transform power.<sup>10</sup> This double and paradoxical uncertainty poses new epistemological, theoretical, and political challenges. It invites open-ended formulations of an alternative society whose strength relies more on the intensity with which it rejects the current state of affairs than on the precision of alternatives advanced. Such open-ended formulations consist of affirming the possibility of a better future and another possible world without knowing for sure if the latter is possible and what it will be like. It is therefore a very different utopia from the modern utopias that are at the foundation of the Eurocentric critical tradition.

The coexistence of these polar temporalities is producing great turbulence in old distinctions and cleavages that were at the core of Eurocentric critical theory and politics, such as those between tactics and strategy, the short term and the long term, and reform and revolution. While the sense of urgency calls for tactics and reform in the short term, the sense of civilizational paradigmatic change calls for long-term strategy and revolution. But the fact that both senses coexist and are pressing disfigures the terms of the distinctions and cleavages and makes them more or less meaningless and irrelevant. At best, they become loose signifiers prone to contradictory appropriations. There are reformist processes that seem revolutionary (Hugo Chávez in Venezuela) and revolutionary processes that seem reformist (Neozapatismo in Mexico) and reformist processes whose reformism is highly questionable (Brazil, India, and South Africa, for instance).

The fall of the Berlin Wall, while dealing a mortal blow to the idea of revolution, struck a silenced but no less deadly blow to the idea of reform. Since then we live in a time that turns reformism into counterreformism with an astonishing lack of democratic accountability and with a no less astonishing passivity on the part of citizens. It is a time that is either too late to be postrevolutionary or too premature to be prerevolutionary. As a result, political polarizations become relatively unregulated and exhibit meanings that have very little to do with the names attached to them. Under these circumstances, theoretical reconstruction in the Eurocentric tradition and style becomes difficult, messy, and unconvincing; moreover, no one seems to be very much concerned about it.

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10. The idea of refusing to take power was popularized on the basis of a wrong interpretation of the ideas of Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Neozapatistas. See Holloway (2002). More on this below.

In my view, the World Social Forum has shown the bankruptcy of this theoretical tradition and style by responding pragmatically to these unresolved tensions between contradictory temporalities and theoretical claims. With all its limitations, which became more evident as the decade progressed (Santos 2006b, 2008), the WSF fostered the expression of campaigns, coalitions of discourses, and practices focused either on immediate action or, to the contrary, on long-term transformation. Calls for immediate debt cancellation got articulated with long-lasting campaigns of popular education concerning HIV/AIDS; denunciations of the criminalization of social protest by indigenous peoples before the courts went hand in hand with the struggle for the recognition of the cultural identity and ancestral territories of the same peoples; the struggle for immediate access to sufficient potable water by the people of Soweto (South Africa) in the wake of the privatization of water supplies became part and parcel of a long-term strategy to guarantee sustainable access to water throughout the African continent, as illustrated in the Constitution of the Africa Water Network<sup>11</sup> in Nairobi during the WSF-2007.

These different time frames of struggle came to coexist peacefully in the WSF for three main reasons. First, they translated themselves into struggles that shared the same mix of institutional and postinstitutional/direct collective action. This was a significant departure from the Eurocentric leftist theorizing that dominated throughout the twentieth century. For the latter, the struggle for short-range objectives was always framed as legal gradualism, as nonradical, institutional activism. Second, mutual knowledge of such diverse temporalities among movements and organizations led to the idea that the differences among them were much wider in theory than in practice. A radical call for immediate action could be the best way of giving credibility to the need for a civilizational change, if for no other reason than because of the unsurpassable obstacles it would be bound to run up against. The WSF also drew attention to untheorized possibilities such as those brought about by some major movements that combined in their overall activism both immediate-time and civilizational-time frameworks. This was (and is) the case with the MST (movement of landless rural workers in Brazil), which combined illegal land occupations to feed hungry peasants with massive actions of popular political education aimed at a much broader transformation of the Brazilian state and society.<sup>12</sup> It is also the case with indigenous movements in Latin America and India, which are calling for the validity of non-Eurocentric cosmovisions and conceptions of the state while also fighting to stop the megaprojects that are already under way and that have ruined their livelihoods.

The final reason for the pragmatic coexistence of contradictory temporalities was that the WSF did not set priorities between them; it simply opened a space

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11. Available online at the Transnational Institute website ([www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org)).

12. See also Santos and Carlet (2010).

for discussion and coalition building among the movements and organizations, the outcomes of which could be most diverse. An overriding sense of a common purpose, however vaguely defined, to build another possible world tended to deemphasize theoretical polarizations among the movements and invite the latter to concentrate on building more intense coalitions wherever and whenever the affinities were more inviting. Selectivity in coalition building became a way of avoiding unnecessary polarization.

### Very Old or Very New? The Example of the Yasuní Project

The second difficulty confronting Eurocentric critical theory has also to do with conflicting temporalities, this time not short term versus long term but rather the nature of the temporal trajectory of the political innovation emerging in the present: innovation as the very new or as the reinvention of the very old. In order to illustrate this difficulty in valorizing adequately new/old fields of alternatives (up until now “wasted” or ignored by the Western critical tradition), I will refer briefly to one of the transformations that has recently been proposed in Latin America: the Yasuní ITT project in Ecuador, a highly disputed project. The Yasuní ITT project, presented for the first time in 2007 by the then minister of energy and mines, Alberto Acosta,<sup>13</sup> is an alternative to the developmentalist-extractivist capitalist model of development that is today prevalent in Latin America and Africa and, actually, in most of the global South. It calls for an international coresponsibility of a new type, a new relation among more- and less-developed countries, and it aims at a new, postoil model of development. Ecuador is a poor country in spite of—or because of—its being rich in oil. Its economy depends heavily on oil exports: oil income constitutes 22 percent of the GNP and 63 percent of exports. The human and environmental destruction in Amazonia caused by this economic model is truly impressive. As a direct consequence of oil exploitation by Texaco and later Chevron, between 1960 and 1990 two entire Amazonian peoples disappeared: the Tetetes and the Sansahauris.

The Ecuadorian initiative tries to break loose from this past and proposes the following: The Ecuadorian state vouches to leave unexploited in the subsoil oil reserves estimated at 850 million barrels in three blocs of the National Amazonian Park of Yasuní, one of the richest biodiversity regions of the planet, on the condition that the more developed countries reimburse Ecuador by half the income Ecuador would surrender as a consequence of this decision. According to government estimates, the exploitation would generate, in the course of thirteen years, an income of €4 billion to €5 billion, while emitting 410 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. This could be avoided if Ecuador were to be compensated with

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13. Acosta later became the president of the Constitutional Assembly that promulgated the Constitution of 2008.

€2 billion. This money would go to environmentally correct investments such as renewable energies, reforestation, and so on; the money would be received as warrantee certificates, or credits that the “donor” countries would retrieve, with interest, should Ecuador decide to engage in oil exploitation.

Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, this proposal does not aim to create a carbon market; rather, it aims to prevent carbon emissions. It does not limit itself to appealing to the diversification of energy sources; it suggests the need to reduce energy demands. It combines Western-centric environmental concerns with indigenous conceptions of the Pachamama (mother earth). It vindicates the right of nature to be protected as a living entity whenever the stability and regeneration of its vital cycles are threatened. It proclaims the idea of *sumak kawsay*, good living, as an alternative to the Western conceptions of development, all of them considered unsustainable because they rely on infinite growth. It must be assessed as an indigenous contribution to the entire world. It has actually earned more and more followers among citizens and movements as it has become clearer and clearer that environmental degradation and the unfair pillaging of irreplaceable natural resources are leading to the collective suicide of humankind.

The internal political turmoil provoked by this proposal is a clear sign of the magnitude of what it entails.<sup>14</sup> At stake is the first great, concrete break with the developmentalist-extractivist economic model. The possibility of its becoming a precedent for other, similar initiatives in other countries is very threatening to global capitalism, particularly to the powerful oil interests. On the other hand, the proposal demands an equally new pattern of international cooperation, a cooperation sustainable over the course of many years and capable of addressing two equally legitimate interests: Ecuador’s interest in preserving its national sovereignty, given the risks it incurs in internationalizing its development plans, and the interests of the international taxpayers, concerned that their contributions not be used for ends not previously agreed upon. This will be a very different type of cooperation from the one that has prevailed in center-periphery relations in the modern world-system, dominated by imperialism, double standards, structural adjustments, unequal exchange, forced alignment, and so on.

This proposal raises several theoretical and political challenges. The first probably is how to deal with the temporal identity of this initiative. Is it new because it aims at a postcapitalist future and constitutes an unprecedented novelty

14. In August 2010, with the purpose of going ahead with the project, Ecuador signed an agreement with the United Nations Development Project that will be administrated by the Multi-Donor Trust Fund. Until now it has received contributions from Chile, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and France. Germany failed to assume its contribution and is still debating about whether to participate. As expected, the most polluting countries of the world are absent from this initiative. Under these circumstances, the government of Ecuador faces a dilemma: keep waiting for the support of the international community or, if that fails (and it seems the needed percentage will not be reached), explore the oil in ITT. However, many social sectors in the country demand a coherent position with regard to the rights of nature and call for the interdiction of ITT oil exploration or even a general extractive ban.

within the logic of modern development, or rather, is it new because it calls for an unprecedented return to or reinvention of an ancient precapitalist past grounded on indigenous, non-Western conceptions of nature? In the first case, the novelty approaches a utopia; in the second case, it approaches an anachronism. In the following I present some of the analytical dilemmas.

It is not easy to analyze new or innovative social, political, and cultural processes. There is the real risk of submitting them to old conceptual and analytical frameworks that are incapable of capturing their novelty and are therefore prone to devalue, ignore, or demonize them. This difficulty carries a dilemma not immediately obvious: it is only possible to create new analytical and conceptual frameworks on the basis of the processes that generate the very need to create them. How is this need to be identified? How is it to be felt? This need is metatheoretical and meta-analytical; that is to say, it implies the political choice to consider such processes as new rather than as extensions of old processes. How to theorize this choice if exactly the same processes, save the rare case of total structural ruptures, may call for either political option for equally credible reasons? Behind the choice there is a wager, an act of will and imagination, rather than an act of speculative reason.<sup>15</sup> Choosing novelty implies willing novelty. Grounding this will is a sense of uneasiness and nonconformism vis-à-vis our present based on the conviction that we deserve better. Of course, for the wager to be credible, it is necessary to invoke reasonable arguments. But such arguments are made against a background of uncertainty and ignorance, the very ingredients of the wager. The matter becomes even more complex once the novelty aims at the future by pointing to the past, even to an ancient past. For a mode of thinking molded by the modern conception of linear time, this is absurd: whatever aims at going back to the past is old, not new. To be minimally consistent, it must involve an invention of the past, in which case the why and how of the invention become the issue. That brings us back to the question of novelty.

The difficulty may perhaps be even greater: a successful wager on novelty does not imply the sustainability of successful novelty. In other words, an unequivocally new or novel process may fail precisely on account of its being new. The new has to confront not only the old theories and concepts but also the social and political forces that mobilize themselves with particular efficacy when faced with something new. The ultimate meaning of conservatism resides in its resistance to the new, which, at its best, is conceived of as a threat to what can be reached by means of the old. This conservatism can emerge from the right as well as from the left. Here again the possible dual nature of novelty returns. Conservatism will confront it in two contrasting ways, either because the new has no precedent in the past or because the new resorts to a past too ancient to belong to the conservative conception of the past. In the particular case of Latin America, to claim a precolonial past is a revolutionary proposition for conservatives since they are

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15. On the wager, see Chapter 3.

the children of the colonizers. For the same reason, for Eurocentric progressives, to claim a precolonial past is an embarrassment at best and an exposure of false consciousness at worst.

There is yet another difficulty. The new or novel can only be analyzed on its own terms as it is occurring. Once the occurrence is over—the moment and the nature of closure are usually highly disputable—it is no longer new. The old takes hold. To resist against closure, the wager on the new has to be followed by the wager on nonclosure, on the Not Yet. The second wager requires that the analysis always be as open and incomplete as what is being analyzed. It goes along with the ongoing processes in analytical real time, so to speak. What is being analyzed today may no longer exist tomorrow. Even the political meaning of the analysis may change rapidly, as rapidly as different political forces destroy, co-opt, or subvert the agendas of their adversaries. Any theoretical-analytical construction thus necessarily has a programmatic dimension. Such a dimension is nevertheless not to be conceived of as the vanguard of an ongoing social and political process always on the verge of being betrayed by a mediocre reality. On the contrary, it is rather a rearguard construction that examines how the most exhilarating social and political processes accumulate forgotten themes, lost alliances, unacknowledged mistakes, unfulfilled promises, and disguised betrayals.

### The Loss of Critical Nouns

The third difficulty in generating powerful and convincing critical-theoretical work in the Eurocentric political imagination is what I call the *loss of critical nouns*. There was a time when Eurocentric critical theory “owned” a vast set of nouns that marked its difference from conventional or bourgeois theories. These nouns included socialism, communism, revolution, class struggle, dependency, alienation, fetishism of commodities, and so on. In the past thirty years the Eurocentric critical tradition seems to have lost “its” nouns and now distinguishes itself from conventional or bourgeois theories by the adjectives it uses to subvert the meaning of the proper nouns it borrows from such theories. Thus, for instance, if conventional theory speaks of development, critical theory refers to alternative, integral, inclusionary, democratic, or sustainable development; if conventional theory speaks of democracy, critical theory proposes radical, participatory, or deliberative democracy. The same happens with cosmopolitanism, which ends up being called subaltern, oppositional, insurgent, or rooted cosmopolitanism; human rights turns into radical, collective, or intercultural human rights.

These changes must be carefully analyzed. Hegemonic concepts (nouns) are not, at the pragmatic level, an inalienable property of conventional or bourgeois thinking. As I have suggested elsewhere (Santos 2002b) and will elaborate upon in a later chapter, one of the distinctive features of current grassroots collective action in different parts of the world is precisely the capacity shown by social

movements to use hegemonic tools or concepts, such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, in counterhegemonic ways and for counterhegemonic purposes. Adjectives may subvert the meaning of nouns. As Voltaire said, "Adjectives are the enemies of nouns." On the other hand, we must bear in mind that nouns establish the intellectual and political horizon of that which is sayable, credible, legitimate, or realistic and, by implication, of that which is unsayable, incredible, illegitimate, or unrealistic. In other words, by taking refuge in adjectives, critical theory believes in the creative use of what I would call *conceptual franchising*, while at the same time accepting the need to frame its debates and proposals within a horizon of possibilities that initially is not its own. Critical theory thus assumes a derivative character that allows it to engage in debate but does not allow it to discuss the terms of the debate, let alone why one might opt for one kind of debate and not for another. In fact, the efficacy of the counterhegemonic use of hegemonic concepts or tools depends on the consciousness of such limits.

As I will discuss in the next section, such limits are now becoming more highly visible as social struggles in different regions of the world are introducing new concepts that have no precedent in Eurocentric critical theory and, indeed, no adequate expression in any of the colonial languages in which critical theory has been formulated.

### The Ghostly Relation between Theory and Practice

The final difficulty confronting Eurocentric critical theory and political imagination consists in the huge discrepancy between what is stated or foreseen in theory, on the one hand, and the most innovative, transformative practices taking place in the world, on the other. For the past thirty years, the most advanced struggles have had as their protagonists social groups whose political existence Eurocentric critical theory (and the political Left it founded) has not acknowledged: women, indigenous peoples, peasants, Afro-descendants, *piqueteros*, the unemployed, gays and lesbians, the *indignados*, and the Occupy movement. These social groups organize themselves very often in ways totally different (social movements, grassroots communities, rallies, self-government initiatives, land and building occupations, popular economic organizations, petitions, popular assemblies, referenda, collective presences in public spaces, and so forth) from those privileged by Eurocentric critical theory (the workers' party and the union, institutional action, armed struggle, and the strike). Most of them dwell not in industrial urban centers but rather in remote sites, whether in the forests and river basins in India or up in the Andes and in the large plains of Amazonia.

This discrepancy between theory and practice had a moment of great visibility at the World Social Forum at the beginning of the first decade of the millennium. The WSF, whose first meeting took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, has shown that the gap between the practices and classical theories of the Left



is deeper than ever. The truth is that the WSF is not alone, as evidenced by the political experiences of the last decade in Latin America, the region where the WSF emerged. Consider the grassroots organizations developed by liberation theology, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas, and the transformative constitutionalism that began with the 1988 Constitution of Brazil and was followed by many other constitutions in the 1990s and 2000s; the collapse of the traditional oligarchic parties and the emergence of parties of a new type; the Argentinian *piqueteros* and the MST in Brazil; the indigenous movements of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and the Frente Amplio of Uruguay; the emergence of self-designated revolutionary processes out of liberal democratic elections; the successive victories of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the coexistence of popular power organizations with liberal democratic institutions; the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, and José Mujica in Uruguay; the struggle of the whole subcontinent against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (ALCA); and the alternative project of regional integration (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or ALBA). These are all political practices and initiatives that cannot but be recognized as progressive, although most of them do not really fit the major theoretical traditions of the Eurocentric Left and may even contradict them. As an international event and a meeting point for so many practices of resistance and alternative-society projects, the World Social Forum has added a new dimension to this mutual blindness—the blindness of practice vis-à-vis theory and of theory vis-à-vis practice—and has created the conditions for a broader and deeper reflection on this problem.

The blindness of theory renders practice invisible or undertheorized, whereas the blindness of practice renders theory irrelevant. The blindness of theory can be seen in how the parties of the conventional Left, together with the intellectuals at their service, have initially refused to pay attention to the WSF and minimized its significance, as well as in the often racist views of the Eurocentric Left with regard to the indigenous movement. The same blindness can equally be traced in the current evaluations of the movements of the *indignados*<sup>16</sup> throughout Europe

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16. Excerpt from the Real Democracy Now! manifesto: “We are ordinary people. We are like you: people, who get up every morning to study, work or find a job, people who have family and friends. People, who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us. Some of us consider ourselves progressive, others conservative. Some of us believe in socialism, others in laissez faire. Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, others are apolitical however all of us are concerned, troubled and angry about the political, economic, and social outlook in our society: politicians, businessmen, bankers, with a monopoly on power leaving us helpless, without a voice. Our powerless situation has become normal, a daily suffering, without hope. Yet if we join forces, we can change our communities, our society, our country, our world. It’s time. We must build a better world together and start here at home, we must protest, camp, demonstrate and occupy for the future, peacefully always.” Available at “Our Manifesto,” Real Democracy Now! [www.realdemocracynow.webeden.co.uk/#/our-manifesto/4551801662](http://www.realdemocracynow.webeden.co.uk/#/our-manifesto/4551801662).



or of the Occupy movement in North America, according to which the affective proximity cannot be theoretically expressed without grossly distorting what the *indignados* or Occupy do and think about what they are doing.

The blindness of practice, in turn, is clearly present in the scorn shown by the large majority of WSF activists, by the indigenous leaders, and most recently by the *indignados* for the rich theoretical tradition of the Eurocentric Left and their utter indifference to its self-proclaimed need for renewal. This mutual misencounter generates, on the practice side, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary spontaneity and innocuous, self-imposed restriction and, on the theory side, an equally extreme oscillation between the postfactum reconstructive zeal and arrogant indifference to what is not amenable to reconstruction.

In such conditions, the relation between theory and practice assumes strange characteristics. On the one hand, theory is no longer at the service of the future collective actions it potentially contains and rather serves to legitimate (or not) the current collective actions that have emerged despite it. Thus, vanguard thought stops being orientation and rather serves as either ratification of the successes obtained by default or confirmation of preannounced failures. On the other hand, practice justifies itself by resorting to a theoretical bricolage that responds to the needs of the moment, made up of heterogeneous concepts and languages that, from the point of view of theory, are no more than opportunistic rationalizations or rhetorical exercises. From the point of view of theory, theoretical bricolage never qualifies as theory. From the point of view of practice, a posteriori vanguard theorization is mere parasitism if not altogether a *contradictio in adjecto*. This ghostly relation between theory and practice yields three political facts, all of which were made evident by the WSF process decisive for our understanding of the situation of the Left today.

### *Who Is the Enemy?*

The first political fact is the discrepancy between short-term certainties and long-term uncertainties, which has never been so wide. To an unprecedented extent, for the last three decades neoliberal capitalism has been subjecting more and more social relations to the laws of the market. The exponential growth of social inequality, the brutal intensification of exploitation and exclusion in both peripheral and core countries, confers to the resistance struggles a strong sense of short-term urgency and allows for ample convergences regarding short-term goals (struggles against savage privatizations, social and economic injustice, bailouts of the banking system, unregulated financial markets, budget cuts in social policies, scandalous fiscal bonanzas for mining companies, the International Monetary Fund's one-size-fits-all recipes, landgrabbing, neoextractivism, and so forth). What remains unclear is if the struggles are aimed at confronting capitalism on behalf of socialism or some other postcapitalist future or, on the

contrary, against this type of capitalism (neoliberalism) on behalf of a type of capitalism with a more human face.

This lack of clarity is not a new problem, but it gains now a new intensity. The impetus of neoliberal capitalism is so overwhelming that what actually ends up conniving with it can credibly be seen as struggling against it. By the same token, the uncertainty regarding the long term now has a new dimension: whether there is indeed a long term at all. That is to say, the long term in itself has become so uncertain that conflicts about it cease to be important or mobilizing. As a consequence, the short term expands, and concrete political polarizations occur in the light of short-term certainties. Discrediting the long term favors tactics and prevents polarizations about the long term from interfering with short-term mobilization. The other side of the total opening to the long-term future is the latter's total irrelevance.

The increasing uncertainty and open-endedness of the long term in left politics are expressed in the transition from the certainty in Marx of the socialist future as the scientific result of the development of the productive forces, to the binary socialism or barbarism formulated by Rosa Luxemburg, to the idea that "another world is possible" that presides over the WSF. The long term has always been the strong horizon of critical theory and left politics. In the past, the greater the distance of that horizon from the realities of present-day capitalism, the more radical the political strategy, hence the cleavage between revolution and reform. Nowadays, this cleavage seems to suffer from an erosion that goes along with that of the long term. As I said above, the long term is still there, but it is no longer very consistent or pregnant with consequences.

### *How to Measure Success or Failure?*

The second consequence of the ghostly relationship between theory and practice is the impossibility of a consensual account regarding the performance of transformative politics. Again, this is not a new problem, but it is now more dilemmatic. For some, the crisis of the Left since the 1970s is manifested in a certain retrogression of the class struggle and in its partial replacement by the so-called identity and cultural turns and the struggles they privilege. The WSF has been both a symptom and a confirmation of this transformation. For others, this was a period teeming with innovation and creativity, in which the Left renovated itself through new struggles, new forms of collective action, and new political goals. According to the latter position, there was certainly a retrogression, but it concerned rather the classical forms of political organization and action; also, thanks to this retrogression new forms of political organization and action emerged. For those who sustain the idea of the general retrogression, the balance is negative, and the supposed novelties result in a dangerous and surrendering deviation from primary objectives (class struggle in the domain of production) to secondary objectives (identity, culture, or, in a word, objectives in the domain of

social reproduction). According to this view, this was no more than a yielding to the enemy, no matter how radical the discourses of rupture. On the contrary, for those who defend the idea of innovation and creativity, the balance is positive, because the blocking dogmatisms have been shattered, the forms of collective action and the social bases supporting them have been enlarged, and, above all, the struggles, by their forms and range, have managed to reveal new vulnerabilities in the enemy. Among the protagonists of the struggles in the last decade, the latter position prevails, even though the former, arguing the idea of the general retrogression, is quite visible in the participation of some organizations (mainly trade unions) in the WSF or in the *indignados* mobilizations.

In the assessment of the last thirty years, resorting to the fallacy of hypothetical pasts is very common, be it to show that if the bet on the class struggle had prevailed, the results would have been better or, on the contrary, that without the new struggles the results would have been much worse.

### *Inconsequent Extremisms?*

The third consequence deriving from the ghostly relationship between theory and practice is theoretical extremism of a new kind, relatively uncoupled from the long-term horizon debate mentioned above. It concerns polarizations that are simultaneously much larger and much more inconsequential than the ones that characterized the debates until the 1970s. The uncertainty and open-endedness of the long term, while preventing polarizations-with-consequences, invite extreme polarizations-without-consequences. Compared with these more recent positions, the extreme positions of the past seem less distant among themselves. And yet choosing between them yielded at the time far more concrete consequences in the life of the organizations, militants, and societies than what happens today. The current polarizations, on the contrary, are not directly linked to concrete political organizations; nor do they carry significant consequences. The main dimensions of present-day theoretical extremism are three.

*As regards the subjects of social transformation*, the polarization is between those for whom the struggles for social emancipation are to be fought by a well-defined historical subject, the working class and its allies, on the one hand, and those for whom such struggles are open to a plurality of ill-defined collective subjects, be they all the oppressed, “common people therefore rebels” (Subcomandante Marcos), the movement of movements (WSF), or the *multitude* (Toni Negri and Michael Hardt). This is a huge difference compared to that of the past. Until the 1970s, the polar positions focused “only” on the delimitation of the working class (the industrial vanguard versus retrograde sectors), on the identification of allies, be they the peasants or the petty bourgeoisie, on the move from “class in itself” to “class for itself,” and so on and so forth. But the options they led to had a decisive (sometimes fatal) impact on the lives of the militants. To stick to the example given above of José Mariátegui, suffice it to remember the threats he

received from the Comintern<sup>17</sup> on account of his “romantic deviance” in favor of the indigenous peoples.<sup>18</sup> His premature death saved him from such threats.

*Concerning the goals of the social struggle*, the polarization is between the seizure of power and the total rejection of the concept of power, that is to say, between the statism that has prevailed on the Left, in one way or another, and the most radical antistatism, as in John Holloway’s (2002) problematic interpretation of the Zapatista movement, namely, that it is possible to change the world without seizing power. Until the 1970s, the polarization occurred around the means of seizing power (armed struggle or direct action versus institutional struggle) and the nature and goals of the exercise of power once seized (popular democracy/dictatorship of the proletariat versus participatory/representative democracy).

*Concerning organization*, the polarization is between those for whom some kind of centralized organizations, such as parties and trade unions, are necessary to carry out successful struggles and those who reject any kind of centralism or even any kind of organization beyond that which emerges spontaneously in the course of the collective action, by the initiative of the actors themselves as a whole. Until the 1970s, the distance among polar positions was much narrower, but the option for one or the other carried concrete and often tragic consequences. The polarization occurred between communist and socialist parties, between one single party and a multiparty system; it addressed the relation between party and the masses or the forms of organization of the workers’ party (democratic centralism versus decentralization and internal pluralism).

We are facing, therefore, polarizations of a different kind, between new and more demarcated positions. This does not mean that the previous ones have disappeared; they have just lost their exclusivity and centrality. The new polarizations do have consequences for political action; yet these are certainly more diffuse than those of previous polarizations. The reason is twofold. On the one hand, the aforementioned ghostly relationship between theory and practice contributes to rendering political activism relatively immune to theoretical polarizations or encourages it to use them selectively and instrumentally. On the other, actors in extreme positions do not dispute the same social bases and do not militate in

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17. Abbreviation for the Communist International, also known as the Third International. The International intended to fight “by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State.”

18. Victorio Codovilla, the leader of the Comintern’s South American Secretariat, instructed Mariátegui to prepare a document for a 1929 Latin American Communist Conference analyzing the possibility of forming an Indian republic in South America. This republic was to be modeled on similar Comintern proposals to construct black republics in the southern United States and South Africa. Mariátegui rejected this proposal, asserting that existing nation-state formation was too advanced in the South American Andes to build a separate Indian republic. From Mariátegui’s point of view, it would be better for the subaltern Indians to fight for equality within existing state structures instead of further marginalizing themselves from the benefits of modernity in an autonomous state (Becker 2006). See also Löwy (2005b).

the same organizations or even in the same nonorganizations. The contours of political options, therefore, look rather like the parallel lives of the Left.

To a great extent, such disjunctions are due to the fact that transformative political mobilizations in our time are not confined to the cultural universe of the Eurocentric Left as we have known it. On the contrary, they go far beyond it. They belong to very distinct cultural, symbolic, and linguistic universes, and the disjunctions they give rise to will not be mutually intelligible without intercultural translation.<sup>19</sup>

In my view, herein lies the most important factor behind the ghostly relationship between theory and practice. While Eurocentric critical theory and left politics were historically developed in the global North, indeed in only five or six countries of the global North (Germany, England, France, Russia, Italy, and, to a smaller extent, the United States), the most innovative and effective transformative left practices of recent decades, as I mentioned above, have been occurring in the global South. The Western critical tradition developed in light of the perceived needs and aspirations of European oppressed classes, not in light of those of the oppressed classes of the world at large. Both from a cultural and a political economy point of view, the “European universalism” that this tradition embodied and that the Frankfurt School celebrated was indeed a particular reading of a particular reality that, for instance, did not include colonialism as a system of oppression, even though the majority of the world population was subjected to it.<sup>20</sup>

Today, a wide variety of transformative progressive practices occur in the former colonial world outside Europe or North America, in unfamiliar places, carried out by strange people who often speak very strange noncolonial languages (Aymara,<sup>21</sup> Quechua,<sup>22</sup> Guaraní,<sup>23</sup> Hindi,<sup>24</sup> Urdu,<sup>25</sup> IsiZulu,<sup>26</sup> Kikongo,<sup>27</sup> or Kiswahili<sup>28</sup>) or less hegemonic colonial languages such as Spanish and Portuguese, and their cultural and political references are non-Western. Moreover, when we translate their discourses into a colonial language, there is often no trace of the familiar

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19. On intercultural translation, see Chapter 8.

20. To be sure, the anticolonial struggles and the movement of the nonaligned countries, founded in Bandung in 1955, also contributed important new concepts and ideas to the hegemonic northern, left script.

21. Aymara is an Aymaran language with about 2.2 million speakers in Bolivia, Peru (where it is an official language), Chile, and Argentina.

22. Quechua is an indigenous language of the Andean region, spoken today by approximately 13 million people in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, northern Chile, Argentina, and southern Colombia. It was the official language of Tawantinsuyu, the Inca Empire.

23. Guaraní is a Tupí-Guaraní language spoken by about 4.6 million people in Paraguay, where it is one of the official languages. There are also small communities of Guaraní speakers in Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina.

24. More than 180 million people in India regard Hindi as their mother tongue. Another 300 million use it as a second language. Outside India, Hindi speakers number 100,000 in the United States; 685,170 in Mauritius; 890,292 in South Africa; 232,760 in Yemen; 147,000 in Uganda; 5,000 in Singapore; 8 million in Nepal; 20,000 in New Zealand; and 30,000 in Germany.

concepts with which Western left politics were historically built, such as revolution, socialism, the working class, capital, democracy, and human rights. Instead, we encounter concepts such as land, water, territory, self-determination, dignity, respect, good living, and mother earth.

It is therefore not surprising that Eurocentric critical theory and left politics do not recognize or understand the counterhegemonic grammars and practices emerging in the global South. Indeed, the Eurocentric tradition becomes provincialized by the emergence of critical understandings and transformative practices in the world that do not fit their frameworks. Moreover, such movements in the global South often refuse to refer their experiences to what they see as the unproductive Northern binary of left or right. If a distance vis-à-vis Eurocentric critical theory is not successfully maintained, one runs the risk of not adequately identifying or valorizing the political novelties occurring worldwide and their eventual contribution to emancipatory politics at large.

### *Theorizing after the WSF*

The WSF originated in the global South based on cultural and political premises that defied all the hegemonic traditions of the Eurocentric Left. Its novelty, which was strengthened as the WSF moved from Porto Alegre to Mumbai and later to Nairobi and more recently to Dakar, lay in inviting these left traditions to be present but not as the sole legitimate traditions. They were invited along with many other traditions of critical knowledge, transformative practices, and conceptions of a better society. Movements and organizations could interact over the course of several days and plan for collaborative actions even though they came from disparate critical traditions and were united only by a very broadly defined purpose to fight against neoliberal globalization and for “another possible world.” This had a profound impact on the relationship between theory and practice.

The experience of the WSF, no matter how it evolves in the future (if the current version of the WSF has a future at all), has made an important contribution to unraveling the ghostly relationship between theory and practice. It has made

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25. Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language with about 104 million speakers, including those who speak it as a second language. It is the national language of Pakistan.

26. One of the official languages of South Africa, it is spoken by about 9 million people, mainly in Zululand and northern Natal in South Africa and also in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, and Swaziland.

27. There are more than 7 million native speakers of Kikongo, many of whom live in western Congo (Kinshasa), where Kongo is a national language. The remaining native speakers live in Congo (Brazzaville) and northern Angola. An additional 7 million Africans claim Kongo as a second language.

28. This is a Bantu language spoken by about 35 million people in Burundi, Congo (Kinshasa), Kenya, Mayotte, Mozambique, Oman, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, and the United States. Kiswahili is an official language of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda and is used as a lingua franca throughout East Africa.

clear that the discrepancy between the Left in books and the Left in practice is one more Western problem. In other parts of the world and even among non-Western populations of indigenous peoples and immigrants in the West, there are other understandings of collective action for which such a discrepancy does not make sense. The world at large is full of transformative experiences and actors who are not educated in the Western left. Moreover, scientific knowledge, which has always been granted absolute priority in the Western critical tradition, is considered by the new popular movements as only one kind of knowledge among many others. It is more important for certain movements and causes than for others, and in many instances it is deployed in articulation with other knowledges—lay, popular, urban, peasant, indigenous, women's, and religious, to name a few.

In this way, the WSF generated a new epistemological issue: if social practices and collective actors resort to different kinds of knowledge, an adequate evaluation of their value for social emancipation must be premised upon a new epistemology, which, contrary to hegemonic epistemologies in the West, does not grant a priori supremacy to scientific knowledge (heavily produced in the North). It must allow for a more just relationship among different kinds of knowledge. In other words, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Therefore, in order to capture the immense variety of critical discourses and practices and to valorize and maximize their transformative potential, an epistemological reconstruction is needed. This means that we do not need alternatives so much as we need an alternative thinking of alternatives.

Such an epistemological reconstruction must start from the idea that hegemonic left thinking and the hegemonic critical tradition, in addition to being (or precisely because they are) North-centric, are colonialist, imperialist, racist, and sexist as well. To overcome this epistemological condition and thereby decolonize left thinking and practice, it is imperative to go South and learn from the South, though not from the imperial South (which reproduces in the South the logic of the North taken as universal) but rather from the anti-imperial South (Santos 1995: 479–520). Such an epistemology in no way suggests that North-centric critical thinking and left politics must be discarded and thrown into the dustbin of history. Its past is in many respects an honorable one and has significantly contributed to the liberation of the global South. Rather, it is imperative to start an intercultural dialogue and translation among different critical knowledges and practices: South-centric and North-centric, popular and scientific, religious and secular, female and male, urban and rural, and so forth. This intercultural translation is at the roots of what I call the *ecology of knowledges* (more on this in later chapters).

The other WSF contribution to the theory/practice conundrum lies in the way it has refused to reduce its openness for the sake of efficacy or political coherence. While there is an intense debate inside the WSF about this issue, I am convinced that the idea that there is no general theory of social transformation



capable of capturing and classifying the immense diversity of oppositional ideas and practices present in the WSF has been one of its most innovative and productive principles. This potentially unconditional inclusiveness has contributed to the creation of a new political culture that privileges commonalities to the detriment of differences and fosters common action even in the presence of deep ideological differences, once the objectives are limited, well defined, and adopted by consensus. In this respect, we can identify a strong continuity between the WSF and the more recent movements of *indignados* in North Africa, southern Europe, and the Occupy movement in the United States and other countries.

The coalitions and articulations made possible among individual participants and among social movements are generated from the bottom up and tend to be pragmatic and to last as long as they are seen as furthering each movement's objectives. While in the tradition of the conventional Left, particularly in the global North, politicizing an issue tends to polarize it, often leading to factionalism, in the political mobilizations of the last fifteen years, particularly in the global South, another political culture seems to be emerging in which politicization goes hand in hand with depolarization, with the search for common grounds, and with agreed-on limits to ideological purity or ideological messiness.

This new political culture represents an attempt at overcoming the ghostly relationship between theory and practice. As a result of a virulent, theoretical extremism that dominated the conventional Left throughout much of the twentieth century, left politics gradually lost contact with the practical aspirations and options of the activists engaged in concrete political action. Between concrete political action and theoretical extremism, a vacuum formed.

In his overview of the peoples' history of the Latin American subcontinent, and in particular of the various subversive and emancipatory "conceptions of the world" prevailing in Bolivia for the last two centuries, Álvaro García Linera, vice president of Bolivia, has insightfully shown how the "modernist and teleological narrative of history" ended up becoming a theoretical blindness and an epistemological blockage vis-à-vis the new social movements. Here is García Linera in his own words:

This modernist and teleological narrative of history, largely adopted from economics and philosophy course books, will create a cognitive blockage and an epistemological impossibility concerning two realities that will be the starting point of a different emancipatory project, one superseding Marxist ideology itself: the peasant and ethnic thematics of our country. (2009: 482)

## Conclusion

The antinomies, difficulties, and hard cases analyzed in this introduction demand that at the beginning of the new millennium we distance ourselves from



Eurocentric critical thinking. To create such a distance is the precondition for the fulfillment of the most crucial theoretical task of our time: that the unthinkable be thought, that the unexpected be assumed as an integral part of the theoretical work. Since vanguard theories, by definition, do not let themselves be taken by surprise, I submit that, in the current context of social and political transformation, rather than vanguard theories we need rearguard theories. I have in mind theoretical work that follows and shares the practices of the social movements very closely, raising questions, establishing synchronic and diachronic comparisons, symbolically enlarging such practices by means of articulations, translations, and possible alliances with other movements, providing contexts, clarifying or dismantling normative injunctions, facilitating interaction with those who walk more slowly, and bringing in complexity when actions seem rushed and unreflective and simplicity when action seems self-paralyzed by reflection. The grounding ideas of a rearguard theory are craftsmanship rather than architecture, committed testimony rather than clairvoyant leadership, and intercultural approximation to what is new for some and very old for others.

The aim of creating distance in relation to the Eurocentric tradition is to open analytical spaces for realities that are “surprising” because they are new or have been ignored or made invisible, that is, deemed nonexistent by the Eurocentric critical tradition. They can only be retrieved by what I call the *sociology of absences* (more on this in later chapters).

As I will explain in the following chapters, keeping a distance does not mean discarding the rich Eurocentric critical tradition and throwing it into the dustbin of history, thereby ignoring the historical possibilities of social emancipation in Western modernity. It means, rather, including it in a much broader landscape of epistemological and political possibilities. It means exercising a hermeneutics of suspicion regarding its “foundational truths” by uncovering what lies below their “face value.” It means giving special attention to the suppressed or marginalized smaller traditions within the big Western tradition.

It means, above all, assuming our time to be an unprecedented, transitional time in which we face modern problems for which there are no modern solutions. The modern problems are those highlighted by the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century: the problem of freedom, the problem of equality, the problem of fraternity. The bourgeois “solutions” to such problems are irreversibly discredited. We live in a “post-” or “neo-” Westphalian world in which the state shares the field of international relations with frequently more powerful nonstate actors. Sovereignty is being eroded while powerful states and nonstate actors coalesce to take control of natural resources and people’s lives in less powerful states. Social contractualism is being replaced by individual contractualism among ever more unequal parties, while rights are being “legally” violated in the name of the twin imperatives of economic austerity and national security and while a global attack against social and economic rights is orchestrated. Capitalism is today experiencing one of the most destructive moments in its recent history as

witnessed in new forms of primitive accumulation by dispossession, from land-grabbing to the theft of wages and bank bailouts; in the subjection to capitalist law of the value of common goods and resources, resulting in the displacement of millions of poor peasants and indigenous peoples and in environmental devastation and ecological disasters; and in the eternal renewal of colonialism, revealing, in old and new guises, the same genocidal impulse, racist sociability, thirst for appropriation, and violence exerted on resources deemed infinite and on people deemed inferior.

On the ruins of the idea of the civic nation, the suppression of ethnic-cultural nations and cultural diversity has become more visible and, with it, the untold human suffering and social destruction thereby produced. Individual autonomy turns into a cruel slogan as the conditions for effectively exercising autonomy are being destroyed. Ideological differences underlying democracy have been replaced by amorphous centrism and institutionalized corruption. As politicians turn into money launderers, hijack democracy, and allow it to be occupied by corporate greed, people are forced to occupy democracy outside democratic institutions. The criminalization of social protest, paramilitarism, and extrajudicial executions complement the scene. Social conflicts both within and among states become less and less institutionalized, human rights are violated in the name of human rights, and civilian lives are destroyed under the pretence of defending civilian lives.

Of course, Western modernity also produced a critical tradition that from the beginning questioned both the problems and the solutions proposed by bourgeois and liberal politics, Marxism being the most prominent exemplar of such a tradition. The problem is that Marxism shared too much with bourgeois Western modernity. Furthermore, Marxism shared not only the philosophical and epistemological foundations of bourgeois Western modernity but also some of its proposed solutions, such as the belief in linear progress or the unlimited use of natural resources as part of the infinite development of the forces of production, or even the idea that colonialism might be part of the progressive Western narrative, albeit with some qualifications. This explains why the bankruptcy of liberalism, although bearing witness to the analytical accuracy of Marxism, does not make the latter more persuasive, as one might expect. On the contrary, as it becomes more apparent that liberal “solutions” were originally fraudulent and are patently exhausted, another transitional dimension of our time gets unveiled: we face Marxist problems for which there are no Marxist solutions.

In light of this, the need for creating a distance vis-à-vis the Eurocentric tradition seems increasingly urgent. This need, however, is not determined by a sudden intellectual or political awareness. Its formulation is in itself a historical process deriving from the ways in which Western modernity, in both its bourgeois and Marxist versions, came to be embodied in political processes across the globe in the last two hundred years. As global capitalism and its satellite forms of oppression and domination expanded, more and more diversified landscapes of peoples, cultures, repertoires of memory and aspiration, symbolic universes,

modes of livelihood and styles of life, conceptions of time and space, and so on, were dialectically included in the conversation of humankind through untold suffering and exclusion. Their resistance, often through subaltern, clandestine, insurgent cosmopolitan networks, managed to confront public suppression carried out by capitalist and colonialist forms of physical, symbolic, epistemological, or even ontological violence. The end result of this exclusionary inclusion was a tremendous expansion of hermeneutic communities, some public, some clandestine, some worldwide, some local, some Western based, some non-Western based.

In my view, this is the core characteristic of our time, one condition that is still to be fully acknowledged, theorized, and accounted for. This being the case, it follows that the repertoire of the modes, models, means, and ends of social transformation are potentially much vaster than those formulated and recognized by Western modernity, including its Marxist versions. Ultimately, keeping a distance vis-à-vis the Eurocentric tradition amounts to being aware of the fact that the diversity of world experience is inexhaustible and therefore cannot be accounted for by any single general theory. Keeping a distance allows for what I call the *double transgressive sociology of absences and emergences*. Such transgressive sociology is, in fact, an epistemological move that consists of counterposing the epistemologies of the South with the dominant epistemologies of the global North.