

Can the Subaltern save us?

By Breny Mendoza

At this point in history, to say that modernity and development may have led the world into a dark alley of possible self-destruction is a redundancy. As I write these pages, the Caribbean, Houston, Texas and the Florida Keys have been devastated by three mega-hurricanes and parts of Mexico City lie in shambles after a 7.1 earthquake. In addition, the president of the United States has threatened to destroy North Korea in the General Assembly of the UN. Great swaths of the planet are cracked open for mining and fracking in search for oil and the oceans are literally blown up for offshore drilling. Wars in Africa and the Middle East are littering the landscape with corpses and producing tons of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, and sulfur dioxide in addition to CO₂. The water supply of war zones is contaminated with oil and depleted uranium.

(<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/social/environment>)

The development of the atomic bomb by the US government and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made it clear in 1945 that terminating life on earth through science, technology and war was a real possibility. It is in this context that the Frankfurt School warned us of the excesses of the instrumental rationality of Western culture and the human domination of nature. It was WWII also that revealed that the natural course of natural history could be ended through human intervention. Today, almost 80 years later, we talk about the Anthropocene, a potentially new geological era in which "man-made" destructive forces make the earth uninhabitable to all forms of life. Nuclear testing, chemical weapons, deforestation, desertification, the burning of fossil and biofuel, the acidification of the oceans, the pollution caused by plastic and even the mass consumption of chicken is not only altering the nature of nature, but it is causing the sixth mass extinction of thousands of species that the world has experienced in the last 700 million years. The realization that life as we know it is coming to an end is forcing many around the world to question the philosophical and the material

foundations of the societies and cultures that have brought onto humanity the possibility of its finality. Given that Western civilization, modernity and development are considered responsible for the definitive destruction of life, it is Western civilization's main tenets that are brought to the dock. In conjunction, because as Arturo Escobar repeatedly says, there are no modern solutions to modern problems, the solutions to the problems of modernity are surely to be found among the non-moderns, or so to speak the cultures of the indigenous peoples of the world that have left the smallest ecological footprint on earth. In other words, we must turn away from development and modernity and turn to indigenous ways of making worlds, especially Amerindian to imagine the futurity of humanity. While there is no doubt that some indigenous ways of worlding offer alternatives to development and modernity, the relationship between moderns (non-indigenous peoples) and indigenous peoples has been fraught with epistemic and ontological violence since 1492. So, what is different today that we can eschew the obstacles that prevented us from learning from indigenous peoples in the past that makes it possible today to project our futures with their knowledges and ways of life? A partial answer to this question is that indigenous peoples today are effectively producing alternative knowledges and practices that are creating alternatives to modernity and development. Another possible answer is that indigenous knowledges and ways of making worlds are the last frontier of moderns. In what follows, I would like to reflect upon the contention and the political implications of attempting to find ecological salvation among the indigenous peoples by looking at how the narratives of modern scholars writing about the crises of modernity find salvation in them or not.

The Quest for Redemption

Modernity and its offspring development have undergone successive indictments in the last decades. After WWII and the Frankfurt School that still relied heavily on Marxism and psychoanalysis for its critique of modernity and just before the downfall of socialism in the Soviet Union and its satellites toward the end of 80s, elite scholars in the West manifested great skepticism regarding the main goals of the Enlightenment project, which had promised to end human suffering through science, technology and secularism. Scientific positivism, the

inevitability of human progress, and the access to Truth in capital letters were seriously questioned by a group of scholars referred to as postmodernists. Postmodernists are said to have produced the “linguistic turn” in Western social theory by focusing on the role of text and language in the construction of reality. Postmodernists were perhaps the first ones in the West to postulate the artificiality of subjectivity, knowledge and reality, and perhaps most importantly its internal connections to power. Their questioning of reality and representation and their critiques of the metanarratives of the West called not only for the decentering of Western stories of the world and its dynamics, but the liberation of the subjugated knowledges it had procured on the perceived non-moderns of the world. Postmodernism signaled a crisis of modernity by shaking its main pillars: binary thinking, hierarchy between the modern and the non-modern, and the lineal conception of time. But as some decolonial theorists have pointed out, the postmodern critique of modernity was a critique of modernity from within, an inside job still incapable of fully grasping its underside, namely, colonialism, implying with this that the West remained blind to its conditions of possibility. From this perspective, the non-modern appeared underneath the dialogues of postmodern scholars. The presence of the non-modern was rather more in his absence/silence which had the perverse effect of tacitly reconstituting the centrality of the Western “man”. But perhaps something far more pernicious was occurring. The voluntary abdication of the centrality of the West that postmodernism offered to the rest of us, enabled the Western “man” to find a seat next to his non-modern counterpart since now his truth appeared as one among many others. This postured equalizing allowed the Western “man” to disentangle himself from Western colonial history (which was just a bad history book) relieving himself from the responsibility of the destruction of other worlds. This explains why subjugated knowledges of the non-modern world never really made it into the postmodern canon, nonetheless, their phantasmagorical appearance would serve to absolve the Western “man” from history’s indictments. Postmodernism would imagine a palimpsest of cultures whereby Western culture would be forever innocent. There was still a future for the West, perhaps even a resurgence if it could only tolerate difference. The non-modern even in his ghostly appearance became the vital lifeline for the West. But by the end of the 90s, postmodernism began to lose its charm and subsisted mainly inside other iterations of it, i.e.

within postcolonial criticism and globalization theories that reveled on themes of difference and culture, which were later translated into neoliberal and multicultural rhetoric and policy.

Postcolonialism as we know emerged under the influence of postmodern perspectives, but was developed in the non-modern world. Interestingly, a central concern for postcolonial critics is the impossibility of the subaltern (an equivalent to indigenous peoples) to be heard on his/her own terms not only from within Western canons, but presumably within their own non-modern traditions. The postcolonial project was set up therefore to locate and re-establish the voice of the subaltern of the colony. Spivak warned postcolonial critics of their futile attempt to grant collective speech to the subaltern as they would ironically also reinscribe and co-opt the voice of the subaltern in much the same way the Western colonizer had done. Cultural solidarity amidst a panoply of voices of a heterogeneous subaltern and speaking for the subaltern seemed a self-defeating strategy. But what was the importance of breaking the silence of the subaltern for postcolonial critics? Was the subaltern the repository of an unspoken truth that had redemptive powers? For whom? The savior rhetoric of the West that rescues the downtrodden non-modern from other non-moderns seems to have been inverted here. The postcolonial critic appears as a stand-in or as an impostor of the postmodern critic searching salvation in the silenced subaltern other. A short-lived version of this experiment was the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group that would attempt to do the same, taking the literary genre of *testimonio* as their way of articulating the voice of the subaltern. As their predecessors, they too failed as ventriloquists and disbanded soon after. Interesting here is the backlash against the "audacity" of an indigenous woman (Rigoberta Menchu) to try to make her word present through a *testimonio* written by a modern scholar. A few years into the debate, David Stoll, an US American anthropologist would attack the veracity and authenticity of Rigoberta Menchu's *testimonio* in an apparent attempt to return her to silence and discredit her. The writer of the *testimonio* remained unscathed from the attack.

At the end of the nineties decolonial theories from Latin America started to take center stage and they also came along with a project of restoring the voices of the indigenous peoples. As

postmodern and postcolonial before them, decolonial thinking was concerned at first with Eurocentrism and epistemic decolonization as a crucial domain of struggle towards transmodernity or alternatives to modernity. (Escobar, 2015) The border thinking of the Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa was singled out by Walter Dignolo as the proper way of grasping a reality that had been largely denied by the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge. (Dignolo, 2000) Border thinking was thinking from the exteriority and from the lived experience of the colonized. Thus, tapping into indigenous epistemological traditions seemed crucial to enact decolonization not only of the indigenous peoples, but also of non-indigenous peoples, which in Latin America includes white and mestizo-criollo folks. Interestingly, white and mestizo-criollo folks appear in this narrative not as internal colonizers, but as natural allies of indigenous peoples. In this manner, decolonial border thinkers would appear not only as co-authors, but also as rescuers of a lost knowledge. As Kyle Powys Whyte, a Potawatomi scholar has noted of White North American allies of indigenous peoples in their part of the colony, non-indigenous allies in the South can feel redeemed as they are now doing what their ancestors failed to do in the past. (Whyte, ?) They are thinking with indigenous peoples and not against them. Border thinking is in this way the lifeline of white, mestizo criollos decolonials. It is arguably what allows the co-existence of two rather different worlds. It is no wonder that when leftist regimes in Ecuador and Bolivia introduced Buen Vivir and the rights of nature in their constitutions this gesture was hailed as a decolonial moment in which indigenous knowledges were finally encoded in the political, even though these conceptions were indexed in a modern/colonial, liberal political code. (Mendoza, 2015)

Not to be left unmentioned are of course the attempts of indigenous intellectuals to salvage ancestral knowledges to counter the assaults of modernity and development. Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples who have regrouped politically since the nineties across the continent (Turtle Island, Abya Yala, Cemanahuac, Tahuantisuyo), see themselves as engaged in a civilizational debate in which a new civilizational model should emerge that is based on non-capitalist, non-liberal, non-state and non-colonial practices rooted in their ancestral knowledges. The preservation and the extension to non-indigenous folks of communal forms of

living, the unveiling of ontologically different way of relating to humans and non-humans and the recognition of their autonomy vis a vis the state is at the center of the new proposal. The motto here is the Zapatista idea of creating a world in which many worlds fit. But as recent experiences show us, it is very difficult to reconcile indigenous proposals with existing political structures, even with those that claim to be re-founded on plurinationality and interculturality. Interculturality as the possibility of dialogue between cultures reaches its limits first and foremost at the level of the state which can bring into the fold of modernity and development indigenous cultural propositions that allegedly would have changed its internal logic and functioning. A case in point is the economy of extreme extractivism of so-called progressive regimes. The regimes of mestizo-criollos and an Aymara indigenous president in Bolivia neither have protected the rights of nature nor changed the modern exploitative relationship to nature, instead they continued the destruction of indigenous communities encroaching on their territories and causing extreme damage to the environment with their energy extractivist mega-projects.

Another area of knowledge that has recently rediscovered ancestral knowledges, myths, and practices of Amerindians as profoundly questioning established assumptions of modernity and development is anthropology. From this perspective, Amerindian ontologies seem to hold the key to a whole new view of nature and culture that can save the world from modern monsters such as colonialism, capitalism, and climate change, and thus can help us build better futures. This has become known as the ontological turn and even considered the salvation of anthropology which had in the recent past been reduced to just being the reflection of the concerns and obsessions of modern anthropologists. The work of the Brazilian Eduardo Viveiros de Castro stands out in this renovation of anthropology. As some have noted, the ontological anthropology that Viveiros de Castro puts forward is fundamentally the story about the Amazonian Amerindian. In a journey of discovery through the seas of ethnography of the Amazons, Viveiros de Castro's eye and deep (modern) sense can access the alter- concepts of nature and humanity of the isolated Amazonian Amerindian and offer them to the moderns to

tackle their own problems. And what he sees is quite interesting. He finds another reality that does not differentiate human from non-humans. Not only is no distinction made between humans and non-humans such as spirits and animals, neither is animality or some former version of it what humans share with animals or non-humans, but it is humanity that they share with each other. In this reality, animals are former humans with an animal body having lost the attributes of the human body but not their humanity or personhood. What differs then is only their perspective of the world and of each other. He calls this Amerindian perspectivism. The caveat here is not that they see no difference between the bodies of animals and humans, but that animals, a jaguar, for instance, possesses his own perspective of the world and can only be understood from this perspective. Human-animals perceive themselves as persons just as humans see themselves as persons, but the jaguar, a predatory human-animal for instance, sees humans simply as prey, a delicious meal. Conversely, the human can perceive the jaguar as a predatory animal or a spirit. In this cosmology, there will be variations in perspective whether you are a human with a human body or a predatory human animal like the jaguar or a spirit; there will be multiple natures, but all of them are anthropomorphized in one "culture". This multiplicity of "natures" not only collapses the distinction of nature and culture, but also the divide between subject and object as all agents are endowed with subjecthood and a perspective. This highly complex rendition of Amerindian ontology is considered an antidote to modern great divides between nature and culture. It enables the recognition of ontological (non-human) rights of nature that modernity denies. Idelber Avelar, a Brazilian literary theorist, goes so far as to affirm that Amerindian anthropomorphism and perspectivism can be useful to slow down the Anthropocene and gives the example of the rights of nature recognized in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia as proof of the contributions of Amerindian ontologies. (Avelar, 2013) So, in a nutshell, what we find in this new anthropology is the extraction of alter-concepts from the perceived radical alterity of the Amazons as a reminder for moderns that they too can create forms of thinking otherwise, if only they can emulate indigenous peoples. Here we encounter yet again non-moderns concepts and alter worlds helping moderns cope with the world of destruction they have brought onto themselves. While no concern about the

wreckage of the Amazonian world is foregrounded, it is to be assumed that it is precisely the wreckage that enables the forward thinking needed by moderns.

Another exponent of the ontological turn is the Argentinean anthropologist Mario Blaser (also Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar) who like Viveiros de Castro is engaged in uncovering other ways of being and of the real of indigenous peoples that can offer moderns solutions to the problems caused by modernity and development. Blaser is also concerned with the assumption that modernity encompasses all that there is, as if non-modern reals are a thing of the past and do not deserve to be taken seriously. The point is that modernity was never able in the past or the present to eradicate alternative ontologies completely. These multiple ontologies still exist and come in conflict with Western ontological forms. Multiple ontologies taken seriously allow us to imagine the possibility of worlds free of the challenges of the Anthropocene, but perhaps more specifically the possibility of the pluriverse or a world where many worlds fit. By recognizing the existence of multiple ontologies, the modern misconception of the existence of only one world and multiple cultures is thus challenged.

Conclusions

This cursory review of diverse theories that are concerned with the crisis of modernity and development reveals a double process. On the one hand, we observe moderns (postcolonial and decolonial included) trying to appear as saviors of the subaltern because they intuit a revelation so powerful it will prevent the definite destruction of the world or at least redeem them from the sins of their ancestors. On the other hand, we find them giving a substantive importance to the concepts and ontologies developed by non-moderns to imagine futurity for themselves. Instead of rescuing the subaltern, it is the subaltern that rescues them. In both strategies, the moderns seek salvation from the subaltern whether to absolve themselves from history or to rescue the history of "Man (or the Father)." The question seems to be: Can the subaltern save us?

It is not my intention to reiterate the usual objections to these theoretical practices by calling them a romanticization or exoticization of indigenous cultures or that they homogenize and make undue generalizations. I am not saying either that indigenous epistemologies and ontologies should not be taken seriously. The point I want to make is that these theoretical propositions of moderns are problematic because they involve what native feminist Eve Tuck calls "settler moves to innocence". Settler moves to innocence are the ways the descendants of the colonizers attempt to diminish the sense of guilt and complicity in the destruction of indigenous worlds, and to secure a settler futurity. (Tuck and Wayne Yang, 2012) Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte reminds us of something else which is very important. The current dread of apocalyptic futures due to climate change are not new to indigenous peoples. Colonialism was and still is experienced as an apocalypse involving the extinction of their socio/natural/cultural habitats and the core of their spirit. Thus, many of their ways of coping with catastrophe must be traced to their attempts to survive colonialism, and not merely to a radical difference worthy of emulation by moderns worried about their collective future. One could surmise that the desire to emulate indigenous ontologies also contains the imperial fantasy to appear as the savior of cultures that otherwise would extinguish. For Latin American white, mestizo-criollo scholars who do not see themselves as settlers, but as natural allies of indigenous peoples it is high time to reflect upon our own responsibility for the destruction of indigenous worlds. Fantasizing about a future based on the radical difference of indigenous peoples can be in fact just another form of extractivism, one that we should not justify as necessary for our survival.

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