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Colonialism, Development, & Educational Rights: A “Dialogue under the Storm”

Gustavo Esteva *

Para dialogar, wrote the Spanish poet Machado, *escuchar primero; después, escuchar*. “For a dialogue, let’s listen first; and then, listen.” A dialogue, says the Zapatista Comandante Tacho, is not just to hear; it is to be willing to be transformed by the other.¹

In 1994, after 12 days of armed confrontation between the Zapatista Army for National Liberation and the forces of the government, there was a ceasefire that the Zapatistas have respected since then: they have not used their weapons, not even for self-defense. A month after the uprising, the famous subcomandante Marcos commented: “Oh god, we prepared ourselves to fight. We don’t know what this thing of dialogue is. We need to learn what it is”. And they learned. They had both the Dialogue of Cathedral

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¹ Excerpted from the Presidential Panel Session entitled “Beyond Education” at the 62nd Conference of the Comparative & International Education Society “Re-mapping Global Education: South-North Dialogue,” Mexico City, March 25-29, 2018. This article has been printed with the permission of Dr. Gustavo Esteva.

and the Dialogues of San Andrés. They reached agreements with the government. And, the government did not respect those agreements.

Peace Agreements after Peace Dialogue, of course. However, can we call what is happening in Colombia after the Peace Agreements “peace”? Most Americans ignore that they are at war in more than 70 countries. Most of them, I am sure, would love to be at peace. Peace is a magnificent word. Apparently, everyone wants peace. But what is peace? Half of the languages in the world don’t have a word for peace or war. Most Western languages derive their term, peace, paix, pace, paz, from the Latin. But Pax Romana is not peace; it is a contract of domination: I will not destroy you... but you will do what I say. This has been peace in the West for two thousand years. That was peace at the end of two world wars. That was peace in Iraq, a few years ago. (Dietrich et al, 2011).

Colonization, Development & Education

In the 1930s and 1940s all around the world, people affected and infected by forms of colonialism who were subordinated to the Cross or the Sword or to both, struggling with their “intimate enemy,” as Ashish Nandy (1983) called the colonized soul, were trying to find their own way. Behind this threat, the worst ever posed to the project of Westernization of the world, a new colonizing weapon entered the world scene: underdevelopment. With his speech on January 20, 1949, president Truman succeeded in what had been impossible for Churchill: the prolongation of the colonial yoke. Socialist-inspired Prime Minister of the new Indian nation-state, Jawaharlal Nehru, became his main ally: he transformed Gandhi into an impractical mahatma, unbeatable as the father of the nation but unable to help in its construction, its development. The “natives,” everywhere, were transformed into “the underdeveloped.” Their imagination and their dreams, full of energy a few years before, were progressively dismantled and reduced to the illusion of chasing the American Dream.

In 1945, the United States was an amazing, highly autonomous machine, producing half of the world's registered production. It was the universal creditor. There were no doubts about its military, economic, political, and even cultural hegemonic power. Europe and the Soviet Union were devastated by the war. Japan was occupied by the U.S. Most countries in what was later called the "South" were still colonies of European countries. All the institutions of the time recognized the United States' hegemonic position. The Bretton Woods institutions codified the U.S. as the financial center of the world. Even the Charter of the United Nations, established in 1945, paid tribute to the U.S. Constitution.

The Americans wanted something more: an emblem capable of acknowledging their new position in the world, making it entirely evident. They also wanted to consolidate that hegemony and make it permanent. Thus, they conceived a campaign on a global scale that clearly bore their seal and an emblem for the campaign that even its worst enemies would adopt and recognize. Development played such a role magnificently.

The emblem turned out to be gifted with an unbeatable malleability. Today, no one accepts the Truman conception of *development*. Neither Americans nor anti-Americans presently use the word to express something equivalent to what Truman expressed. But none of the political and intellectual contortions to which the word has been subjected during the following decades succeeded in dissociating it from the connotations that it acquired on January 20, 1949. It appears to possess the virtue of transforming all opposition, all failure, and all neglect into opportunities for buttressing itself.

Since Truman, development has connoted at least one thing: to escape from the vague, indefinable, and undignified condition known as underdevelopment. For two-thirds of the people on Earth, to think of development—any kind of development—requires first the perception of themselves as underdeveloped, in a subordinate position, after comparing their own situation with an established standard.

Beyond development

Education was of course the main component of the kit of tools of developers. In 1953, UNESCO experts had a very important meeting to discuss the problems of education in Latin America. Their conclusion: people are not interested in sending their children to school and even resist it. Eleven years later the same experts came together again. They reached a radically different conclusion, still valid today: no Latin American country will ever be able to satisfy the demand of education. The campaign of UNESCO and all the governments was a great success: they convinced the parents to send the children to school. They thus started to claim schools and teachers at every level. No country will ever be able to satisfy such demand (Illich, 1977).

Apparently, we are no longer alone in such a condition. Apparently, no country would be able today to pay the bills of health and education. All governments are currently concerned on how to implement the dismantling of all social services. The so-called Educational Reform, which in Mexico will imply closing half of the public schools, mainly in Indigenous communities, is not only a form of privatizing public resources, transforming them into private profit in the model of charter schools. It means that capital has found other ways, instead of schooling, to discard or disqualify the majority of the population. More than half of the children registered in first grade will never reach the grade that the law in their country defines as a minimum (Illich, 1996). The class of those uneducated or undereducated, who have internalized their social devaluation, is no longer needed.

In the past, all people were actually or potentially a labor force; it looked like a good investment for capital to give them some education, including them in a process in which everybody will learn, at least, how to say "Yes, Sir", "Yes, Madam". Today, for the first time in its short history, capital does not have any use for an increasing number of people. There is a new social class: disposable human beings. And they are being disposed. No need to educate them.

In the 1980s, in the so-called “lost decade for development” in Latin America, the real nature of the myth became entirely evident. The social majorities, for whom development was always a threat, denounced it loudly for the first time. It seemed that only by rejecting the enterprise would its effects be removed. And the enterprise appeared in all its nakedness: a malignant myth whose pursuit causes the continual destruction of environments and cultures.

Development was supposed to close the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries. There was an explicit intention of bringing some justice to the world. It is true that the development enterprise changed the face of the world, but in an opposite sense to what was promised. In 1960, the northern hemisphere countries were 20 times richer than those in the southern hemisphere; in 1980, 46 times (Sachs, 1992). Far from closing, the gap widened. Development was very good business for the rich countries, very bad business for us in the “South.”

In the 1980s we also knew that the educational system was failing, that this central promise of development was not fulfilled. The system does not prepare people for life and work, and the minority reaching the top of the educational ladder cannot find jobs for whatever they studied. This awareness generated the biggest social movement on earth, the most invisible. The school is no longer perceived as a place to learn. Children are sent to school to get the passport needed to circulate in the modern society. To learn, you and your children create other opportunities beyond the school.

Development is radically inhospitable: it imposes a universal definition of the good life and excludes all others. We need to hospitably embrace the thousand different ways of thinking, being, living and experiencing the world that characterize reality.

That is exactly what I observed at the grassroots in the 1980s. When it became clear that we would never catch up with the rich countries, there was rage and frustration for being always left at the end of the race. Some people said: “OK, my country will never be developed, but I will join the minority; I will get all the goodies of development in the midst of

underdevelopment.” Many of us, however, discovered the trick. Instead of pursuing the illusion of getting the American Way of Life or any other universal definition of the good life, we discovered that we still had our own notions of what is to live well...and they are clearly feasible. The notion of *buen vivir* started to circulate.

I was one of the two billion people that became underdeveloped on January 20, 1949. To accept such a condition is very humiliating. You can no longer trust your nose: you need to trust the noses of the experts, guiding you to development. You can no longer dream your dreams, they are already dreamt: to be like them, like the developed, and even dream their dreams. But development also comes with fascination. In the 1950s, movies were the new entertainment. We were rushing every weekend to see the latest movie. And all of them were presenting the American Way of Life as the thing closest to paradise. Truman promised we could have it all. The American will share with us all their scientific and technological advances to enter into that world.

The opposite of development, we know now, is not underdevelopment but hospitality: to accept respectfully that others exist, that their existence, their own ways, their gods and hopes, should be respected and celebrated. In keeping their traditional hospitality, in spite of past experiences of hospitality abuse, many people are now walking along their own paths, trying to regenerate their own dreams, and attempting to rebuild their old or new commons as the world seems to fall apart, and old paradigms collapse.

The End of the World as we Know it

In my world, we have heard in recent years that there is a new consensus: we are at the end of a historical cycle. But we have heard that there is intense controversy about the corpses, what is ending. There are many candidates. Neoliberalism, colonialism, the American empire, we heard that Wallerstein insists that the terminal phase of capitalism started in 1968. I want to share an attitude I have been observing around me. It

comes from the hypothesis, or rather the feeling, that we are indeed at the end of an era. We need to look for other political horizons. We are at the end of the era of the patriarchal mentality, which has dominated for the last 5,000 years in the whole world and culminated in its most destructive condition, capitalism and its political form, the democratic nation-state. And we are also at the end of modernity.

Postmodernity should not be misunderstood as the historical epoch that follows modernity. It describes the state of mind of one or several generations that have had to painfully disassociate themselves from the truths of the previous epoch, without having found for themselves another unitary system of reference. This state could be described by the word disillusionment... If modernity is understood as the societal project characterized by Newtonian physics, Cartesian reductionism, the nation-state of Thomas Hobbes, and the capitalist world system, *postmodernity* simply refers to that disillusioning phase of the same modernity, in which people increasingly doubt the universal truth of this paradigm. These doubts, and this perception, derive mostly from everyday experience, that is, they stand for an important intellectual and social achievement, without being immediately the result of scholarly reflection in a more narrow, institutional sense. (Dietrich & Sützl, 1997, p. 3)

More and more people are becoming aware of the relativity of those truths in whose absolute validity they used to believe. As a consequence, those truths have lost their binding character. Such a state can be interpreted and experienced as a simple loss of values and orientation, as anomy, the notion introduced in 1895 by Durkheim alluding to fear and lack of orientation of individuals, and lack of regulation in and among societies (Durkheim, 1982). The insight that there cannot be the one truth, as Derrida (1987) observed, however, allows for a democratic plurality of truths. And so, while some engage in fundamentalisms, many people immerse themselves in different forms of radical pluralism and practice new forms of knowing and experiencing the world, participating in the insurrection of subjugated knowledge suggested by Foucault. They substitute nouns creating dependence – education, health, food, home, and

so on – for verbs that bring back their personal agency, their autonomy: learning, healing, eating, dwelling. They acknowledge the individual as a modern construction from which they also disassociate themselves, in favor of a conception of persons as knots in nets of relationships, which constitute the many real we’s defining a new society (Panikkar, 1990, 1993).

Capitalism encountered three different limits. A regime ends when it cannot reproduce itself in its own terms. This is the case today for capitalism. What was described as primitive accumulation, centuries ago, implied grabbing resources and transforming them into capital, that is, buying labor force. Today we have unprecedented accumulation...but most of it cannot be transformed into capital, it cannot reproduce the social relations defining capitalism (Jappe, 2017). To this internal limit, generated by the irresponsible behavior of the 1990s, when capital killed the goose of the golden eggs, we need to add the ecological limit –there are wide areas so destroyed that is not possible to get any profit from them- and the social limit –the resistance of an increasing number of people to the dispossession of what they have –territories, rights, whatever.

Capitalism got its political form in the seventeenth century, with the creation of the modern nation-state, which absorbed all previous forms of nation and state. Such political space facilitated the expansion of capitalism, but for globalized capital it became an obstacle, a limitation. It has been dismantling it. Only its rituals remain today.

For capitalism, a democratic façade was very convenient, very useful. For the era of dispossession, of extractivism—as we call it in Latin America—for the era of cynically grabbing and concentrating resources, formal democracy is a problem. You need the police, the military, the cartels, the media, all the authoritarian tools of a wide repertoire.

The end of capitalism is not good news. It does not mean an opportunity for emancipation but the fall into barbarism, into an unprecedented wave of destruction. There is no room for optimism, all the options look terrible, but there is still room for hope. A new mood is beginning to emerge in the world. As the writer Arundhati Roy says,

“another world is not only possible; she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing” (Roy, 2003).

Waking Up & Re-Imagining Educational Justice

In 1992, when the Spaniards wanted to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of America, there was a very impressive reaction among the Indigenous peoples in the whole American continent: it was a clear, open, lucid affirmation of their very existence and their decision to exist and flourish in their own way.

Two years later, the Zapatista uprising became the wake-up call for anti-systemic movements all around the world, ready to say *¡Basta!* Enough! to the way of destruction affecting both nature and people, Mother Earth and the social fabric. We don’t accept to be classified as disposable human beings, said the Zapatistas, and put autonomy at the center of the public debate. In the following years disenchantment with democracy became universal. “All of them should go!” said the Argentinians in 2001. “My dreams don’t fit into your ballot box”, affirmed the *Indignados* in Spain. Occupy Wall Street, in the U.S., enabled millions of people to finally acknowledge that their system is at the service of the 1%.

For a democratic society to exist, you need at least two conditions: that the majority of the citizens believe that the electoral process is a fair, clean and respected method to express the collective will; and that those elected through this process really represent the interests of the majority. It is very difficult to find today a country in which these conditions are met. The very nature of formal democracy is also becoming transparent. The term was coined in Greece and took its modern form, the universal model, in the US. Both were societies with slaves and in the hands of misogynous machos. Racism and sexism are deeply embedded in this political design; they are not circumstantial anomalies.

There are still attempts to reform the democratic nation-state, but many struggles try instead to widen, strengthen and deepen the spaces in which people can practice their own power. They are literally constructing

democracy from the roots, in which common people can assume the power of the Leviathan, free to speak, to choose, and to act. Attempts of this kind are innumerable and all over the world. On May 28, 2017, for instance, the National Indigenous Congress of Mexico, with the support of the Zapatistas, created the National Council of Government based on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous autonomies. Instead of trying to seize the state apparatus, conceived for control and domination, they are dismantling it and creating alterative institutions.

Autonomic movements, widely visible in Latin America, are not only challenging neoliberal globalization, but are acting explicitly against capitalism without thereby becoming socialist. Some are not only attempting to end their dependence on the market or the State, but are also breaking with the **premise of scarcity** that defines economic society. They adopt the **principle of sufficiency** and avoid the separation of means from ends in both economic and political terms. Their struggles adopt the shape of the outcome they want to bring about.

Several feminist schools participate in autonomic movements that go beyond conventional visions of post-patriarchal societies. A clear example is the Zapatista society, where politics and ethics (and not the economy) are at the center of social life, and caring for life, women and Mother Earth has the highest priority. In these societies, autonomous practices characterize all areas of daily life, ruled through democratic processes that organize communally the art of hope and dignity.

When teachers come to the villages, observed Rigoberta Menchú, the Quiché from Guatemala, “they bring with them the ideas of capitalism and getting on in life. They impose these ideas on us” (Menchú, 1985, p. 241). Twenty years ago, when the parents discovered what the teachers were doing in the school, they made the teachers leave.

In 1979, a group of rebellious teachers in Chiapas, in the South of Mexico, started a movement against the corrupt leader of the biggest union in Latin America, with more than a million teachers. They created a coordinating body that currently mobilizes thousands of teachers against the so-called educational reform; you invited some of their leaders to this

gathering and they will be in one workshop. In Oaxaca, the local section of the union has been very prominent in the struggle. The teachers have a solid educational plan, alternative to the official reform, to recognize, celebrate and respect the cultural diversity of Oaxaca, where the majority of the population are Indians belonging to 16 different Indigenous peoples.

In 1995, some Oaxaca teachers started what they called a Pedagogical Movement, which conceived and implemented very interesting initiatives. Today, within the very authoritarian system of public education, you can find in Oaxaca ten communal *secundarias*. When the children arrive, for the first day of classes, they get the information that there will be no classes, no disciplines or grades. In groups of two to five they should conceive a project, discuss it with the elders, the authorities, their parents, everyone in the community, and then implement it, in three months or three years, depending on the project. The teachers operate as a shield, protecting the children from the Ministry of Education and producing all the paperwork the bureaucrats require. They also are available for consultation, if the children want some help in what they are doing. It is a pleasure to hear these children at the end of the process. They are not repeating anything, as educated parrots. They are creative, open, free. They look not only contented but very well rooted in the community.

In 1997 the Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca came together and after a whole year of communal debate they presented in their State Forum a consensual declaration: “The school had been the main tool of the State to destroy the Indigenous peoples.” They were just reclaiming that historical truth and saying *¡Basta!* Many communities started to close the schools and kick off the teachers. You can imagine the scandal. Front page in the papers: “These barbarians are dooming their poor children to ignorance. This cannot be Indigenous autonomy and self-government. They should be stopped.” A lot of pressure was applied on them, but some communities persisted. A good anthropologist decided to teach a lesson to the parents. He designed some tests to compare children going to the school with those not going to the school, to show how the latter were being left behind. To his surprise, those not going to the school were better in everything—

reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and history—with one exception: they did not know how to sing the national anthem, like the children going to the school (Prakash, 1998).

These same communities came with us some years later. They had a concern. Some young people, that have already learned many things to live in the community and the useful elements of the official curriculum, were interested in learning more, things that no one in the community knew. Since they had no diplomas, they would not be able to continue their studies. With them and for them, we created the University of the Earth, *Universidad de la Tierra*, a coalition of Indigenous and non-indigenous people. A Zapotec singer and intellectual gave us our name. This university, told us Jaime Luna, should always have the feet on earth, not floating on the space. And it should care for Mother Earth. We loved the idea and we constructed the university around the principle of learning by doing. We have no teachers, no classrooms, no curricula. If someone insists in asking for our pedagogy, we may allude to “babies’ pedagogy.” All babies learn things as difficult as how to think, walk or speak without any education, learning in freedom. This is what we do. All our former “students” are today getting dignity and income in whatever they learned with us.

The idea is spreading. There are several *Unitierras* in Oaxaca and also in Chiapas, Puebla and other states of Mexico, in California, in the US, in Toronto, Canada, in Manizales, Colombia, or Cataluña, Spain. We interact within a network involving more than 50 countries, and we find our sisters in places like India, Brazil or the Kurdistan.

What does this mean? We are abandoning the very idea of education and adopting the principle of the freedom to learn. What we are doing, everywhere, is to create the conditions allowing everyone to learn in freedom whatever he or she wants to learn.

Paulo Freire and Iván Illich were very close friends until the end of Freire’s life. Freire stayed for years with Iván in Cuernavaca. But they parted ways. While Freire was conceiving and implementing plans to improve the educational system, particularly literacy campaigns, with his beautiful pedagogy and through the mediators he selected and addressed, Illich

explored an answer to a single question: what kind of society tries to educate all its members? What does education do to a society? (Cayley, 1992). Thanks to him, we know the answer. We know that education is very modern. That until the sixteen-century, *educare* meant to feed by the breast. That in 1632 Lope de Vega wrote a very comic play in which he is playing with the new meaning of the word education, making men to feed by the breast. Modern education was born with capitalism and has always been at the service of capital. It is an expression of its logic, and it produces one the most perverse forms of colonization (Illich, 1977).

My Zapotec grandmother could not enter into my house in Mexico City through the front door because she was an Indian. My mother, like many other people of her generation, assumed that the best she could do for her children was to radically uproot them from their Indigenous ancestry. In my house, under the very patriarchal domination of my father and his aristocratic, creole nostalgia, I heard all the time that Indians were not only stupid and illiterate, but mean, with the idea that we should run whenever we saw one of them. I adored my grandmother and got the opportunity to be with her on holidays in Oaxaca, where I live today, in a Zapotec village, seven kilometers from the place she was born. I can no longer be described as a Westerner; I have dismantled one by one all the categories, the traits, the habits, shaping me as a Westerner. Because I know very well the Zapotec world and my Zapotec community, I know well that I am not one of them, I am not a Zapotec. I don't know what the hell I am.

What I do know very well is that I am one of the many marginalized by the economic society who are increasingly dedicated to marginalizing the economy. The social majorities of the world—the Two-Thirds World, if they are to be called something—are abandoning their ambivalence toward development, modernity, capitalism: the economic society. They are becoming *refuseniks*. They are consolidating their own spheres of existence and shaping them as vernacular realities, in relatively small, highly self-sufficient, interconnected units. In doing so, they are keeping themselves out of the logic of capital and the market and getting some degree of

control over their interactions with the economy. They are avoiding the separation between means and ends and the assumption of limited means and unlimited ends. As a consequence, they can bring back to the center of their social life politics and ethics. And they can thus recreate or regenerate their own ways of life, in their reclaimed new commons (Esteva & Prakash, 1998).

From Resistance to Liberation

In moving from resistance to liberation, wide sectors of the social majorities are not only challenging the dominant individualism, but the very notion of the individual and the social pacts supported by it. As Foucault explains, the individual is the product of power. What is needed is to de-individualize by means of multiplication and displacement. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, pp. xiii-xiv).

The transition is defined by the combination of autonomous modes of government at the local level, where people exert their political power in their reclaimed or regenerated commons, with the use of juridical and political procedures to generate social consensus from the bottom up (Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Subcomandante Marcos, 2001).

Diversified worlds of convivial new commons are thus emerging, carrying with them the revolutionary force of connecting desires and realities. People can thus focus their actions in what is positive and multiple, in the difference, in flows and mobile arrangements, instead of uniformities, unities, systems. They actualize the present, which takes the place of a future alienated by ideologies (Steger, 1984). They struggle against all odds, exposed to continual erosion and disruption by the intrusion of the market or the state in their reclaimed commons. However, the new democratic and legal “umbrellas” that they have started to construct, through the radical and convivial use of the law, and through

limits to the industrial mode of production, nourish the hope that their new commons will consolidate and flourish.

Grassroots initiatives are steadily opening fresh debates for the constitution of alternative discourses: people's discourses, conducted where the people live, not in cyberspace and on media screens, but down to earth in their own local spaces.

Justice and virtue are at the very center of such discourses: real justice, emerging from the community, in the classic tradition, beyond Trotsky and Nietzsche (MacIntyre, 1981) and proper virtue, rooted in the soil, in the place, in the localized social space where real humans live and die.

If utopia is that which has no place in this world, what people have done in recent years, particularly in the South, is ambiguously utopian: the new era is already there, as an alternative to industrial society, but it does not yet have its place.

The time has come for the end of the patriarchal, capitalist era. Development, once a hope to give eternal life to economic societies, has instead dug their graves. Evidences of the new era, appearing everywhere, are still perceived as anomalies of the old. The old one, in turn, looks stronger than ever, and the death it is carrying is still perceived as a symptom of vitality. If people are fooled by such images, disguised with the slogans of the period, and are blind to the evidence of the new era, postcapitalism will continue to dismantle and destruct its own creation to the point of collapse.

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