Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible, by Arturo Escobar

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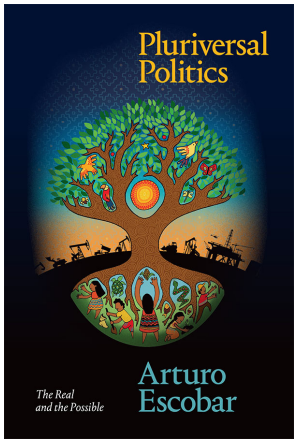

I was disappointed to learn that Arturo Escobar's *Pluriversal Politics* is not a handbook for accessing alternate worlds—at least not in the familiar sense. Obliquely, this might be Escobar's point. From *Continuum* (2012-2015) to *12 Monkeys* (movie 1995; TV series 2015-2018) to *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-2019), the focus on narratives navigating multiple realities is searching for the right world, or the struggle to restore characters to their original place and time. Escobar begins with the assumption that we already inhabit a "pluriverse," "the idea of multiple worlds but also to the idea of life as limitless flow" (26). If we fail to perceive this flow, it's because alternate possibilities for existing are obscured by anthropocentrism, colonialism, and the manufactured needs of capitalism. While Escobar's vision of co-existing, autonomous worlds never leaves Earth, readers will nevertheless be taken on a philosophical journey that will leave them sobered, at times perplexed, yet quite possibly inspired.

Escobar begins with a fundamental question: "are we really the autonomous individuals we imagine ourselves to be?" (5). Certainly, this is how many have learned to see the world. Development and progress, as global values, are predicated on individual choice—of work, living space, and products to consume. Over the course of subsequent chapters, Escobar convincingly demonstrates how modern individualism, far from being an innate condition of contemporary reality, is rather one possibility among many that has prevailed only because it forecloses other worldviews:

> What does "being realistic" mean? It means believing that in the final analysis there is a single correct way to see and understand things (based on rationality and science); believing that these (our) universal truths must prevail against all others, which in our view are less correct, or false; being convinced that we live in a world made of a single world, and being shocked by the opposite possibility; and being sure that the truth of this single (usually Western) reality—which obviously we all share, as we should!—is the space from which we ought to promote our projects (whether they be for becoming very rich or for resisting capitalism). (6)

The problems we face as a planet, in other words, cannot be solved using the frameworks and practices that caused them in the first place. It's not enough to resist if resistance is merely exchanging one form of individualism for another.

There are certainly precedents for thinking outside the individualist box. In Buddhism, for instance, there is no self, only being in relation to everything else: "*nothing exists intrinsically; everything is mutually constituted*" (19; Escobar's italics). Other examples cited by Escobar implicate technology and the theorizing of Western knowledge. Cybernetics troubled the separation of observer and observed, implicating both in systemic relation: "This conclusion still remains at the center of debates about the real: to know is to transform yourself and the unfolding universe" (22). The developing field of political ontology "provides a space for studying the relationships between worlds, including the conflicts that result when different ontologies or worlds strive to preserve their existence in their interactions with other worlds, under asymmetric conditions of power" (25). And Foucault—an essential companion on this trip—discerned a fundamental structure to discourses, and in doing so illuminated possibilities beyond those that prevail, as in the example of discourse around Third World "development": "What does it mean to assert that development began to function as a discourse; that is, that it created a space in which only certain things could be said or even imagined?" (51).

Ultimately, the precursors that most inform Escobar's study/manifesto go all the way back to the beginnings of humanity as we know it:

> inhabiting (*habitar*) can be defined as the recurrent associational interaction between living things and their environment, creating the conditions for well-being. For a good portion of their history, humans knew how to practice this form of inhabiting the habitats they found. This ethos began to crack with the Greek polis, with its geometrical forms and layouts, conceived by humans who had begun to think of themselves as superior to and apart from the natural world. Here began the long civilizational journey of the Western ontology of separation and dominion over the natural world; the habitat is transformed into 'an out-of-focus, scarcely noticed background' to the polis and its function of inhabiting. (154)

This prevailing ontology is contrasted with the knowledge it suppresses in order to circumscribe what passes for reality, what Escobar calls "the cosmovisions of the original peoples in many parts of the world" (15). These include groups in northwestern Colombia who practice "a relational ontology based on the idea that territories are living beings with memories, spaces in which the sacred and the everyday are lived experiences, possessing their own rights, which embody their relationships with other beings and the ways they interrelate with them" (16). In a narrative set piece, Escobar imagines a father and daughter navigating the Colombian rain forest via the Yurumanguí River, in a canoe made from the mangrove tree, using knowledge of the river's tides, and traversing an environment rich in other species on their way home: "Ethnographers of these worlds describe it in terms of three contiguous worlds (*el mundo de abajo*, or infraworld;

este mundo, or the human world; and *el mundo de arriba*, or spiritual/supraworld). There are comings and goings between these worlds, and particular places and beings connecting them, including 'visions' and spiritual beings" (71). Rather than treat such knowledge as an object of curiosity or "enlightened" dismissal, Escobar sees it as another form of ontology that calls instead for engagement, one pluriversal link among many that potentially impacts our collective history, politics, and culture. In contrasting one possible way of life with another, Escobar's intent is not to romanticize these cultures, which is merely another form of centering modernity: "those who defend place, territory, and the Earth are neither romantics nor 'infantile.' They represent the cutting edge of thought, for they are attuned to the Earth and to justice, and they understand the central issue of our historical moment: the transitions to other models for living, toward a pluriverse of worlds" (44-45).

(North) American readers may read Escobar with skepticism. If you're reading this in the midst of 2021's ongoing pandemic and political division, you might understandably have a problem with a scholar who encourages readers to think outside of science and the rational. In response, Escobar might remind us of what a pluriverse is: distinct worlds that co-exist as part of the same system. He might also respond with a simple question about our current state of individuality and consumption: How's that working out for you?

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