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The risky streets of ontologically redesigned cities: Some comments on Arturo Escobar's rurbanization research program¹

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In *Habitability and Design: Radical Interdependence and the Remaking of Cities*, Escobar expands on his remarks at the 2018 GeoForum lecture at the AAG (Escobar 2018a, 2018b). He contends that cities are governed by a Western, patriarchal, logic that disconnects them from the Earth and makes them uncondusive to life. In order to make cities habitable again, he notes, we must redesign them along the lines of communities whose political ontologies are grounded in their relationship with the Earth as a living system:

The current crisis is a crisis of the patriarchal and capitalist occidental modes of dwelling that have eroded the systemic mode of living based on radical interdependence. ... Important clues for the relational rethinking and remaking of cities might exist in the autonomous territorial struggles by some groups against extractive activities (largely, but not only, in rural and forest areas in the Global South), involving the defense of other modes of inhabiting. To do so, however, requires the ontological redesigning of design, away from its functionalist and instrumental orientations and towards relational principles and goals. (2018b: 1-2)

Escobar describes his GeoForum remarks and paper as a research program on cities and an intervention in the field of urban studies, which he elaborates in his latest book *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (2018c). The range and scope of Escobar's paper are ambitious as is evident from the range of key terms in the quote above. The assertions and approaches in *Habitability and Design* also bear the hallmarks of Escobar's thinking: tackling large questions, seeking broad explanations, and following up on critiques with proposals. While the focus on the urban is a new element in Escobar's critiques of Western modernity and

¹ Acknowledgments: Thanks to Sarah Hall of GeoForum for inviting me to be a commentator for the 2018 GeoForum lecture, and to Arturo for his work, which has been deeply generative for me as for so many others.

proposals for non-Eurocentric alternatives, there are clear continuities between his current intervention and his prolific work over the past 20+ years.

Escobar's writings have shaped scholarship on a diverse range of concerns across the globe. Indeed, my own research on development, the environment and Afro-Colombian social movements in the Pacific lowlands of Colombia has developed in relation to his (Asher 2009, 2014, 2018). These brief comments cannot do justice to Escobar's vast contributions. Rather I flag some central threads of his foray into urban studies and note that the goals, methods, and politics of this latest critique and research proposal for "ruralizing the urban," are contiguous with the trajectory of his previous two monographs *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995/2012) and *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (2008). Given the continuities in Escobar's work, my comments parallel my remarks on his earlier writings (Asher 2013, Asher and Wainwright 2018). I flag a series of analytical slippages in his "design for the pluriverse," and argue that however inadvertent they risk undermining his, and indeed, our larger political desire for habitable cities and Earthly justice. Therefore, I suggest his relational frameworks need supplementing with other methods to understand and address the "patriarchal capitalist colonial modernity" (p. 5) that he holds responsible for the current crises in cities and beyond.

Escobar intervenes in urban studies to attend to the inadequacies of most extant analyses of the "urban revolution of space" inadequate, and to share lessons from struggles for urban justice struggles and rights to the city. To illustrate the problems with the former, he references the discussions at the October 2016 United Nations-Habitat III conference. Convened every 20 years, these large UN conferences are the most influential event in the urban studies field. Escobar observes that the New Urban agenda that emerged from Habitat III to meet the challenges of rapid urbanization in the 21st century (rise of megacities, urban governance, migrant flows, etc.) was drafted by professional planners, international corporations and multinational development institutions. Small wonder then that it represents prioritizes, "... the accumulation of capital rather than social reproduction." (p. 3) and does little to meet the needs of most marginalized communities. Like the post-World War II development agenda of the last century, this 21st century New Urban Agenda and the mainstream approaches to urbanism

it represents foster a “crisis of habitability,” which are symptomatic of “... a deeper crisis, of patriarchal capitalist colonial modernity as the dominant civilizational model for the globalizing world. (p. 5)

Escobar contends that to go beyond these impasses of modernity and to make cities habitable again, they must be reconnected to the Earth. He proposes the concepts “rurbanization” and “ontological metrofitting,” to foreground the *relationality* between the rural and urban, and other spaces and subjects. Escobar reviews the current “relational turn” in urban studies and notes that among the commendable features of this work are an ethnographic sensibility, recognition of urban complexity, links to politics, designing policies from below, and attention to various forms of materiality including that of climate change. Given the imperatives of planetary urbanization, critical scholars and professionals also acknowledge that cities “... will need to be significantly rethought, reconfigured, and remade.” (p. 7).

But such remaking, he reiterates, cannot be imagined from these prior relational frameworks, which he finds weak due to their still being bound to anthropocentric approaches of patriarchal, western modernity. To imagine habitable cities, he contends requires radical relationality of the kind found in “other” cosmo-visions and ontologies, and the logics of non-Western epistemes of autonomous indigenous and black communities. In a combination of analysis and politics that is characteristic of Escobar, at his AAG lecture he foregrounded the importance of movements and knowledges of indigenous, Afro-descendant, pre-western, Latin American indigenous and black feminists to outline a research program for rurbanization. In the written version of this lecture, he fleshes out the concept of “ruralizing the urban” and the relevance of the “peasant mode of dwelling” to urbanization with particularly reference to the work of Colombian architect and designer Harold Martínez Espinal. This too is characteristic of Escobar. He is among the few authoritative Western academics who consistently references works by lesser-known, women, young or non-western scholars, and oral and activist knowledges. A close reader of Escobar’s work will note that apart from the object of his paper—the urban studies field and cities—the aim, methods, politics, and citational practices of this work mirror those of his work on development and development studies (Escobar 1995/2012, 2008).

In the context of the ecological and economic crises of the 21st century, the imperatives of social and environmental justice are more urgent than ever. Escobar's alternative proposals and the voices he repeatedly brings to bear on them are clearly necessary. Yet as I noted in my AAG commentary, there are analytical slippages and political risks, however inadvertent, in this as in his older work. I flag them and outline some supplemental strategies for those in the urban studies field who wish to take up the call of rurbanization and ontological metrofitting. Without these supplements we risk slipping into the dualisms these methodologies are meant to undo. For example, without an understanding of the political economy of development and agrarian change, Martínez Espinal's design principles and "ruralizing the urban" could become just another technical fix, the dangers of which Escobar has been flagging since his critique of development planning (1995/2012). Urban studies experts are best qualified to assess the systematics of Escobar's systems thinking for architecture, design and urban planning. Here I focus on "relational thinking," which is at the heart of his proposal for a non-patriarchal pluriverse and to outline how it can be supplemented productively. My remarks are not aimed at Escobar but rather at those who take his warning of civilization crisis seriously (as they must do).

Remarking on the need to develop our thinking about the relevance of patriarchy to the urban crisis, he notes,

As a number of feminist writing outside the core of the Anglo-American academic world suggest, patriarchy entails the systematic erosion of the relational **fundament (sic)** of life. The encroachment of patriarchal cultures, starting in Europe several thousand years ago, has not ceased to gain hold in most societies. ... Patriarchal cultures value competition, hierarchies, power, growth, appropriation, procreation, the negation of others, violence, and war. In this culture, modern humans seek certitude through control, including the control of the natural world. Conversely, historical **matristic (sic)** cultures were characterized by conversations highlighting inclusion, participation, collaboration, respect, sacredness, and the always recurrent cyclic renovation of life. They required awareness of the interconnectedness of all existence. (p. 11)

The choice to draw on feminist thinking from beyond the western academy and name the problems of patriarchy is politically important. Yet limiting its origins to Europe is problematic for feminist politics in the broad sense that Escobar aims to flag. At least

since the 1990s, feminists from within and beyond the academy who have been at pains to highlight the multiple roots and transnational connections of radical politics. Indeed, relationality and multiple logics are fundamental to feminist theories and politics, and their necessarily anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial goals (Asher 2017). For instance, various feminist, post-colonial, transnational, “of color,” black, queer, decolonial, post-humanist, and other critical perspectives have reframed debates about science, the nature of subjectivity, domination, and resistance; and posited new forms of radical politics. They have questioned the masculinist and essentialist assumptions of disciplinary thinking to examine how women, human, culture, nature, race, indigeneity, peasants, proletariat, the rural, urban, city, country, globe, among other categories of analysis and politics emerge in relation to each other. They have also challenged how the foundational categories and dualisms of Enlightenment modernity (nature-culture, object-subject, feminine-masculine, sex-gender, colony-nation, knowledge-praxis, and more) are constituted as a result of power, representation, and political economy. Going beyond oppositional thinking, feminists from multiple locations have shown how such dualisms and others such as rural vs. urban, or the Western vs the Rest tell us little about specific conjunctures of historical interactions and geographical connections that forge and bind them. Patriarchal practices then are but one form of such power.

Students of the urban who resist the temptation to paint the Western academic knowledge with a broad brush and avoid the pitfalls of identity politics will find a rich lode of critical scholarship on the makings and workings of “patriarchal colonial capitalist modernity.” (Hall et al. 1996, Lemert 2013). They will learn that modernity takes diverse and divergent forms as it shapes and is shaped by those it encounters. They might recognize multiple forms of radical relationality in the works of environmental historians such as William Cronon (1992), anthropologists such as Eric Wolf (1986), and feminists such as Silvia Federici (2012) to name but three. Reading Marx’s writings and critiques of the capitalist mode of production critically but openly (Anderson 2010, Brown 2012, Haraway 1991, Osborne 2005, Luxemburg 2004, Spivak 2015, Tsing 2015, Weeks 2011) will enable students to trace its complex and contradictory dynamics, and how difference (racial, gendered, sexual, spatial and more) and social reproduction are key to capitalist accumulation (Katz 2001, Mies 1982). Becoming close readers of texts

and the world will be able to enable urban studies scholars to contextualize the New Urban Agenda in historical terms and parse the analytical parameters of the latest phase of capitalist accumulation.

Understanding and undoing the ravages of many violent “-isms” (sexism, colonialism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, to name but a few) to imagine and construct a world for non-humans and their human kin is an ethical and political imperative. I believe it is such an imperative that underlies Escobar’s urging that

Non-patriarchal ways of being are open to us in the archives of non-patriarchal practices, and many others yet to be invented. At issue is a politics for another civilization that respects, and builds on, the radical interconnectedness of all life – what Mexican feminist sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2017) calls a politics **in** the feminine, centered on the reproduction of life, in tandem with the re-appropriation of collectively produced goods (postcapitalism), and beyond the masculinist canons of the political, linked to capital and the state. Or, to return to Argentinean anthropologist Rita Segato (2016), a politics that ends the “minoritization” of women that has accompanied the de-communalization of modern worlds, in favor of a re-communalizing autonomous politics that reclaims the “ontological fullness” of women’s worlds. Re-weaving the communal and relational fabric of life means, as she puts it, that “the strategy, from now on, is a feminine one” (106). (Escobar 2018b: 11)

As we attend to the “radical interconnectedness of all life,” we must bear in mind the warning that comes from many quarters not to reify “women,” the “feminine,” “non-Western” and other “Others.” Furthermore, by now the feminist insight that “women” (or indeed any group or entity) are not a monolithic category is almost a truism. Thus, the need to be attentive to what I call “differences within difference” is yet another repetition in a series of repetitions. The words and wisdom of activists and academics feed into the endeavors to “learn from below.” These are active tasks, which must necessarily involve parsing the parameters and permutations of “patriarchal practices,” “postcapitalism,” “ontological fullness,” “politics of the feminine” and “autonomous politics.”

Urban scholars and planners certainly have a lot to learn from Escobar’s call to “re-Earth the city,” but they must do so without romanticizing or instrumentalizing peasants, the rural or the “communal.” And the “politics of the feminine” must be supplemented by a feminist politics to undertake a serious critique of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and the relations between them. Without such a supplement, those

bearing the mark “woman” will be the burdened again with the unpaid labor of reproducing life.

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