

DISCLAIMER

In general, the present text intends to be a provocation to get us thinking as a group by arousing the curiosity for each other's work, and thus should be read in connection with the materials posted in the workshop's webpage. More specifically we seek here to make evident some areas of convergence between the strands of research found among participants and to raise some questions we hope to address in the meeting. The text is not intended to set a rigid agenda but rather to prompt responses that will help us define the agenda. These responses can consist of comments shared with the group (please send to Mario for distribution), in the form of direct suggestions to the co-organizers and last but not least through your written contribution to the workshop. We hope to have these contributions circulated well in advance of the meeting so everyone reads everyone else's work. Our target date to circulate the written contributions will be August 22th.

Politics from the Pluriverse

By the Triphasic Collective Los Ponchos

This workshop is proposed as an experiment in reality-making practices. We want to start with the assumption that we do not *know* what we are talking about. Closer in spirit to a witches' coven than to an orthodox academic meeting, the workshop is concerned with detecting, amplifying and re-transmitting certain events that we might conceive as forming periodicities and patterns. What is characteristic of these events is that they unhinge perceptions of the world that 'we' tend to assume as common. For lack of a better word we are calling these perceived patterns the pluriverse. The periodicities and patterns we associate with the pluriverse have emerged in different ways in the writings of the workshop's participants, but we suspect that these writings are themselves resonating periodicities and patterns that extend well beyond the academia. Thus, we hope that our discussions will work through two registers and their connections: a) detecting the patterns and periodicities that we associate with the pluriverse wherever we sense them; and b) recursively detecting our own works as partaking and resonating with/ in those patterns and periodicities.

What kinds of events make these patterns and periodicities that we are calling the pluriverse? How do they manifest in our works and beyond? A few vignettes will help us to start addressing the questions.

Chiapas, Mexico. In 1994 the Mayan Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) declares war on the Mexican government, describing itself as the product of 500 years of struggle since the Conquest. In 1996, the EZLN circulates its Fourth Lacandona Declaration stating "Many words are walked through the world. Many worlds are made. Many worlds make us. There are words and worlds that are untrue and unjust. There are words and worlds that are true and truthful... Only the powerful and their servants fit in the world of the powerful.... We want a world in which many worlds fit." 'A world in which many worlds fit' becomes a key demand of the alter-globalization movement.

Porto Alegre, Brazil. 2001. Building on the Zapatista uprising, and the 1999 Seattle demonstrations against the WTO, the first World Social Forum (WSF) takes place under the slogan 'Another World is Possible,' meant to contest the dominant notion that neoliberal modernity is the only plausible 'reality.' According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the WSF do this by enacting, on the one hand, a sociology of absences that illuminates how alternatives to the 'existing world' are actively produced as absent, and on the other hand, a sociology of emergences that seeks to identify and enlarge future possible experiences that now just appear as tendencies and latencies.

British Columbia, Canada. 2004. The Mowachat/Muchalaht First Nation clashes with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and environmentalists groups who want to return Luna, a young lost orca whale, to its pack. The Natives insist that the 'orca' is T'xulit, the abode of the spirit of their recently deceased chief, Ambrose Maquinna, and that his desire to stay with his people must be respected. Finally Luna is not moved, in part because of the Native's 'rights to their culture'. The substantive claim made by the Natives about T'xulit is never seriously engaged by others except to be ridiculed or minimized as a 'belief'.

Isabelle Stengers invite us to 'resist serious thinking' (a way of thinking that has stiffen its capacity to be surprised and moved in new directions) and to begin to take seriously that which 'we' (adult serious thinkers) have no longer the luxury to entertain because we 'know'. The move is crucial to guard off from the modern territory's ever-going process of capture.

Bolivia.2006. The minister of foreign affairs, indigenous Aymara David Choquehuanca states that stones have gender, reproduce and form families and generations. The comment is widely criticized and presented by opposition forces as an example of the risks of having 'backward and superstitious indians' running the 'serious businesses of the country. Since 2005 the country has been governed by MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo, a political alliance of left and indigenous movements). Choquehuanca is part of a current within the government that seeks to reshape the state formation in light of indigenous cosmologies.

In analyzing the struggles of place-based movements in Colombia, Escobar argues that "modernity's ability to provide solutions to modern problems has reached a new limit, making discussion of a transition beyond modernity feasible, perhaps for the first time ... The discussion of a transition beyond the current order brings together those who call for new anti-capitalist imaginaries..., with those emphasizing non-Eurocentric perspectives on globality, the advocates of decoloniality ,and calls for a new paradigm of relinking with nature and each other. What these have in common is an acute sense or modernity's inability to tackle today's problems".

2008. Ecuador. In spite of Left-leaning president Rafael Correa's disagreement, and at the instance of Indigenous delegates, the constitutional assembly enshrines Pachamama (a Qechua word translated with much distortion as 'nature') as a subject with rights to "exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles." Marisol de la Cadena sees this event as the

introduction in the political sphere of entities (“earth-beings”) that literally throw into disarray the modern constitution.

*In his book **Par-dela Nature et Culture**, Philippe Descola argues that what he calls ‘the naturalist consensus’ is faltering in the face of new developments in science, ethics and law, and intimates that we (moderns) might be experiencing “a phase of ontological re-composition”.*

Ontological politics: if realities are enacted, then reality is not in principle fixed or singular... The implication is that there are various possible reasons, including the political, for enacting one kind of reality rather than another, and that these grounds can in some measure be debated. This is ontological politics (John Law, building on Annemarie Mol).

Grossberg argues that the conjuncture “demands that we find ways to listen to the challenges posed to euro-modernity by the demands of those who have been colonized and even exterminated. In one sense, it is precisely the claim of other modernities but even more, of other realities, of the post-colonial seeking an-other future, of the indigenous seeking to live in the reality that euro-modernity tried to take from them. This is the challenge of ontological imagination and translation and investment”.

Peruvian Amazon. Natives obstruct roads in protest of a presidential decree that open their territories to mining and oil companies, which now possess technologies that allow the exploitation of resources never accessible before. President Alan Garcia considers that the agenda of the protesters’ leads the country to “irrationality and primitivism.’ Shortly after, the militarized police unleash an attack on the protesters that ends up in a massacre with at least 9 policeman and 20 demonstrators dead. Capitalist and State practices, intertwined with Science, are not often prone to play ‘ontological politics’ or to listen to challenges posed to Euro-modernity. This is a ‘presence’ that imposes itself by creating absences. And yet....

Harvey Feit tells a story about how the Cree of Northern Quebec rather than severing relations with these self-imposing ‘presences’ keep trying to make them work properly, not out of a moral imperative but rather out of an ontological one.

We could go on and on with more vignettes, all illustrating in different ways and with diverse degrees of dramatism the increasingly more visible and felt presence of what from an unmitigated Euro-modern standpoint must appear as ‘anomalies.’ By unmitigated Euro-modern standpoint we are referring to one which embodies without further ado what Latour (1993) has called the modern constitution, with its double great divisions between nature and culture, on the one hand, and moderns and pre-moderns, on the other hand. The presumption that nature and culture are two distinct ontological domains has nowhere been most clearly embodied than in Science (with capital), the medium with which moderns get to know nature (or reality itself) without the distortions of culture. And precisely the possession of Science, and therefore of true knowledge with universal validity, usually emerges as one of the most distinguishable trait that separates moderns from the rest, who can only have beliefs, or at best, local knowledge. From

such a standpoint, modernity was a way of being to which everyone would eventually come to adhere, for it was grounded in reality itself. It was then a matter of time before all ‘Others’ would become somehow modern and bow to the dictates of a reality unveiled by Science. This was the ‘normal’ and expected storyline for entrenched modernizers, from Right to Left. Needless to say, the events presented by the vignettes above are enormously disruptive of this normalcy. Not only the ‘Others’ of Euro-modernity have failed to embrace it but also in some cases have shifted from a defensive attitude to a positive affirmation of their own ontologies in the face of Euro-modern claims to universalism. To top this, the ontological divide between nature and culture has become increasingly under question, and so has done the authority of Science to determine what the real is. In short then, we can say that, as a first approach, the pattern we perceive is constituted by events that appear as ‘anomalous’ in relation to a Euro-modern storyline. How do the occurrences that make up this pattern have been ‘resonated’ by the strands of research represented in the workshop?

Alter-Globalization and Place-based Politics: a bit more than anti capitalism.

Many analysts of the alter-globalization movement have stressed the centrality that knowledge practices and knowledge production have for its participants (Conway 2004; Osterweil et al 2008) and Santos (2006) has argued that for many of them, social justice cannot be achieved without cognitive justice. While momentarily suspending the certainty of the meaning of ‘cognitive justice’ we still want to pursue this thread to get a closer look at how some elements of the alter-globalization, especially those connected to notions of place-based politics, disrupt the modernist storyline.

As pointed out in one of the vignettes, the motto of the World Social Forum (WSF) ‘Another world is possible’ was meant to contest ‘la pensée unique,’ the mantra that gained dominance from the end of the Cold War that there was no other *realistic* social ordering for a globalizing world than capitalist modernity in its neoliberal version. Central to such contestation was to produce ‘another knowledge’ that would illuminate alternatives. Of course these alternatives came from a diverse pool of experiences and forms of knowledge. Initially, mainly from various strands of the modern left bringing along its universalist claims but increasingly with more input from subaltern groups such as Indigenous peoples, peasants and women who brought along their place-based and situated epistemologies. ‘Place,’ understood as both location and sense of self, is central for these subaltern groups as the grounding nexus where ecological, cultural and epistemological differences cohere into particular ontologies that refuse to be rolled over or subsumed under capitalist modernity and its main apparatuses (e.g., state and the market). The defence of the particularities of places against the universalizing tendencies of Euro-modernity’s agents and institutions, as well as the search for non-colonizing and symmetrical ways to relate across differences, has lead various analysts to conceive the present moment as one that go beyond capitalism/anti-capitalism to involve a particular place-based politics (Escobar 2008; Mignolo 2000, 2007; Rochelau 2007; Santos 2007), which in some cases also incarnates a pluriversal political proposal (Blaser 2010; de la Cadena, 2010).

Constituted as a ‘public space’ (Conway 2004) where different experiences and forms of knowledge embodied by diverse place-based movements met, the WSF came to perform the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences of which Santos speaks. Yet aware of the universalizing tendencies of Euro-modernity and its politics, some analysts warn that attempts to achieve a counter-hegemonic coherence without attention to the coloniality of knowledge (i.e., the inequalities between modern and non-modern regimes of truth) that play out in this ‘public space’ may re-enact absences by translating place-based agendas into the universalising categories of emancipation emanating from the modern West (see Conway 2008).¹

In seeking to articulate and aggregate with each other without succumbing to proselytizing practices, the work of translation becomes crucial to the alter-globalization movement. Translation is “the alternative to a general theory” about social emancipation; it is the “procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world ... as revealed by the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences, without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without in other words, reducing them to homogeneous entities (Santos 2006: 132). But, beyond what translation is expected to achieve, how is translation conceived in the alter-globalization space?

According to Santos, translation is based “on the premise that for cultural, social and political reasons specific to our times it is possible to reach a broad consensus around the idea that there is no general, all-encompassing theory of social transformation”. Moreover, “without this consensus – the only kind of legitimate (negative) universalism – translation is a colonial kind of work no matter how postcolonial it claims to be” (ibid 140). Based on this consensus translation can proceed as the “interpretation work between two or more cultures ... to identify similar concerns or aspirations among them and the different responses they provide for them (1134).”

In this formulation, translation seems to require a pre-existing common ground both as its condition of possibility and as its expected goal. In effect, either in the form of a negative universal that must be accepted as a precondition to start the work of translation or in the form of an expectation that the work of translation should identify concerns and aspirations which while not exactly the same must coincide, the notion of a pre-existing common ground is lingering here. This is in tension with another formulation that conceives that “the work of translation has no commonplace at the outset ... as it progresses the work of translation construct the commonplaces...” (Ibid 140).

The second formulation seems closer to visions of pluriversality that stress ontological rather than epistemological multiplicity. These visions pose some challenges to ideas of translation that

¹ The warning becomes particularly relevant in contexts where, as in the cases of Ecuador and Bolivia, the coincidence built on the opposition to neoliberalism must be transformed into a propositive stance embodied through state policies. As revealed by the increasing antagonism between progressive yet modernizing stances of Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa and his supporters and the Indigenous movement, in these contexts it becomes apparent that those coincidences were based on equivocations. We discuss the concept of equivocation below.

rely to any extent in notions of pre-existing common grounds. From such perspective the pre-condition of a negative universal begs the question of how this universal comes into being out of a pluriverse. In other words, even the consensus about this must be reached through the work of translation. In other words, this consensus can be a goal to be achieved through translation but never its pre-condition (see the debate Beck/Latour in *Common Knowledge* 10(3) 2004). Moreover, as illustrated by the Cree case (Feit 2004), for many subordinate groups refusing engagement and attempts at translation because optimal conditions are not in place might not be an option. Can we still conceive of (fruitful) translations that operate without preconditions? For example, Brian Noble (2007) discusses the Black Foot's enactment of a form of translation that starting from the 'here and now' of a hierarchical relation can also subvert it.

Conceiving translation as mutual interpretation whose goal is to identify commonalities may appear, from an ontological multiplicity standpoint, prone to fall into equivocations (Viveiros de Castro 2004), that is to assume we are referring to the same thing when that is not the case. An example drawn from the vignettes above would be assuming that the thing orca can and is expressed through the synonymous terms Luna and T'xuliit and thus that we are dealing with an epistemological difference. However, it might be the case that 'orca' operates as an (imposed) homonym that refers to two different things, Luna and T'xulit and thus that we are dealing with an ontological difference. The risk is that a *search for* similarities (in contrast to encountering them) usually implies an imposition. For instance, looking for similarities between our notion of an orca and that of a given Indigenous group starts from the assumption that *there is such thing as an orca* which is then conceptually dressed up in different ways by 'us' and 'them,' yet, precisely the ontological question is, *what is there?* Starting the engagement disregarding this question (i.e., assuming that there is an orca) might imply an imposition and a conflict.

The implicit formulation of the pluriverse that is lingering here stresses that we are dealing with relations between worlds and not just between humans. This requires that we think the terms of the relations in as an underspecified way as possible for we cannot assume in advance what are the 'things' our world is confronted with in any given ontological encounter. In addition, the possibility that translation across worlds may reveal equivocations (and therefore ontological conflicts) raises an important question: **how to perform translations that both are accountable to the multiple possibilities of the encounter between different ontologies and retain a commitment to produce politically transformative articulations? And here the qualification 'politically transformative' is overshadowed by the presence of a set of practices (by Capital, State and Science) that tend to obliterate the pluriverse by naturally/historically imposing their singular politic[s].** This question becomes even more poignant when we consider that the terrain is not clearly split into two camps (e.g., the universalizing apparatuses of Euro-modernity and the pluriversalizing multiple worlds) but rather is crisscrossed by allegiances, connections, and connivances of all kinds.

ANT: a bit more than constructivism

Actor-network theory, through science studies, has also put forward a very strong challenge to the Euro-modern storyline, in this case by contesting the nature/culture divide (see Latour 1993, 1999, 2004a; Law and Hassard 1999; Law 2004, Law and Mol 2002; Mol 1999, 2002; Stengers 1997). A basic insight that emerged from this body of work was that, contrary to a commonly held assumption, scientific practices do not work with completely independent realities ‘out there,’ rather they produce those realities. This insight should not be confused with ‘social constructionism,’ for it is not referring to *ideas* about reality but to reality (or realities) in all its (their) materiality. Neither should one then assume that what is being said is that scientists make realities at will. The crucial issue here is that a different understanding of reality is being postulated, one that bypass the nature culture divide to arrive to a material-semiotic formulation. To put it briefly, scientists make realities but not under conditions of their own choosing, they have to grapple with an ‘environment’ (or hinterland or landscape) whose features are the sedimentation or crystallization of previous actions ... and, crucially, the agent of those actions are not only the scientists but complex assemblages of humans and non-humans (see Law 2007).

A further insight of these works is that diverse scientific practices contribute to bring into being diverse realities. For example Annemarie Mol (2002) has shown in a hospital setting how atherosclerosis emerges as a different object under the microscope of the pathologist, the interpretation of the clinician, and the graph of the radiologist. This multiplicity, as Law (2004) points out, raises important questions, “if there are different realities, then lots of new questions arise. How do they relate? How do we choose between them? How should we choose between them? One possibility is that we need what Mol calls an ontological politics. If truth by itself is not a gold standard, then perhaps there may be additional political reasons for preferring and enacting one kind of reality rather than another” (Law 2004). In Mol’s case we know that atherosclerosis’ multiplicity is arranged into a singular ‘disease’ by a process of selectively coordinating or discarding divergences. That those involved in these processes are largely operating in a milieu that takes the singularity of reality (a particularly Euro-modern assumption for that matter) as a given is not a minor detail. But, what happens when the multiple realities being enacted by different worlds refuse to be managed into singularity? When we move the insight about reality making practices and multiplicity beyond the domain of science, the questions posed by Law become even more pressing and complex, and the connections with the concerns of those coming from alter-globalization and place-based politics start to become evident. In effect, one cannot avoid **wondering about the potential connections between the ‘managed singularity’ achieved by Euro-modern knowledges practices ‘at home’ (in the hospital for instance) and the singularity imposed ‘abroad’ (in the roads), at gunpoint as in the Peruvian case of our vignettes or ‘peacefully’ through benevolent programs of education into Western ontologies. But in a similar way one may also wonder about the potential relations between that which escape singularity ‘at home’ and resist it ‘abroad’—as well as about the partially**

connected ontological spaces that emerge at all scales as people selectively accept the offer of ‘civilization’ *but* refuse the wholesale transformation that it requires.

Similarly to the alter-globalization participants and analysts’ formulation of the pluriverse, the one emerging from STS (and particularly ANT) is at variance with a relativism that equates radical differences with incommunicability. From this formulation, communication across worlds (or the constitution of a common world) remains a possibility—and a political one at that. Thus, this is a possibility that must be brought into being through active work, and hence translation also figures centrally for this formulation of the pluriverse. But here translation is much closer to the non-foundational formulation sketched by Santos as it is not premised on yet to know but already existing common grounds (or an agreement reached before translation starts). Paraphrasing Latour (2005:108) translation is closer to a process that induces two parties into coexistence than a process that facilitates the transport of information between parties. In this sense, translation is concerned with building the common ground rather than seeking out commonalities. **But how can this proceed? How common would be those grounds—and how would they be made common? Is this the only way of conceiving translation? What other scenarios can we envision? Does co-existence always require a common ground? How does a translation that allows for constant negotiation of the co-existence look like—one that inserts ontological politics into coexistence? What about avoidance or detachment? Do they have a role in this re-conceived notion of translation?** For instance, in one of the formulations of the pluriverse emerging from Indigenous studies it is proposed that translation should be something like a ‘controlled equivocation’ whose aim is “not that of finding a ‘synonym’ (a co-referential representation) in our ... conceptual language for the representations which other[s] use to speak about one and the same Thing; rather, the aim is not to ‘lose sight’ of the difference concealed within equivocal ‘homonyms’ between our language and that of other[s] — since we and they are never talking about the same things” (see Viveiros de Castro 2004).

Viveiros de Castro’s idea of translation as equivocation emerges from the insight that Amazonian ontologies tend to be ‘multinaturalist,’ that is, they do not conceive of a unified reality but rather a multiplicity of realities. In this point, Amazonian ontologies closely resonate with the idea of the pluriverse emerging from both STS and alter-globalization. Yet, are all of these ideas of the pluriverse operating on the same ontology? Most likely not, and this points to some further questions: while ‘pluriversalist,’ exactly which ontology is ‘ours’? For example, John Law (2004) discloses his: “The picture of reality that lies behind this [his formulation of the pluriverse] assumes out-there-ness to be overwhelming, excessive, energetic, a set of undecided potentialities, and an ultimately undecidable flux.” **Can each of us spell out the ontological assumption we operate with, and then ponder, how does this ontology relate to the others? Are we advancing or offering the forms of translation that emerge from our ontologies in an appropriate manner, avoiding ‘imperialisms’? For instance, are we taking Euro-modern ontological assumptions as a case of ‘false consciousness’ hiding from sight the ‘reality’ of the pluriverse? (see Henare et al 2008) Might the pluriversalist claim be at risk of becoming too**

voracious trying to account for both what exists and what does not exist? Are these even the right questions? Or should we rather pose questions about how we relate to other ontologies in terms of efficacy and consequences and perhaps of ‘craft,’ as Stengers invite us to do? But if we pose the question in these terms we then must raise the question of the conjuncture in which we operate.

Of Conjunctures and Convergences

The term ‘conjuncture’ as explained by Grossberg (forthcoming) seems very appropriate to speak of the resonances and convergences we have tried to capture with the vignettes above. “A conjuncture ... is characterized by an articulation, accumulation and condensation of contradictions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances. .. It is the complex product of multiple lines of force, determination and resistance, with different temporalities and spatialities. *Yet a conjuncture has to be constructed, narrated, fabricated.*” Grossberg also points out that the conjuncture is associated to a problematic lived or experienced as crisis. The vignettes carry that feeling of crisis, of turning point that we consider is related to a double sided event: the unravelling of the Euro-modern constitution and the re-affirmation/emergence of the pluriverse.

We intentionally mixed in the vignettes those occurrences that make it to the news, those that are commentaries on the former and occurrences that might be only noticed by academics for they break ‘our serious thinking.’ We see these occurrences converging and potentially making up a conjuncture. But as the emphasis in the quotation indicates, the conjuncture is not something that simply stands ‘out there’ for us to identify but a moment or event we need to ‘craft’ and help to emerge. So, here is perhaps the overarching question of the meeting: **Is there a set of plausible, efficacious and interlinked stories that can be told about the kinds of occurrences depicted in the vignettes and beyond? How do we craft such linkages?**

In addition to the questions highlighted in the text we would like participants to consider a few others raised in the original proposal of the workshop:

- 1) what kinds of politics become possible when, in looking at grassroots and place-based mobilizations and their relations to state, market and science, we shift lens from epistemological issues (differences in how people come to know the world) to ontological issues (what kinds of worlds are there to be known)?
- 2) In turn, what do these processes of mobilizations, and their triggers, tell us about the conditions of possibility for the critical interrogations of Euro-modern ontological assumptions emerging in the academy and beyond? Are there patterns of resonance between interrogations in both settings? How these resonances might inform our roles at the intersection of globalization (understood as a struggle for the pluriverse) and of knowledge practices as productive of variable realities or worlds?

- 3) What can we learn from actual experiences of translation(s) in specific settings (we have in mind here the contribution of participants whose works involve ongoing efforts by placed-based groups to enact and empower their worlds).