



February 2018

Farewell to Development

An Interview with Arturo Escobar

*As inequality and environmental degradation worsen, the search is on not only for alternative development models but also for alternatives to development itself. Leading post-development theorist Arturo Escobar, co-editor of *The Post-Development Dictionary* and author of *Design for the Pluriverse*, discusses the fight for pluralism and justice in Latin America with Allen White, Senior Fellow at the Tellus Institute.*

Tell us about your personal journey. What inspired you to become a critic of mainstream development theory and a pioneer of a new paradigm?

I grew up in Cali, Colombia, a city of a half million people, in the 1960s, in many ways a typical member of a generation seeking modernization and development, in the mainstream sense of the words. Both of my parents came from the countryside—my father from a very poor peasant family and my mother from a middle-class family in a small town. They migrated to Cali to improve their lives and secure opportunities for their children. We attended good elementary and high schools, which required substantial sacrifice on the part of my parents. Upon graduation, I attended Cali's public university, Universidad del Valle (the only affordable option), where I majored in chemical engineering.

As I was nearing completion of my undergraduate degree (1975), I realized two things. First, I didn't want to work as a chemical engineer because that probably meant working for a large, multinational company. Second, I was becoming very interested in questions of food and hunger. Through acquaintances in Colombia, and with knowledge obtained through study of UN documents about the hunger crisis of the early 1970s, I was awarded a fellowship to begin a Master's Degree in international nutrition and food science at Cornell University in the late 1970s. The program approached food as a scientific matter and malnutrition as a political matter, cultivating my interest in the political economy of hunger and malnutrition in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Upon completing my Master's, I returned to Colombia to work for a year with the National Planning Department, then went to the University of California, Berkeley, for a PhD in

Nutrition. At Berkeley, as everywhere else, discussions of nutrition and public health were framed within the conventional paradigm: the “Third World” (still the prevailing category at the time) should pursue “development,” as defined by the US and other Western nations, to improve the health of their populations.

You have argued that the conventional understanding of development in the Global North—individualism, competition, industrialism, market primacy—is at odds with the core tenets of alternative models in the Global South. Explain this tension.

Beginning in my youth, I reacted adversely to the notion that Latin America (and what today we would have called the South) must follow the North’s development pathway, particularly that of the US. I became involved in the student movement as an undergraduate, a time when many young people were reading neo-Marxist Latin American dependency theory and searching for a Latin American identity through the work of authors such as Gabriel García Márquez. Writers from the North such as Herbert Marcuse and Jean-Paul Sartre, who were deeply critical of industrialized societies, were part of our education as well.

This exposure laid the groundwork for my resistance to the prevailing definition of modernization along the lines of the US experience. I found myself at odds with the notion that capitalist industrialization was the only alternative. Over time, I connected with many colleagues who shared my radical critique of the dominant, capitalist development model. This led to publication of *The Development Dictionary* in 1992 and now, twenty-five years later, the forthcoming *Post-Development Dictionary*.

What are the core attributes of the “post-development” framework?

Two key elements define the concept of “post-development.” The first questions the central premises of development, including economic growth and material progress. Post-development challenges the idea that all countries must develop along Western capitalist lines according to these dictates.

The second, which emerged in the mid-1990s, is that African, Asian, and Latin American nations can and should put forward alternatives to development that incorporate non-Western concepts of what constitutes a thriving society. Those of us who subscribed to this view believed that other ways of theorizing—of liberating the imagination to enable other definitions of possible futures—were critical to changing the discourse in the Global South.

These debates continue. Why? Because seven decades after World War II, certain fundamentals have not changed. Global inequality remains severe, both between and within nations. Environmental devastation and human dislocation, driven by political as well as ecological factors, continues to worsen. These are symptoms of the failure of “development,” indicators that the intellectual and political post-development project remains an urgent task.

Is there a danger in retaining the word “development” in any form, even with the prefix “post”?

Yes, the old term muddies the debate. We clarify by making a strong distinction between *development alternatives* on the one hand, and *alternatives TO development* on the other.

Over the course of the last few decades, “development” has undergone multiple modifications, such as sustainable development, participatory development, development with gender equity, integrated rural development, and so forth. All these approaches stay within the conventional understanding of development: they don’t constitute a radical departure from the prevailing paradigm.

So, how do we shift from *development alternatives* to *alternatives TO development*? This requires a deeper understanding of the underpinnings of the development concept and an unbundling and redefining of its core assumptions. For example, conventional development locates the individual as the central agent and beneficiary of development. Gustavo Esteva, a radical Mexican critic of development close to the Zapatista movement, argues that the idea of the individual was the Trojan Horse by which Western nations infused their ideology of development—including private property, secularism, and anthropocentrism—into traditional, communitarian ways of being.

About a year ago, I attended a meeting in Bogotá with the Minister of the Environment about the Pacific Coast, a rainforest region rich in biodiversity and populated largely by black and indigenous peoples. For thirty years, research and strategies to “develop” the area have centered on large-scale development interventions, such as the expansion of oil palm plantations, mining, and large port development. Against this backdrop, poverty, inequality, and violence have deepened. To say the problem facing the region—and other parts of Latin America—is lack of development is fundamentally flawed. At that meeting, I argued that we should dare to reverse the picture: to entertain the idea that the problem of this region, is not underdevelopment but, in fact, excessive development. Recognizing this opens possibilities for new thinking based on alternative notions of human and ecological well-being.

One such alternative is Buen Vivir, which, with its roots in indigenous cultures, has influenced social movements and politics in Latin America. What do you see as the essence of Buen Vivir?

Buen Vivir, in a literal sense, means good life or good living. It stresses living in ways that promote the collective well-being of both humans and nature.

Eduardo Gudynas, Maristela Svampa, Alberto Acosta, and Pablo Solón are leading voices on Buen Vivir. The concept originated in the Andes, especially Ecuador and Bolivia, but also in Peru and Colombia. With a firm footing in the worldviews of indigenous peoples, Buen Vivir embraces the inseparability and interdependence of humans and nature. In the current development debates, Buen Vivir has informed critiques of the prevailing development model, confronting

basic assumptions about progress, competition, consumerism, and materialism. It rejects anthropocentrism and critiques capitalist and socialist forms of development because both, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, are destructive of both humans and ecological systems. The ethos of Buen Vivir centers on fostering harmony between humans and nature, quality of life, and conviviality.

Buen Vivir manifests itself in diverse forms. It remains a dynamic, evolving concept rooted in the interdependence between human and non-human species while rejecting the separateness and anthropocentrism embedded in Western belief systems. Despite its superficial appropriation by governments in the region, it continues to be an important inspiration to struggle and debate in the arena of post-development.

Some fear that Latin America is at a critical crossroads and that recent gains in democracy and social stability are at risk. Could this be a moment for the advancement of such alternatives to development—or their suppression?

This is a very difficult question. The election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1998 marked the beginning of what has been called “the pink tide,” the emergence of the left-leaning governments of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, and Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, among others. It was a moment of hope. Finally, it seemed, Latin America would end its dependence on the US and global capitalism by redesigning its economies and societies. Indeed, for fifteen years, the region made significant progress toward economic justice and reduced inequality.

Other shifts, however, militated against such an alternative path. The Washington Consensus of the 1990s—the agenda of privatization, deregulation, and trade liberalization promoted by the US, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank—was replaced in the next decade by the “Commodities Consensus,” a focus on export-driven growth in the agricultural and extractive sectors embraced by governments ranging from neoliberal Colombia and Mexico to ostensibly progressive Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil. Then, as commodity prices declined, the drop in export earnings left fewer resources for sustaining popular social programs. One result of the situation was political instability. A second was the return after 2015 of right-wing and/or neoliberal regimes in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, as well as the current destabilization of Venezuela. Paradoxically, the increasing difficulty in maintaining the extractivist model has spurred a surge of authoritarianism in an effort to keep failed extractivist policies going, taking a toll on hard-won democratic reforms. In response, social movements have gained traction, in their defense of land and territory, food sovereignty, ecological preservation, and women’s rights, among other issues.

Is there tension between grassroots movements focused on local concerns and global movements engaged with issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and human trafficking—or are they compatible?

In general, I see these issues as not only compatible, but inextricably linked to each other. Consider the case of the defense against incursion into indigenous territories, big dam construction, land grabbing, and the commodification of seeds and use of GMOs in agriculture. The link between local conditions and impacts, on the one hand, and global corporate and financial interests, on the other, is clear. In this sense, the *raison d'être* of many local movements are found in the larger, global relations in which neoliberal, extractivist forces that transcend national borders affect local communities. This dynamic has given rise to La Via Campesina, a large coalition of peasant movements representing more than 200 million peasants throughout Latin America. La Via Campesina reflects a new way of thinking about scale advocated by geographers such as Doreen Massey, a view that emphasizes horizontal rather than vertical linkages through networks among diverse places, thus transcending geographical boundaries to connect via shared narratives and beliefs.

However, putting such potential compatibilities into motion across movements critically depends on the activation and pursuit of three principles. First is the relocalization of many activities, with an eye toward devolving the production of food, energy, and other basic human needs to the most local level possible. Second is the recomunalization of social life. If we agree that excessive individualism is at the root of much social, cultural, and economic deprivation, we must start reconnecting with each other in alignment with our basic social propensities as communal and collective beings. Resisting the dominant ethos of separation and acting on the basis of radical interdependence instead would go a long way toward recomunalizing our societies, reweaving the fabric of life in ways that comport with the interdependencies of the modern world.

Third is the reinvigoration of collective decision-making and direct democracy. The corrosion of representative democracy through capture by the wealthy and privileged is a universal phenomenon enabled by the existing social and political order that inherently concentrates power. This is as true in the US as in Latin America, where governments increasingly fall under the control of plutocrats through campaign finance systems that incentivize corruption and policies that favor the privileged.

You have put forward a “Pluriversal” framework—“a world where many worlds fit”—to foster common ground in oppositional movements. What does such a framework entail?

The Zapatistas years ago talked about a world in which many worlds fit, an antidote to the idea of a single civilized world built along hegemonic patricarchal Western capitalist lines. Such a Pluriverse is built on the concept of diversity within a whole Earth system, a multiplicity of worlds and peoples coexisting within the Planet. This is the first meaning of the Pluriverse. The Pluriverse

also connotes life's ceaselessness, always flowing, constantly changing owing to interdependence of all aspects of living systems. Akin to the works of Dutch painter M. C. Escher, the Pluriverse has no beginning or end but only constant ebbs and flows. This is the natural way. Human intervention that obstructs or destroys this self-organizing dynamic is the source of much suffering and instability. The concept of the Pluriverse pushes us to think in terms of many possible worlds as well as the circularity of life, a perpetual flow and "radical interdependency" of all living things.

The patriarchal capitalist world is built on domination; historically, its modus operandi precludes other forms of human organization. Should capitalism have the right to exist within the Pluriverse? In theory, yes, but only if it is constrained to become one among many coexisting systems. It must acknowledge the destruction it has foisted upon the planet and people. Of course, if it does, then it will cease to be capitalism as we know it.

As you know, the Great Transition seeks to foster a global citizens movement. What strategies might encourage individuals, organizations, and movements in the South to participate in such a movement?

Such participation is both plausible and necessary. Transition initiatives, in the sense of citizen action to create a new social paradigm, exist in both the Global North and the Global South. I have devoted considerable time to mapping such meta-movements and visions, which I refer to as Narratives of Transition. Some are well-known, such as those inspired by the work of Thomas Berry and Joanna Macy, who speak of transitions in the North such as The Great Work (towards a new, Ecozoic Era) and the Great Turning (from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization). Another important transition narrative is the degrowth movement and, of course, the GTI and, at a local scale, the Transition Town Initiative. In the South, we find analogs in the form of Buen Vivir, post-development, and civilizational transitions. Plans for connecting the conversations in the North and South are in process, including the First North-South Conference on Degrowth in Mexico City in September 2018.

For such collaboration to succeed, we must acknowledge the contrasts and tensions owing to widely varied geopolitical and cultural conditions, e.g., the North's inclination to individualism vs. the South's emphasis on the communal. This makes frontal challenges to capitalism more difficult in the North than in the South. And conversations about degrowth and voluntary simplicity in the relatively poor South can be difficult owing to the belief, including by some on the political Left, that traditional forms of growth are essential to raising the life prospects of millions.

In discussing a global citizens movement, terminology and definitions merit careful consideration. If the backdrop and inspiration is a planetary civilization, why not talk about a planetary movement? This may better communicate the idea that the movement is supranational and exists at scales from the local to the planetary.

Further, we should clarify that when we speak of "global citizens," we refer to people across the range of diverse identities. In fact, we must ponder how the term "citizen" might apply to all people on Earth.

The term “peoples,” for example might be preferable to “citizens,” as it has special cachet in the Global South. “Citizen” in many countries in the South is a very fragile category amidst the tumultuous contemporary geopolitics, and it is commonly tied to the idea of the state. One might argue that it has little relevance to many places in the Global South, where even the right to have rights is at stake. Using a word that conveys a deeper communal identification would be superior because language should reflect the movement we wish to catalyze and the world we seek to create.

About the Interviewee



Arturo Escobar is the Kenan Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a Research Associate with the Culture, Memory, and Nation group at Universidad del Valle, Cali. His research focuses on political ecology, ontological design, and the anthropology of development, social movements, and technoscience. His books include *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* and the forthcoming *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*.

About the Publication

Published as an interview by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

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Cite as Arturo Escobar, "Farewell to Development," interview by Allen White, *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2018), <http://greattransition.org/publication/farewell-to-development>.



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