

**Gustavo Esteva**, *Gustavo Esteva: A Critique of Development and Other Essays* (translated by Kathryn Dix), New York: Routledge, 2023. ISBN 9781032202235 (paper); ISBN 9781032202198 (cloth); ISBN 9781003262749 (ebook)

Gustavo Esteva remains one of the most committed post-development thinkers and public “deprofessionalised” intellectuals of our time. He is perhaps best known for his work on post-development: his 1992 essay entitled “Development” became the central piece in Wolfgang Sachs’ edited volume, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, that would embody Gustavo’s thought and action towards reclaiming, defending, and creating commons throughout his life. However, Esteva contributed greatly to several schools of thought. I met Gustavo Esteva in 2015. My first encounter with him was one of the most profound intellectual and existential transformations of my life. I remained in contact with Gustavo until March 2022, when he sadly passed away. However, his work remains one of the most critical and comprehensive propositions of post-development and pluriversal thinking.

Transformed by a series of social, economic and political upheavals of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably the strikes and worker and peasant movements of Mexico in the late 1960s, his encounters with thinkers such as Ivan Illich and Raimon Panikkar and the Indigenous and Zapatista (a movement he would later come to advise) uprisings during 1992 and 1994 respectively, Esteva would go on to collaborate with many others and make important contributions to Marxism, anarchism, and intercultural dialogues. Hopefully this review will bring some warranted attention to Esteva’s work as well as the many writings that are now being collected and translated by a few of his closest collaborators and friends (see e.g. Esteva 2023).

*A Critique of Development and Other Essays*—a book that Gustavo personally oversaw at the very end of his life—is not only proof of Gustavo’s unwavering commitment to a pluriversal autonomous transformation beyond the state, market, and formal democracy, but also a testament to his relentless pursuit of the possibility of creating a radical plurality of conviviality between worlds. The book, which consists of a series of essays written by Esteva throughout his intellectual life, offers a body of work and intellectual path that is difficult to summarise in one volume, much less in a book review. However, the care that Gustavo and his editors (Jose Rafael

Escobedo and Bernd Reiter) and translator (Kathryn Dix) invested into these texts—each one carefully selected and presented in a particular order (some of them translated into English for the first time), along with introductory notes by Esteva himself—provides a systematic and comprehensive view on his work expanding over five decades.

The book begins with Esteva in a conversation with Teodor Shanin which took place in 1992, a few months after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conversation is led by a sense of the political urgency of transformation and autonomy (the interview is accurately titled “Re-thinking Everything”), as Shanin reflects in the dialogue: “Communities appear to be a solution to this problem we’re discussing” (p.16). The dialogue is, as Gustavo argues, an accurate and assertive view of the multiple crises of the collapse of Western civilization, as capitalism devolves into a state of permanent crisis. This is a key point that Esteva remakes in the second essay, “Beyond Development”. In it, Esteva explains how he himself became “underdeveloped”—a process that originated on 20 January 1949, with Harry Truman’s inaugural speech. Development transformed needs, from something you do—like shit—to something you require or you lack—like “technology”, “modernity”, or “progress”. The myth of development quickly became embedded into people’s lives, eliminating otherness and humiliating those that resisted. In a small introduction to the text by Ivan Illich—who was a key influence in Gustavo’s thought and a friend throughout the rest of his life—he notes how the work of Gustavo with “marginals” in zones like Tepito—a peripheral neighbourhood in the centre of Mexico City—became the basis of a moral economy, a process that begins by resisting the humiliation of government housing programmes after the earthquake that shook Mexico City in 1985, and inaugurates multiple communitarian possibilities of liberation leading them to reclaim and regenerate their commons, opposing the supposed “need for experts”. As Esteva argues, “for them, detaching themselves from the economic logic of the capitalist market or the socialist plan has become a matter of survival: they are trying to put the economic sphere on the margin of their lives; interaction within these commons prevents scarcity (in the economic sense of the term) from appearing in them, which implies the redefinition of needs” (p.286).

In the 1970s, Esteva, still a committed Marxist, saw Lenin’s question (“what is to be done?”) from a different perspective. In Mexico, “The Protagonists of Social Change” (Chapter

3) were not the workers, but peasants. Esteva saw a new class emerging, one that could very well still be exploited by capital through wage or through colonial forms of exploitation, but again he saw the *marginals* as a possibility for emancipation—as a new form of communal configuration that could create communitarian support to liberate themselves from the subordination to capital. His work on the commons and the notion of *comida* became a point of entry into this transformational approach. Quoting Eduardo Galeano (1998: 54), Esteva used to say that we live in paradoxical times, where “[w]hoever is not afraid of hunger is afraid of food”. Esteva saw development as the source of scarcity and producer of hunger. To transform “food” into “eating” or *comida* because “[t]here is no English word for *comida*” [p.60]), the notion is intended to show that by embodying the simple idea of going from nouns to verbs, people can reclaim their own paths, and shatter the myth of development.

*Comida* is more than food, it is a social fabric, “a vernacular expression alluding to activities and interactions of individuals among themselves and with their environments that allow them to generate, obtain, and assimilate the material elements they need to procure their life as autonomous subsistence” (p.59-60). As Esteva explains, “*comida* should be understood beyond the act itself, as an expression of social feelings of unity, consideration, closeness, and gentleness. *Alimento*, on the other hand, is a word immersed in the economic world, the world of scarcity” (p.82). This social fabric leads towards a form of radical pluralism, one that points to a political horizon beyond the nation-state, reformulating the meaning of democratic struggles and recovering autonomous definitions of the good life that emerge from autonomous centres of knowledge production. In “Reclaiming Your Own Path” and “Back to the Table” (Chapters 4 and 5), Esteva argues that it is industrial society that continuously imposes *nouns* (like *food*, *education*, *security*, or *health*) as a conventional mode of thinking, eliminating people’s own way of doing things by educating them “to wear tinted glasses ... with supposedly universal meanings ... creating a particular type of blindness” (p.75).

In a third section of the book, Esteva engages with the notion of plurality as the key towards autonomy. In “The Radical Otherness of the Other” (Chapter 6), Esteva explains how he was able to toss aside the tinted glasses of development to open his thoughts to other realities or *worlds*. From his encounters with Ivan Illich and Raimon Panikkar, Esteva explains that the

radical differences that separate us as human beings are constantly denied (i.e. we are all humans) and paradoxically, through the myth of inclusion or recognition that erases otherness creating only condescending forms of hospitalities. His answer to this paradox is what Panikkar (1990) called “*dialogical dialogue*” or the position of *radical pluralism*. Esteva asks: “How can we, after acknowledging the radical otherness of the other, engage in a real dialogue with him or her?” (p.107). The key, Gustavo argues, is *hospitality*. Gustavo used to say that he remembered a conversation with Illich, who asked him if he could identify a word to describe the era *after* development—what would it be? “What came immediately to mind was ‘hospitality’” (in O’Donovan 2015: 531). To be hospitable, he argues, is not to follow the other, to adopt their views, to affirm them, or to negate them. Hosting the other simply means to open your own doors for them and to accept their existence in their own place. Hospitality is the opposite of tolerance, which is just a more discrete form of intolerance (p.122).

In “The Path Towards a Dialogue of *Vivires* (Lived Experiences)” (Chapter 7), Esteva argues that, while important contributions are still being made by decolonial thinkers to recognising otherness, most notably through the idea of a *dialogue of knowledges* (Santos 2014), a true convivial path would require acknowledging not only that there is no *supraculture*, but also that we will not be able to completely understand the other. Gustavo used to capture this attitude in a phrase by Zapatista Comandante Tacho: “to dialogue is not simply to hear the other but to be willing to be transformed by the other” (p.146). To learn to listen is to be able to be transformed by the other without losing yourself in the process. Or as Gustavo would argue, with reference to how Indigenous communities in Latin America maintain their indigeneity, it entails “the tradition of changing tradition in a traditional way” (p.135). Listening to and having a dialogue with the other not only shifts the fetishisation of “seeing” in Western Eurocentric modernity, but also allows us to recognise the inherent incommensurability of cultures, which is essential to resist the superficial and co-opted notions such as multi- or interculturality.

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 was to Gustavo a *collective* awakening. From the call to say “Enough!” (*¡Ya Basta!*), the Zapatistas became one of the most important socio-political movements of our time. The seven Zapatista principles, from *listening while we walk*, *walking at the pace of the slowest*, and *ruling by obeying*, became means of showing a lack of interest in

taking power and governing a state or country, demanding instead a radical form of recognition on their own terms, towards autonomy, freedom, and radical democracy. A “hope that also is called dignity” (p.170), Esteva argues, reflecting on how the Zapatistas challenge the modernist insistence on the vanguardism of struggles against the state, which quickly led to a struggle for the state, replacing one intelligentsia with another. As he writes, “[w]e must recognize that the nation-state, be it the most ferocious dictatorship or the gentlest and purest democracy, has been and remains a structure for dominating and controlling the population, to put it at the service of capital. The modern state is the ideal collective capitalist” (p.171). In “The Oaxaca Commune” (Chapter 10), Esteva reflects on how Indigenous movements for radical autonomy further embody such resistance and the search for alternatives to modernity; a condition of postmodernity, he argues, is a *moment* where we must live with radical uncertainty, because we know that modernity and its tools, the state, strikes, unions, and factories, have collapsed.

In the final section of the book Esteva lays the basis of a pluriversal path forward. Starting with an “archipelago of conviviality”, an idea he relates to the Zapatista metaphor of the sinking boat of capitalist modernity: when the boat is sinking, a few, seeing the futility of taking control of a sinking ship, choose to swim to other shores to see other possibilities. The insurrection, he argues, is not coming (cf. The Invisible Committee 2009), but is in fact *ongoing*. It consists of everyday forms of resistance in these archipelagos, of rebellious dispersion embodied in communal forms of disobedience that begin by substituting nouns for verbs like *eating, learning, healing, dwelling, and exchanging*. These processes create multiple paths towards other knowledges, those that have been historically oppressed and that are now resurging. Here, Esteva’s critique of capitalism, drawing on other thinkers like Anselm Jappe (2011), focuses on recognising the fact that capitalism has no real need for people anymore—people are literally “good for nothing”, he would say, a process that is quickly descending into a form of universalised barbarism (p.133), an awareness that is quickly becoming visible as millions of people are *on the move* against the multiple symptoms of a system in crisis.

In “The Convivial Path” (Chapter 12), in a close dialogue with ideas developed by Ivan Illich, Gustavo restates his intention to “write an epilogue to the industrial age ... to describe the fading monopoly of the industrial mode of production and the vanishing of the industrially

generated professions this mode of production serves” (p.235). Here, Esteva argues that such a task begins with recentring the importance of tools in Illich’s thought and the notion of an “austere man” (*sic*). The era of systems emerged the moment that people were not capable of wielding tools for themselves, when the tools became systems determining their reality. Esteva sees the recuperation of such tools as the key towards creating a convivial path as an alternative to industrial society and its constant obsession with economic growth and the degradation of social fabric by an unwavering reliance on experts. “Austere is the individual that produces the tools of conviviality” (p.236), he argues. Akin to what simplicity and frugality would entail in a degrowth society (Latouche 2014), and in a fundamental critique of other socialist experiments and currents, he argues, alternatives “could not be realized without replacing industrial instrumentation with convivial tools” (p.237).

In “The Day After” (Chapter 13), Esteva deals with the COVID-19 pandemic as a source of further uncertainty and as a pinnacle of the abstraction of capitalism and industrial society’s reliance on experts. As we heard time and again during the pandemic, “We will not return to normality, because normality was the problem” (p.246). The pandemic accelerated the already depicted end of the era, something that according to Gustavo is not necessarily a good thing. This means that what we now face is neither a return to the business as usual of neoliberal capitalism, nor a familiar form of capitalist modernity, but something radically different (e.g. what the World Economic Forum called “The Great Reset”). Drawing from Giorgio Agamben’s thinking on the state of exception, Esteva sees the pandemic as an experiment of what is to come, of what the society of control will degenerate into. It is a process where the state of exception becomes normalised and one in which “‘Democracy’ is being ‘democratically’ dismantled almost everywhere” (p.247).

However, Esteva’s unyielding commitment to hope manifests again here when he argues that, despite this generalised state of exception, people also woke up. Like in many other moments of crises, solidarity emerged: “Many people begin to see their places again, the specific persons around them, even those neighbors who barely said hello” (p.252). It is in the face of such great challenges that *friendship, hope, and surprise*—the three words Gustavo identifies as “The Keys for the New Era” (Chapter 14)—emerge as the political concepts that enable us to

look towards other horizons of possibility. Esteva sees these keywords as much more than simple attitudes; he sees them as the ways in which people can root their struggles in convivial forms, as he argues, “rooted in our social and cultural soil, nourishing hopes with friends at a time in which all of us, inspired by the Zapatistas, are creating a whole new world, open to the surprise of another era” (p.279).

As Arturo Escobar and Bernd Reiter argue in the book’s preface, Esteva is on par with many other critical thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, and because Esteva did not consider himself to be a writer, an academic, an activist, or even a thinker in the traditional sense, his relationships with academia and the traditional *spaces for thinking* were convoluted through the process of his own deprofessionalisation. As Gustavo mentions in the introduction, he usually wrote out of necessity, out of a sense of urgency, because struggles needed to be explained. He wrote in moments where the crisis of the system appeared to be normalised and when what he was reading—that is, theory—not only failed to explain reality, but also often felt foreign and incommensurable to his experience.

Throughout his life, Esteva remained committed to *thinking-doing-feeling* from and with the grassroots. He saw himself as part of a weaving of multiple experiences, a knot in a network of concrete relationships (p.99), both personal and communal, on the margins, where he saw the paths towards conviviality, autonomy, and *Buen Vivir* emerging. In his obituary, Bernd Reiter shares a piece of correspondence with Esteva where he reflects on his own positionality as being *in-between*—that is, inhabiting different *worlds*. Despite his initial hesitance to accept the label, he recognised how he was able, like only a handful of others, to experience many worlds, and to actually embody a path towards radical pluralism: Gustavo is perhaps one of the few thinkers that embodied throughout his life the Zapatista motto, *we learn as we walk*.

Esteva’s work remains critical because it continues to ask the most essential questions that should worry all of us: “how to change a reality that is unbearable, how to dismantle a regime capable of continually destroying both the planet and the social fabric, how to transform a reality which maintains increasingly intense forms of confrontation and violence as a new status quo” (p.vii). As we continue to experience the civilizatory crisis of capitalist modernity, the motto that Esteva embodied should resonate with any society in movement, with anyone

experiencing dignified rage, and with anyone that yells Enough!—*Against Fear: Hope!* Hope is the anchor that roots us to the world, to a place, to our friends, and what gives way to hospitality and solidarity. It is only with and through hope that paths towards autonomy and conviviality actually become possible. This is indeed the time for radical hope.

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*Carlos Tornel*  
*Department of Geography*  
*Durham University*  
*carlos.a.tornel@durham.ac.uk*

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