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The logo of the International Institute of Social Studies, featuring a stylized, handwritten-style script of the word "Erasmus" in a dark blue color.

**Disclosing agency for ontological emancipation  
A conversation with the work of Arturo Escobar**

A Research Paper presented by:

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*To the memory of Inés Becerra, “Inecita”, and of every woman who,  
like her, lived a life of unselfish service, care and love.*

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## List of Acronyms

AFES	Agrarian Food and Environmental Studies
GDP	Governance and Development Policy
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
MA	Master of Arts

## Abstract

This paper develops an experiential reflection from a phenomenological approach to the study of crises. It reflects upon personal stories that converged in a moment of introspection as a way of approaching the study of a convergence of global crises. Following Arturo Escobar, this convergence has a core source: modernity, ingrained in a tradition that gives shape to our behaviour and aspirations. The convergence of crises might be understood in ontological terms, manifesting both globally and locally, in the planet and in our own 'selves'. Since it is an ontological crisis, an ontological emancipation is vowed. Such emancipation should orient the opening of a new space of possibilities. The role of agency in this process is proposed to have key roots in a re-understanding of language and reality. Finally, it is argued that ontological emancipation is a process of healing in local and global terms, therefore, sustainability is a natural result.

## Acknowledgments

This, more than any other work before, was a relational work. This product is not mine at all. I will never forget this experience nor those who were there, besides me. I want to say thanks, because I owe this...

To my family, who supported me until the last minute. I don't have words to express how lucky I feel being part of this family. You are my strength and purpose.

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To the nature and its landscapes in Colombia, especially in Putumayo.

## Relevance to Development Studies

A phenomenological approach and an ontological perspective proposes provoking perspectives and tools for the study of development-related issues, such as sustainability, civic action, cooperation, public policy, etc.

## Keywords

Ontology, crises, emancipation, sustainability, agency, experience, language, post-development.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

*The imperative of our times is the need to heal ourselves.*

**Frédérique Apffel-Marglin**

(Post-Materialist Integral Ecology, 2018:59)

## The story of Inés

This paper is dedicated to Inés Becerra, a very dear person for me, my family and my extended family from my father's side, whom I remember mostly as the main responsible for the dishes we tasted in our Sunday visits to my grandmother's house. Since I have memory and until the time when I leaved my hometown in a provincial region of Colombia to start my university studies at the capital, every Sunday my parents took me and my siblings to lunch and spend the day with my grandmother, Emma, in a neighbouring small town. It was almost ritualistic, Inés cooked for us every Sunday a special meal, often using food from the backyard garden where she (mainly providing labour) and my grandmother (mainly providing capital) raised small animals (hens, chickens, rabbits) and some crops (mostly corn, but also beans, fruits and others). For me and my siblings, Inés was a kind of second grandma, she had been always with my grandmother, accompanying her, but also working for her. She was, off course, family... but only up to a certain point, as I realised later, when grown up.

Inés represented the story of many persons that in Colombia and other places of Latin America are called 'nanas', because of their role in the rising of the children of the family. 'Nanas' embody a more important figure than a baby sitter, they become almost like a second mother and sometimes even develop a closer relationship with the children than the actual mother. They participate importantly in this caring activity, but they often also do many more household tasks. "Nana" is a feminine appellative because this figure is exclusively held by women (there are exceptional cases where a similar role is held by a man, who of course is not called "nana" and with whom the roles change variably). They are 'adopted' since an early age, coming frequently from problematic social and economic backgrounds (orphanage, abandonment, poverty, violence, etc.), and they end up living and working with the 'adopting' family for so long, many during all the life, that they become part of the family (up to a hazy point). 'Nanas' live a situation where they are at the same time part of the family and not; they belong, but *just not completely*: a state where care and love intersect with gender, class and labour issues and family legitimacy distinctions. Adopting or having a 'nana' was a common practice in moderate-to-wealthy families in past generations, but nowadays it is rarer.

Inés was the 'nana' of my father and my three uncles; my grandma had four sons and had to raise them almost like a single mother, in a home where the masculine authority figure, my grandfather, was occasional and problematic. For me and my siblings, then, Inés was something like a *grand-nana*, but neither we nor my father call her like that; she was just "Inecita", a (diminutive) appellative we always used as a term of endearment (but that today I reflect upon it because of the power relation issues at hand and the possible *otherisation* in using a diminutive in this context). By the time of our Sunday visits she and my grandmother lived alone, like two (aging) sisters, in the big house where the four sons had grown up. My uncles, like my father, all have their own families but, unlike my father, had established in further cities in Colombia and abroad. My father had decided to live near my grandma, which made possible the Sunday visits.

Inés, like many ‘nanas’, never got married nor gave birth children. She died in 2008 from an unexpected gallstones illness. I was in Brazil at that moment, finishing my undergrad studies in an exchange programme; I was not able to attend her funeral nor to mourn her death. Since I had started the university I progressively went less and less to visit the small town. But after Inés passed away one thing changed radically in the Sunday visits dynamic: the meals were no longer homemade; from then on, lunch was at any of the few restaurants of the small town; the wood oven, for instance, was never used again. I remember Inés commenting how things were changing regarding the food preparing: every year, as she was growing older, the effort to raise and prepare the crops and animals was bigger and it was easier to just purchase in the market. However, she knew, the products in the market were simply not the same; so, she kept doing things as always, homemade (in Spanish we say ‘*casero/a*’), even though buying finished ingredients was probably cheaper and surely less laborious.

I doubt that either my father, my uncles or anyone else in the family inherit the practical and traditional knowledge (in Spanish we say ‘*saberes*’) of Inés’ food preparing. This was probably because of gender roles; maybe if my grandmother would have had a daughter, things would have been different. But surely it was because these kinds of knowledges were not as important as others: the highest proud of my grandmother is that she ‘alone’ (i.e. without any help from my grandfather) managed to support her four sons to go to university. Formal, scientific, education was and still is the most important knowledge.

Inés was born in a very difficult family environment: her mother died at giving birth, and her father was not able or willing to raise her, she did not learn to read or write. In that context, by the age of 16, she started working for my grandmother. All the practical knowledge she acquired was self-thought, *experientially*, interacting with the rest of people in the small town. With Inés departure we lost not only the care and love of her presence but also many of her recipes, practices and tastes; among other ways, her love was shared to us through her food. A huge knowledge loss I had not been fully aware until I started studying my Master of Arts (MA) programme in the International Institute of Social Studies ISS in 2017.

The story of Inés is a story of development and resistance that could be analysed from many perspectives, such as the class, labour, care, belonging or gender issues that I have pointed out. I would not attempt to do any of those analysis here, rather I try to go to a something more fundamental that pervade all those aspects. The memory of Inés came to me because it was one of the triggers of a huge process of introspection that I reflect upon in this paper and which was generated by the mourning not just of her lost but of many of the *losses of development* that I was feeling very personally in *all my bodies*<sup>1</sup>.

## The story of Pastora and Elias

In 2017, when I arrived at the Hague to study the MA programme in Development Studies that this paper concludes, I also heard a story of another beloved forebear: it was about the grandmother of one of the lecturers of the General Course of the MA. Murat, the lecturer, showed a picture of his grandmother threading cotton in an artisanal artefact, about 70 years ago, back in his home country: Cyprus. Simultaneously, he was reflecting about how 100 years before the time of that picture, in Manchester, as product of the industrial revolution, factories where threading cotton and other fabric in hundred-times more efficient manner than his grandmother was doing a century after. This illustrated his point about the huge

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<sup>1</sup> As the paper goes on, I will be explaining some terms that might be either specialised or which I use with a special meaning, such as those marked in italics in these paragraphs.



divergence of industrial production, 'advancement' and 'development' and the relation of all this with capitalism and modernity.

That story made me remember the stories of my family, such as the one of Inés I already told, but also another of my maternal grandmother: Pastora. She migrated from a small rural town in the 1960s to a bigger city. She was the mother of, by the time, seven girls. She was married with my grandfather, whom I never knew because he died before I was born, and who worked in an iron mine in the small rural town. Pastora had decided to leave, I was told by my mother, and was determined to avoid her daughters getting married with miners; even though she herself was married to one and my mother and aunts remembered my grandfather, Elias, as the best person and father ever. Pastora saw her future and the one of her daughters in moving to the bigger city, there were no perspectives in staying.

Both Pastora and Elias came from a peasant culture, but they did not want to continue in it. Pastora pushed hardly to migrate and achieved it successfully, none of her daughters married a mine worker nor stayed in the rural small town, also, none of them remained as peasant. Elias, who had sold his labour all his life as an iron mine worker, as soon as he got the legal age of retirement, with the liquidation money started a small but prosperous grocery shop. Sadly, a few years after this he died of cancer, most probably due to a legacy of his work in the mine.

The story of my grandparents Pastora and Elias is also a development story. They were not literate. They managed to migrate from the country to the bigger city, bought a house, started a prosperous business and raised eight daughters, one of them adopted (impressively), and one son. It was clear that they had migrated looking for a better living, and peasantry was not appealing nor profitable. And they made it with a great deal of success!

It was progress, right? Something similar I could think about the story of Inés and Emma. Inés had been 'rescued' for what might have been otherwise a life of suffering; and despite many challenges, Emma had achieved his goal of 'educate' my father and uncles. It was progress for sure and I was seeing myself as the result of all that.

By all means, I am the legacy of my parents, grandparents and other ancestors like Inés. Both of my parents finished university degrees. Thanks to that I received probably the best possible education in Colombia and now I was studying a MA programme in Europe to "give back" and work for the development of Colombia. I had already several years of work experience on it: As soon as I graduate in 2009, I had decided to work for development projects; I had no pretensions of raising a business nor making a career 'for money', for instance in the private sector, even though I graduated as business administrator. However, when remembering the stories, I was not particularly cheery. On the contrary, after Murat's and other lectures but especially after some time living in The Hague, I was everyday more suspicious of these memories, of all this story. I was particularly dissatisfied with this idea of progress. All the effort of my forebears, that I had been so much proud in the past, now I see it with different eyes and feel it with different sensations. Coming to study at Europe, which had been such a dream for so long, was not feeling now with the cheerful sensation it was supposed. What was happening? If it was a story of success (right?), then, why was I not feeling Okay with this? What was the problem with progress?

Although I do not fully answer this questions, they and the stories behind them triggered in me a deep reflection process that was maintained strongly through all my MA programme and that became so important that I had no choice but to take the endeavour of analyse it as deep as possible, putting it as the topic of the most important assignment of the MA programme: this paper.

## So, what is this paper about?

This paper is a very personal, experiential, reflection from a phenomenological approach, about crises. I reflect upon some personal stories that converged into a personal moment of introspection as a way of approaching to the study of a convergence of global crises, as we might call our present moment on the planet Earth, following the insights from the academic field of political ecology. I argue that this convergence of global crises has a core source: modernity, which is ingrained in a tradition that gives shape to our behaviour and aspirations. I argue that this convergence of crises might be understood in ontological terms, and as such, manifests both globally and locally, in the planet and in our own ‘selves’. I explore my personal manifestations of this process under the light of the theoretical concepts, mainly as portrayed in the work of Arturo Escobar. Since it is an ontological crisis, I vow for an ontological solution, an emancipation that should orient to the opening of a new space of possibilities, to the pluriverse as Escobar calls it, rather than to a ‘replacing’ ontology.

I dig in on the question of how to embark on this transformation and the role of agency. And although, off course, in this paper I will not provide a total solution nor a theory of it, I hint to some elements that could lead or be important to this ontological emancipation. I remark specially in the role of awareness and on its path to effective action, a very classic gap in the social studies, and propose both *resistance* and *language as action* as some first paths to enquiry.

In this paper I have no intentions to demonstrate nor to establish a theory for ontological emancipation nor for the study of crises. In several ways, indeed, I try to challenge the traditions of this way of thought that pretends to demonstrate, theorise or get to universal answers of rules. This is a very personal, situated and embodied contribution.

This is as well a small part of a huge work in progress. I deal here with some classic and fundamental questions studied in philosophy and social theory. Under my formation as business manager and (soon-to-be) Master of Arts, I put this work as a contribution to the field of development studies and not in philosophy nor social theory. I acknowledge the limitations, partiality, subjectivity and situatedness of it.

The paper is divided in 5 chapters, being this introduction the first of them.

In Chapter 2, I give some more details about how I endeavoured this ‘research’ and respond to the question of *why* ontological emancipation: why it was important for me and in what ways it may also be important for others *like* me.

In Chapter 3, I make a slightly deeper exploration on the conceptual orientation regarding ontology, modernity, rationality and sustainability. I expose the global and local relation and the *double movement* of ontology. And introduce the justification of studying sustainability at this level. Intuitively, sustainability would be a natural result of a process of ontological emancipation.

In Chapter 4, I describe some of the proposing elements for embarking on this ontological emancipation and the concepts which can be useful for these new understandings.

Finally, in the concluding Chapter 5, I wrap some of the most interesting elements for me in this journey, re-enacting some excerpts of a conversation I had with Arturo Escobar, in Cali, during November of 2018.

## Chapter 2 My Path: An Experiential Journey

*Many a thoughtful observer of the contemporary scene has pointed out that this spread of rationalization is or has become 'unreasonableness' (von Wright, 1991), 'irrational' (Maxwell, 1984), 'political domination' (Habermas, 1971), 'discipline and surveillance' (Foucault, 1965; 1970; 1975; 1977), 'a powerful ideological fiction' (Haraway, 1989), or 'morally bankrupt' (Bauman, 1989). Such scepticism is no doubt inspired by the mounting evidence of the enormous cost in terms of social and ecological health of the modern form of knowledge. These costs, these losses, are leading more and more people to question the universal validity of the modern mode of thought and to the recognition that it is just as culturally rooted, just as local, as other modes of thought. After political decolonization must now follow a decolonization of the mind.*

Frédérique Apffel-Marglin

(Rationality and the World, 1996:16)

### The ways of approximation: not a method!

Through an experiential approximation I explore the study of crises as a trigger for the cultivation of new ways of understanding and being. I understand *experiential* as the kind of approximation that “has renounced to all pretention of demonstration” and which function is “not to teach nor to prove” (Bucher, 1996:23, in reference to the intellectual work of Heidegger, my translation), but to suggest, to hint, to orient. “The knowledge that emerges from such experience is not *imposed*, is *offered*” (Bucher, 1996:23, emphasis added, my translation).

I departed from the readings of Arturo Escobar (particularly, his work on thinking-feeling and design) and the conversations with him, Wendy Harcourt and other colleagues at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS). I started the engagement in this experiential knowledge without being completely aware that I was doing so. However, I did it because it was being helpful for me to advance through the course of the Master of Arts (MA) and because I also wanted to explore ways of challenging the traditional methods of knowledge generation dictated by the scientific method and the like.

At first, I intended to make a revision of the work of Escobar, especially his concept of ontology, his views on agency, and the implications of using this level of understanding for what he calls civilizational transitions (Escobar, 2016a). However, although I do partially address the implications in exploring subjects such as development and sustainability at an ontological level, this paper is not a revision of Escobar's Work; if any, it is a conversation, as it is shown in Chapter 5, where I re-enact one the talks we had in person. Nevertheless, I pay attention to his conceptualisations of ontology and agency with the purpose of developing a proposal for ontological emancipation. The study of these concepts took me to the study of the Heideggerian phenomenology, especially as interpreted by some academics that also have influenced or conversated with the work of Escobar, mainly, Hubert Dreyfus, Fernando Flores and Terry Winograd<sup>2</sup>.

While passing through the process of reading I reflected with my own personal experience in an intention of establishing a dialogue with the concepts. I followed suggestions made by Wendy Harcourt in the sense of staying aware of the triggering points in the readings that reflected on my own experience. Conversely, in an unintended resemblance of an autoethnography process, I looked for which anecdotes or stories from my past I recalled while

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<sup>2</sup> The books I refer to are: Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus (1997) and Winograd and Flores (1993)

reading. I also stayed aware of any corporeal reactions that these processes could generate. The stories told in this paper are, then, the result of that introspective enquiry. After identifying the stories, I hold on them to analyse, under the light of the concepts and the emotions, in which ways these stories could reflect the purposes of the 'research'.

To be clear about these purposes, I have to say that although initially I wanted to make a theoretical exploration of the concepts of ontology and agency, in the end, the path of this work shifted towards other destinations. If this paper responds to a research question, that would be: in what ways can we understand and embrace a moment of crisis to embark on an ontological emancipation and (re)orient ourselves towards the quest of new ways of understanding and being.

knowledge is lived and experienced differently according to different identities and subjectivities. As Ronald de Ren  ville (1938) stated it in *L'Exp  rience Po  tique*: "true knowledge is experiential; it is an operation of love" (quoted in Bucher, 1996:23, my translation). In this sense, the ground of this work is related with the experience of knowledge, this is, with the emotional/intellectual work of going under this research: to get close, in touch, in relation with the concepts; this is, reading them, understanding them, feeling them reflected on my own experience. "To have an experience, be it of a thing, a man, a god, means that it comes to us, touches us, arrives to us, moves us and transforms us" (Heidegger, quoted in Bucher, 1996:22, my translation).

Because these concepts are related with my feelings and my experience, it is a reflection about what I am reading, learning and knowing; disclosing and reflecting on my own personal experience. The question that haunted me is off course related with a personal reflection: **How do I, a born and raised modern individual, can embark on a journey for ontological emancipation?** More precisely, what exactly can I do to transit to an understanding where inherently unsustainable modern dynamics are left behind, and other dynamics develop, in order to adjust my life construction more in accordance with a fair and sustainable world?

Embarking on such a journey became a very distinctive, personal process, acknowledging my own characteristics of privilege and oppression. At some points it was stained with angst, but it was fundamentally a path of healing. Reading Escobar has been healing in different ways and their propositions might be the guidelines of many possible paths. But at times these paths become dark and fuzzy, especially whenever there is no clear pragmatic action envisioned, possible, immediate. That is why agency was so appealing for me to explore.

I decided to not do any fieldwork because I found myself very concerned with issues of intervention. Instead, I read and monitored myself in the process. I preferred to make 'fieldwork' over my own experience instead of going to a place and intervene a community, especially because those who can have a critical ontological vision are those who are probably resisting, probably minorities or groups often taken as object of study and, although I had done fieldwork before, at that moment I was not comfortable doing so.

My positionality as a Colombian student in the Netherlands acknowledging the privilege this implies and with a political project in mind (the look for new political positions where the search for *buen vivir* is more important than for development), inevitably impregnated my subjectivity on the results of this exercise.

Conversations became my most important *way of approximation* in this work. I use that expression instead of 'method' or 'methodology' because although, at first, I intended to follow a systematic method, the continuous involvement with *experience* took me to another path, one of intuition. In the same fashion, I write the word 'research' in quotes precisely because this paper is not guided on the grounds of a *method* but on *experience*. Over these

grounds, I postulate this work as an invitation to decentre modernity and development through a process of emancipation at an ontological level.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that this reflexive journey of my own self (may or) may not be relevant for others interested in similar topics. The experiences portrayed may seem completely local and applicable only because of the particular settings of my context and temporality and (may or) may not teach any lessons for other processes in other places or times.

## **A situated experience**

The reflections triggered by the stories which I tell in the Introduction of this paper had an emotional impact on me, since all this emerged at a proper time and place, it was a situated experience: at the moment of my installation in Europe and the starting of the MA programme in Development Studies at ISS, I was passing through several personal processes that converged in that particular time and place and resounded accordingly. I was carrying my history: different roles that showed in a reflexive manner. I started to recall my own personal experiences with development and, by doing this, I engaged in a critical reflection over my own actions as embodied into my different roles: as a professional, as a student, as a citizen, as a family member, as a partner in a love relationship.

## **As a person: Refusing my bodies**

In the course of the MA I encountered myself reading Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Arturo Escobar with an unusual emotional involvement. It was eye-opening but also painful, I was feeling what Santos (2014) calls the 'epistemicide' and the losses of development very deeply in the roots of my own history; that is why I started this paper with the stories of my forebears.

This process occurred simultaneously with something I was experiencing that I shall name as an encounter with my *emotional body*. I had started to understand my individual existence as a confluence of four different but interdependent bodies: a physical, a spiritual, a rational, and an emotional. I was feeling that up to this point in my life, with over 30 years old, I had strengthened primarily one of those bodies: the rational one; and it had gained a hegemonic power on myself, this is, on my actions and convictions. A change in the configuration of these bodies implied for me a fundamental transformation that happened at times unconsciously and that imply moments of crises. However, it was in these crisis moments that I gained awareness of the situation. I illustrate this with my own experience by telling some stories that exemplify my different life roles.

I grew up in a small city in a central region of Colombia. There, I was educated in a school with many catholic fundamentals. In those school years, although I was not very disciplined in the church duties, I was very much a God believer. Before finishing high school, I had passed through the catholic sacraments of baptism, confession, eucharist, and confirmation. I went to study my undergrad in Bogotá, the country capital, and among the several transformations of those university years, I stopped believing in God. It was not a painless process. In retrospective, I think that I overcame this, say, early crisis, through a rational, physical and intellectual strengthening, and a collateral silencing of my emotional and spiritual bodies.

By 2008 I went to Brazil to finish my university studies. There, I participated in a research endeavour in public policy and development. I made my final undergraduate dissertation on the topics of social capital and development. I did fieldwork in a small town, in one of the poorest zones of the Sao Paulo state. I wanted to see the institutional interconnections

using a social networks analysis methodology. Back in those times, I did not encounter with a really critical vision about development; my references and theoretical tools were informed by the two business schools I was enrolled in, and I did not find neither post-development nor any of the Latin American decolonising authors, it was not in my radar at the time. So, my theoretical foundations were those advocating for regional and local development, a lot on social capital literature and a vision of development as freedom such as in the tradition of Amartya Sen (2000) in conjunction with development as economic growth. Although I thought I was being critical by looking for “better development” (i.e. making development work in the fashion of *alternative development*) I never landed in a quest for fully alternatives to development; that was another level of criticism I did not find in those years. I only clearly realised this now, years later, after passing through the reading of Escobar and after questioning almost every of those actions under new light. It is curious how subtle and inconspicuous some aspects of our configuration as human beings are. I had studied business administrations intending to be critical over capitalism; I realised you never are critical enough.

However, nothing affected more importantly the configuration of my four bodies as the relationship with my partner in love. This was also an inconspicuous process. After almost seven years of being together we broke up, just a couple of months before coming to the Netherlands to make the MA. Breaking up made me aware about how much I had changed in those seven years of relationship. I became aware of how almost unperceivably and unconsciously I had developed my emotional body and how it was still very shy, many times overshadowed by the rational one. Although emotionality was in my actions (I demonstrated care and love in my day to day gestures) it was not completely in my language. In my words and conversations, this is, in the language construction of the future and the relationship, I was still hegemonically rational. Just as I was rational, I was also *scientific* in my ways of thinking and being, even on a phenomenon such as love. I dismissed the emotional just as I dismissed the non-scientific explanations. This lack of explicit commitment in the language, produced by the so-assumed power imbalance of the rational over the emotional body, was one of the reasons of the break up. It was just after breaking up that I realised the changes I had passed through. It was in that moment of distress and crisis that I became aware of my own personal fundamental changes.

By reading Escobar I found how this division between the rational and the emotional is problematic, limited and misleading, and how it was forged in a tradition, in an ontology (see Chapter 3). I started to understand about the intertwined process of thinking-feeling and to embrace the new, strengthened, emotional body. Embracing thinking-feeling is just a way to break and go beyond the ancient dualism. The writing of this paper in this manner, telling my stories and own feelings is a process of demonstration of this. I ended up doing a reflexive introspective work, something I did not imagined. So, in contrast to my past where I gave priority to the strengthening of the rational and physical bodies, in the process of this thesis I was almost trying to restrict my rational body and giving more free way, or free will, to my emotional body. I felt I needed to do this to start embracing my four bodies.

## **As a professional: contributing to the making of development**

In Colombia I worked in a university centre for consultancy and applied research, assessing public organisations and public policy mainly on topics of strategy and competitiveness in Bogotá and Colombia. I also was a founding associate of a cooperative organisation devoted to participating in the implementation of development projects from the perspective of the solidarity economy. I was trying to work in development both from above and from below perspectives.

In the university centre I co-authored a book series of entrepreneurship in Colombia. It was the product of a research grant to understand how fast-growing start-ups could be fostered in the country. In final book of the series, we ended promoting indebtedness, competence, and globalisation. All these dynamics that I now question and criticise. As a cooperative member, I led several projects for the organisational strengthening of civil society organisations, but we were, I realised, very dependent on funding from the government or international cooperation funds and multilaterals such as USAID or the UN and this implied follow their guidelines. All this was also being now put under great critical sight.

I entered the MA with the vision of continuing this career: *making development work* by better governance and better policies. Indeed, I was admitted to the MA majoring Governance and Development Policy - GDP, but after the first weeks I changed to the major on Agrarian Food and Environmental Studies - AFES. This happened because, very early in the MA, I felt a sense of hopeless disenchantment of the social transformation through institutional reform, which was the professional path I had been forging in Colombia. I no longer felt completely comfortable of positioning myself in that field. I started to feel that approach as a small palliative of bigger, more structural, problems. That is the main reason why I changed majors. AFES is intended to understand capitalism by studying these main fields: agrarian, food and environmental politics. This change would mean a break, or at least a shift, in my professional trajectory, I was completely aware of that.

### **As a student: agrarian food and environmental issues**

Later in the MA it came the full immersion on the AFES courses, which resulted to be a strong process of learning and awareness, intertwined with a huge deal of emotionality. Learnings on political ecology, global food politics, and the agrarian questions revealed how issues in these fields (such as ecological destruction, hunger or land grabbing, just to name a few) are not only endemic to Colombia but are rooted in global structures that impact in similar ways to many other countries. Of some of these countries I had little prior familiarity, but still, although located very distantly geographically and culturally, they carry on remarkably similar problems. AFES explains very sharply how global phenomena is suffered and resisted locally.

The questioning introspection was increasing daily. It was not precisely because of the new information, nor only because of the MA itself; it was happening especially because of the *force of the experience*. For me, being in Europe and studying a MA in a renowned institution was the fulfilment a long-held dream; but now that I was living it, it was not feeling as such, probably because of the acknowledgment of how this dream was more the result of a privilege. I questioned the dream itself: why was it a dream to come to Europe? How did I come to wish this? Why was it so disenchanting?

All these intersected stories converged in an overwhelming crisis. Something close to what Giovanna Di Chiro has called the “numbness and disabling environment associated with the ‘well-informed futility syndrome’” (Di Chiro, 2017). I was passing through several breaking points: in the field of my studies, in my career, in my personal relationships, in my own knowledge construction process, and fundamentally, in the process of my life construction. I was feeling very constrained, at sometimes, immobilised; the feeling of things not getting better was unavoidable. Why was I having this feeling, why was I passing through that pain? Why was I experiencing so personally, so fleshy, the losses of development?

## AFES existential crisis: a convergence

It is the year 2018, I am established in The Netherlands, enrolled in the MA in Development Studies majoring Agrarian Food and Environmental Studies AFES. I had come to ISS to study development, convinced of the ideas of human progress and development as freedom, to learn how to make “development work”, how to make life better for a lot of poor people in my country; people like “Inecita”, who suffer many forms of violence and despair and who strive to survive every day because do not have opportunities for getting better and evolve. I am supposed to be enjoying the experience and preparing to come back to Colombia to “apply the learnings” and make my contribution to my “developing” country so we can “take off” and “catch up” with the developed ones; find a job, pay my loan, get a house, etc. Okay, well, not so much...

Instead, I am passing through strong reflections triggered from my experience of what I am academically learning and what I am living in my day-to-day. I experience a disenchantment of social transformation through institutional reform (my career). I also experience reflections that question my personal relationships both intimate and social, with my family and with my country. It questions my visions about my role as Colombian, as citizen, as professional, as a partner.

I gained a raised awareness of the knowledge losses, such as in the story of Inés; the issues with the imaginaries of progress and development that shape our behaviour and desires, and inform processes like migration, such as in Pastora's story; my own positionality as a professional promoting competence and indebtedness; and my privilege as a student in Europe learning about global crises and taking poor countries as the object of study.

I am rethinking and questioning my own role in all of it: in the reproduction of those dynamics, in the reproduction of the social structures that maintain inequality and privilege, in the losses of development. My own role and privilege, together with all the new information and learnings adds up to a strain on many other dimensions of my life at this specific time and place. It is therefore in these ways how I experience the AFES existential crisis: as a convergence.

## Painful development

Stephen Marglin pointed out this in his 2003 article *Development as Poison*: “more disturbing than the meagreness of development's portions is its deadliness... which involve the destruction of indigenous cultures and communities. This result is more than a side-effect of development; it is central to the underlying values and assumptions of the entire Western development enterprise” (Marglin, 2003:70).

The remembrance of our forebears, which generate these sometimes-painful reflections, maybe comes as a trigger to help us understand how big discourses such as development and modernity have a historicity: a beginning and an ending, a time and a space. This sheds its acknowledgement, then, not as the inevitable, eternal and ubiquitous system as it has been positioned in the mainstream discourse, but as an endeavour. It helps to understand more clearly the *making of development* (as it is named the General Course of the MA in Development Studies), the historicity of the whole thing: how development was situated and related with other economic, social, cultural, and political processes. It became very clear to me: development is a situated discourse, or, using Escobar words, “a whole system of thinking, an apparatus, a historically-deployed device, very sophisticated, very massive, very hard to get away from it and see it from outside” (Escobar, quoted in Gómez, 2012:6).



I am recalling my past working experience with the lenses of development as poison. The feeling was that I had not been critical enough in my participation in development projects. Moreover, now I am feeling how my own actions have been supporting the expansion and unquestioned consolidation of modern capitalist structures. I had been contributing more to the 'poisonous' enterprise than to finding alternatives. Why was I not able to see that?

Marglin accounts for the *culture of the modern west*, responsible of the foundations of development, as "a set of assumptions, often *unconsciously held*, about people and how they relate to one another", which "can be described under five headings: individualism, self-interest, the privileging of 'rationality', unlimited wants, and the rise of the moral and legal claims of the nation-state on the individual" (Marglin, 2003:72, emphasis added). Maybe I was too embedded in that culture and probably I was giving more importance to the development as freedom than to the development as poison.

I am feeling myself a product, an example of this machinery of development. I am being aware about the hierarchy of knowledge and about the global power relations between the so-called global north and south. I am questioning this but doing it *from* Europe. Through my own privilege I am seeing myself contributing to the reproduction of patterns and structures of inequality and knowledge hierarchy. I am questioning, but at the same time embodying several contradictions held in the education system, in the academy, in my own desire of coming to Europe. I am bringing to the surface many intuitions regarding colonialism, development and capitalism that I had have long time before, in Brazil, when researching about local development and in south America when traveling through the continent and seeing the huge diversity and struggles of the people; but those intuitions had been somewhat buried for several years. I am seeing my family also immersed in class and tense power relations. I am experiencing several kinds of ethical dilemmas and questions. Was it supposed to be the learnings of the MA? What was the cause of such unease? Was this process of development the source of the pain?

## Chapter 3 Understanding Ontology

*When we encounter people who live in a substantially different tradition, we are struck by the impression that they have a strange and apparently arbitrary 'world view'. It takes a careful self-awareness to turn the same gaze on our own lives and 'unconceal' our own traditions –to bring into conscious observation that which invisibly gives shape to our thought.*

**Terry Winograd & Fernando Flores**

(Understanding computers and cognition, 1993:8)

### Recalling the stories

The stories I have told in the previous chapters illustrate very clearly the pervasiveness of the ideas of capitalism and development, and how these are manifested in our lives, not only in our day-to-day actions but especially in our convictions and desires. My grandparents, Elias and Pastora are an example of how their insertion into the capitalism transformed their lives in their day-to-day and also shaped their desires and aspirations. They represent the ideas of progress and advancement that are so instrumental to capitalism.

The insertion of Colombia, by the means of development, in the global economic structures of capitalism (a global production chain where steel is key in this case) explains why an iron mine was established in the rural town where Elias and Pastora were born. A global phenomenon affected their day-to-day dramatically. And their story is a story of successful capitalist transformation: Elias managed to change from being a born peasant to become a worker and finally migrate to the city to establish a grocery shop; he managed to become a small bourgeois (although none of his descendants continued growing the business after his death). Pastora's role, off course differentiated by gender (e.g. rising nine children), was just as fundamental in that process. So, what is the problem with that, some may ask; do I stand for a static social immobility? Well, it is not as simple as that.

I admire my grandparents deeply for their tenacity; they managed to perform well in that game. But Capitalism did not come only with economic structures and opportunities for mobility. It also came with moral and value judgements about what is good and bad in life, for instance the very idea that remaining a peasant means backwardness and being an urban entrepreneur means advancement. There is a process of validation that dictates what is advancement and what is backwardness. There is also a process of valuation: how much your labour is worth, for instance. And these validation and valuation impact our daily practices and more fundamental processes too, such epistemological ones. The story of Inés, for example, shows this: while my father got a high degree of education in engineering, he does not know how to cook a single dish. At some point, there was a judgement about what knowledges are important, and those that are not so much can be left to be forgotten (all the knowledges that died with Inés), or even better, replaced to be supplied by the system: My father knows a lot about industrial maintenance, but he is dependent on restaurants (or on a relative who knows how to cook). Other social structures that are instrumental to the system came as well, such as the structures of class and gender that explain, for instance, why Inés was not completely part of the family or why she was the responsible of preparing the food and caring the children.

However, the most important issue for me is the legacy or the reproduction of these structures. This was the crucial point of the introspection that lead to the AFES existential

crisis. I am the product of my forebears, and by being so, I am a key figure in the reproduction of those structures. Structures that come with power and validation. The system imposes a very particular lifestyle (what respond to: why do we act as we act, why are we as we are?) that we are not able to question, because one of its characteristics is precisely its inconspicuousness. It is shown as a 'natural' thing and it is very difficult to see it from outside or to understand it as discourse or as a tradition situated in a time and space (even if that space intends to be the whole planet), a *historically-deployed dispositive*, as Escobar says. So, why was that, what informed that?

In trying to answer those questions we could try to look rationally for our history and formation and try to give answers based on that. But inevitably this kind of things will be very difficult to disclose; they are invisible, too intrenched, too difficult to sense because they make part of ourselves, inconspicuously, even, unconsciously. But moments of crisis unchain a situation that destabilise the normality, the habituality, and position us in the willingness to ask and look for it with new more sensitive senses, this could lead us to new understandings.

I found an answer in the highest level of abstraction: It is not only development and capitalism, it is not just the global economic and social structures. It is not only the process through which we create and validate knowledge. It is, overall, the fundamental question of how we construct our lives, the fundamental question of the being: *ontology*.

Ontology is important because all these *historically-deployed devices* come from a tradition that is difficult to grasp, 'unconceal', and understand, just as it is difficult to 'unconceal' the social structures of capitalism and development, or even more. As Winograd and Flores put it: "In trying to understand a tradition, the first thing we must become aware is how it is concealed by its obviousness" (1993:7).

It was through the process my own crisis that I became aware and that I questioned my tradition, to look for emancipatory ways of changing: what can I do to go out of this? Well, the first thing is to know how it is, and the second is to ask what can we do to change it. Escobar had several answers for the first, and I make a proposal for the second.

## Ontology

What is our ontology, how it pervades our everydayness and shapes our behaviour, our desires, our convictions, our knowledges? Using Escobar words, ontology could be defined in the most succinct way as "a particular set of world-making practices" (Escobar, 2016b:15). This includes practices from the everyday interactions, to the processes, rules and believes for the construction of culture(s) and knowledge(s) and up to the very process of building our conceptions of world and life; in other words, all the spectre of our practices and experiences of doing, knowing, and being.

In his book on designs for the pluriverse Escobar writes: "ontology is related with the assumptions that different social groups make about the kinds of entities that are taken as existent 'in the real world'" (Escobar, 2016a:110, my translation). Escobar uses this definition strategically to problematise the notion of "real" as inserted in the tradition of modernity. Other definitions of ontology on Escobar's work have been proposed<sup>3</sup> and problematised, however, for the purpose of these paper, it is enough to remain with this one. More im-

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<sup>3</sup> In the collaboration work of Escobar with Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, they have also worked with more sophisticated notions. Blaser proposed a three-layered definition that is useful for the issues of political ontology (see: Blaser, 2013).

portant than the question of ‘what’ is the question of ‘how’. How do we account for ontology, or better, how do we encounter things (material and non-material phenomena and others) and how do we deal with them?

## Double movement of ontology shaping process

Following Escobar argumentation, an ontology is related to the human practices and relations, and how this process is constructed and reconstructed in a relational, interactive way. When talking about ontological design, for instance, Escobar points out that at the practice of designing we also create ways of being. He recalls what “Anne Marie Willis has called the ‘double movement of ontological design’, this is the consciousness act that we design our world and, when doing it, our world also designs us” (Escobar, 2016a:27, my translation). This argument, can be extended (from design) to other practices of being, knowing and doing (e.g. from the things we do in our daily lives, like our roles as professionals, students, partners, citizens, etc., and up to our conceptions of what is a good life or what would we expect for the future in our planet). In other words, ontologies (in plural) can be dynamically forged and re-forged.

With the stories told in this paper I intend to show the huge diversity of interconnections that exist between global and local phenomena. Just as we can understand how global structures (e.g. in the economic system) impact our everyday life (e.g. our job), we can understand our ontology (the tradition informing our existence) impacting our daily actions. And this is a two-way process. Changing the practices also impact the ontology. But off course, changing the practices that inform our own selves is not easy at all, beginning because they are, as Winograd and Flores say, immersed, almost hidden in a tradition (as in the quote starting this chapter). This tradition, for people like me, is *modernity*.

Winograd & Flores also recall this double ontological movement involving language in the following terms: “As the use of new technologies changes human practices, our ways of speaking about that technology change our language and our understanding. This new way of speaking in turn creates changes in the worlds we construct [...] practices shape our language and language in turn generates the space of possibilities for action.” (1993:7). They explain how an innovation of language can change dramatically our lives exemplifying this with the introduction by Freud of the terms: ‘ego’, ‘subconscious’ and ‘repression’.

This thought of language as changed by humans and changer of humans is based for Winograd and Flores on the thoughts of Gadamer and Heidegger of hermeneutics as well as the work of Humberto Maturana on the organisation of living systems. In this argumentation the key lies on the study of interpretation, which according to Heidegger and Gadamer is a fundamental activity that we engage in our everyday lives: “Any individual in understanding his or her world is continually involved in activities of interpretation. That interpretation is based on a prejudice (or *pre-understanding*), which includes assumptions implicit in the language that the person uses. That language in turn is learned through activities of interpretation. The individual is changed through the use of language, and the language changes through its use by individuals” (Winograd and Flores 1993:29).

## The ontology shaped by modernity

This (re)forging interaction of ontology is affected by the practices and believes that are part of big discourses, or a tradition, such as of modernity. For Escobar, the discourse of modernity is engrained at an ontological level, this is, at the very process of our understandings and construction of the being. Modernity as discourse was spread and implanted, often violently, by the means of colonisation, the capitalism consolidation and, more recently, by the development endeavour and the globalisation process.

Modernity was able to achieve an implantation of a single type of ontology. This type is termed by Escobar as the *dualist ontologies* (2014; 2016a; 2016b), characterised by a particular set of world-making and world-understanding practices moulded by the dualisms arisen in the modern era, particularly with the cartesian binaries of mind/body, human/nature, reason/emotion, subject/object, us/them, etc. (Gómez, 2012).

About this cartesian division, Heidegger would argue that “the separation of subject and object denies the more fundamental unity of *being-in-the-world* (*Dasein*). [...] The interpreted and the interpreter do not exist independently: existence is interpretation and interpretation is existence.” And drawing such a distinction would step back from “the primacy of experience and understanding” (Winograd and Flores, 1993:31).

Moreover, the main problem with these dualist ontologies is that there is normally a subordinated part in the binary and, then, it becomes an issue of power. The human vs nature binary, for instance, justify the “human dominance over the so-called ‘nature’ understood as ‘inert space’ or ‘resources’ to be had” (Escobar, 2016b:20); an ontological cause of the unsustainability and the ecological crisis. The ‘universality’ vs ‘particularity’ and ‘reason’ vs ‘emotion’ have grounded the hegemonic connotation of notions like ‘civilisation’ and ‘science’; which have led to what has been called as the imperialism of science, and the epistemic violence. Other binaries such as ‘men’ vs ‘women’ and ‘us’ over ‘them’ also might explain the pervasiveness of and maintenance of patriarchy and some phenomena such as the ‘othering’, a construction of imaginaries about those who are different or do not share ‘our’ culture, style, convictions, ideas, etc., which might be related to the rise and/or perpetuation of many discriminations and conflicts.

Contrarily to what modern thinking imply, this implantation (i.e. the forging of dualist ontologies) was not a natural process, nor has been exempt from resistances. But the alternatives have been deliberately eliminated, made invisible or left behind. Much of decolonial and post-development thought is nurtured with this reflexion. In epistemic terms for instance, Boaventura de Sousa Santos has referred to this process as the *epistemicide* (Santos, 2014), or the murder of knowledges from non-modern worlds. Escobar also has talked about *ontological occupation* (2016b), meaning something I relate to colonialism and to the tradition of modernity discourse to overcome and eliminate other positions<sup>4</sup>. In this terms, modernity, capitalism and development, as discourses and practices, have been processes of ontological occupation.

## **Crisis of this model and proposal of solution (emancipation)**

This model (i.e. everything that has been forged by the dualist ontologies of modernity and its armed partner: development) is in a moment of terminal (but chironical) crisis. Escobar argues that the contemporary crises of climate, energy, food and inequality are not only bound in social, economic and ecological terms but also in ontological terms: “Ontologically speaking, one may say that the crisis is the crisis of a particular world or set of world-making

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<sup>4</sup> Escobar suggests that political ontology is helpful to understand occupying ontologies. He addresses political ontology and the emergence of new ontologies as a result of ontological conflicts: “the proliferation of struggles in defence of territory and cultural difference suggests that what emerges from such struggles are entire worlds, which we will call relational worlds or ontologies” (Escobar, 2016b:15). About this point, Escobar drew upon the epistemologies of the south and two main strategies with ontological dimension, namely, “the sociology of absences (the production of non-existence points at the non-existence of worlds, and often implies their ontological occupation), and the sociology of emergences (the enlargement of those experiences considered valid or credible alternatives to what exist entails the forceful emergence of relational worlds through struggles)” (Escobar, 2016b:15)

practices, the world that we usually refer to as the dominant form of Euro-modernity” (Escobar, 2016b:15). This is a crisis of a civilizatory model: the “one-world” model, and it is a convergence of crises with a core source: modernity. We could talk, then, about an *ontological crisis*.

This ontological crisis manifests both globally, in the planet Earth, and locally, in ourselves, or in our ‘selves’. I can say, for instance, how I have felt this ontological crisis in my ‘self’, as a modern, privileged, middle-class, Colombian student enrolled in a Master of Arts in Development Studies in Europe, in a specific time & place, through the AFES existential crisis. The AFES existential crisis is the local manifestation (in my ‘self’) of the global ontological crisis.

But just as I can feel the angst of the ontological crises, I can also envision an exit, this is, an emancipation. Following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, I internalise the premise that we are facing a convergence of crises where there are modern problems for which there are no modern solutions (Santos, 2014:73). Modernity, capitalism, development and globalisation have implanted a type of ontology that we may feel as a jail: it is not bringing happiness and it is destroying the planet in the process. Although this may have been useful in the past for instance, the control over nature was fundamental for our survival centuries ago, in an *empty world* (Daly, 2015); nowadays, in a *full world* (i.e. with more than 7 billion inhabitants), when the main threat to human survival comes from humans themselves, that way of thinking that was fundamental in the past is no longer relevant nor useful in the present. Today we may feel this modern set of rules, practices and believes as the bars of a jail for our being, an ontology that constrains our freedom and our capacity to change and adapt to new circumstances (Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus, 1997:9).

Thus, a liberation of those ontological constrains would be an ontological emancipation and, as such, a practical proposal for the achievement of sustainability, since coming from my positionality as an AFES student, and following Escobar, I propose an understanding of the challenge of sustainability at an ontological level. My experience of thinking-feeling ontological emancipation in this intellectual journey is transposed/intersected with my experience of overcoming the AFES existential crisis.

## **Ontological emancipation**

Ontological emancipation is a term I have not completely defined nor grasped, nor intend to do so here; I will probably be reflecting about this through many years to come, maybe all life. However, I could initially address this as a process of embarking on an ontological shift towards a life construction of more sustainable and fair worlds and ways of living: a world where many worlds are possible, or as Escobar calls it, the pluriverse. “If the crisis is then caused by this One-World World [...], it follows that facing the crisis implies transitions towards its opposite, that is, towards the pluriverse” (Escobar, 2016b:15). Since, at an ontological level, modernity and development implant a set of rules that shape our daily practices and, in that way, also shape our experiences, behaviours, and ways of dealing with things and others (i.e. how you relate with others: humans and non-humans), then we should strive for an emancipation of all this!

## **Understanding sustainability at an ontological level**

The path to sustainability cannot be paved with the same materials (structures and paradigms) that have produced the problem in the first place. Sustainability demands a complete integral change of the social, economic and politic system that we currently have, this is, a significant transformation of the capitalist mode of production, consumption and the social and political

relations involved. Political ecology has shown, for instance, how the problem of climate change has proved the inability of the modern structures to respond accordingly to its challenges. Current debates on *buen vivir*, degrowth, community economies and other post-development alternatives are increasingly taking place in the academic and political arena, however, in order to achieve a mass involvement from the middle modern class, we need to hope for a paradigm shift that should be understood in ontological terms, this is why ontological emancipation is so relevant.

Given these challenges, answering the question of what we can do to embark on ontological emancipation becomes extremely relevant. The question of agency for transitions to post-development has been addressed in important ways by Escobar. In his latest book on *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2016a) he poses the question of agency as an unexplored notion, especially in relation to the ontological design or the design for autonomy. He detaches the concept of agency from the idea of individual and reality and asks that the concept is rethought under new parameters. In a journey towards ontological emancipation *the question of agency is key*.

The path to sustainability should pass through a profound introspective reflection of ourselves. This is something we do not normally do, since, most of the time we are just responding to our obligations: the tasks and duties that we *have* to do. We are embedded in a lot of structures that our modern lifestyle implies, and in our everyday we are just reacting (see *thrownness* in Chapter 4). It is only when something is not normal, habitual, that a crisis is triggered and make the question about existence (see *breakdown* in Chapter 4). It is then when somethings such as ontology takes relevance. That is why I think that the personal crises are usually called existential crises.

When the inertia of our everydayness is broken the crisis is triggered and then is when we make those deep, fundamental questions. So, in a moment of global crisis convergence when the survival of the planet is at stake, is a good moment to make again the big and important questions, such as the question of our existence, and this duty must come especially from us, modern, privileged subjects, (responsible for the transformation that the world has suffered as result of modern technology and ‘progress’).

## The question of Agency

I depart from one of the most striking gaps on the field of political ecology, namely, the **gap** between *awareness* and *action*. That question could be framed as follows: why are we so resistant to make the changes that we know we must make in order to attain a sustainable world? In the climate change global issue, for instance, most of us, western, modern, middle-class, people are aware of the risks and serious challenges and calls for immediate action to mitigate the announced environmental catastrophe that is approaching. However, it is difficult to abandon our modern lifestyles. We continue to rely on fossil fuels (consuming, transporting, etc.), and other unsustainable everyday practices. An ontological emancipation towards a different world-making is possible and it might be the answer to bring together awareness and action; but, how can this transition be made? How can modern individuals embark on such a journey?

Escobar suggests some ways to consider, especially from the practice of design (2016a). The reorientation of design from its modern configuration towards ‘ontological design for the pluriverse’ is one of the most recent streams in his work. I believe that there are other possible paths for these transitions that could include examples not only from indigenous or isolated communities but from peoples that resist every day and in different ways, peoples embedded and subsumed in capitalist dynamics who can cultivate the potential for ontological emancipation. It is modern subjects’ potential agency and their practices that I believe

fundamental, because they are today a majority in the world and it is from this mainstream majority that sustainability is pleading and, therefore, that emancipation must be strived.

The question of agency for ontological emancipation is not simple. To begin with, Escobar advocates for a detachment from what he calls the *fiction of the individual*: “one of the most harmful consequences of the rationalistic tradition” (Escobar, 2016:101). Addressing agency in these terms drive us to think that agency for a process of ontological emancipation is not isolated nor independent, but relational; so, it is not exerted by individual subjects, but it is distributed and/or collaborative. There is even space for considering the agency of non-humans (e.g. the agency of nature or of the mother earth, for instance). What I find important here is the, again, the question of *‘what can we do’* in order to embark on this journey.



## Chapter 4 Healing and Emancipation

*We could not escape being immersed in a tradition, but with an adequate language we could orient ourselves differently and, perhaps, from the new perspective generate a new tradition.*

**Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela**

(Autopoiesis and cognition, 1980:vvii; quoted in Winograd and Flores, 1993:40)

### Resistance: a first hint for healing

Healing is the most important endeavour of our times. We struggle to heal, we dare to heal. For me, reading Escobar and learning, thinking, and feeling about these topics have been healing. After the AFES existential crisis where I felt, for instance, the hopelessness of any transformation through institutional reform (and even less by any revolution; for which many Latin American far-left-wing supporters would advocate), the only path left I envisioned was that of supporting and incarnating resistance. There are many ways of resisting, much of them in the day to day. People resist on different levels: for instance, in the level of laws and rights (such as the advocacy to not allow social structural inequalities endure and perpetuate) or in the epistemic level (such as rescuing and protecting ancestral knowledges).

But one particular way I got interested by is *ontological resistance*. This stands for the right we have to construct our life in our own terms, and to resist the ontologies related to modernity and capitalism; understand that such ways of being and thinking and doing are not something that fulfil everyone: it might work for some, (e.g. for some nations), but surely do not work for everyone. So, ontology should not be imposed; and in any case, it is possible to resist. *Buen Vivir* as a practice of ontological resistance is a first milestone on these big reflections and thoughts about which paths I envision for my own future, personally and professionally. From the local places rises the right to autonomy and the will to pursue and maintain it.

Although the AFES posture is highly based on Political Economy and even though I get very engaged on it despite I had little prior knowledge, I have felt compelled to keep studying these phenomena at a higher level of abstraction, keep thinking in ontological terms. But resistance is coming from the peoples who have a different ontology, that are better equipped and can be aware and recognise easier these ontological differences (such as indigenous or other communities) or by those who have disclosed their tradition, became aware of its losses and gained the will to change. However, that it is not the case of everyone. To incarnate resistance, first there should be awareness and then the will to change. So, first, it comes the awareness, and then, the emancipation.

In this paper I have told some stories to show why we, modern subjects, should strive for ontological emancipation. This emancipation is to be engaged especially by people like me, born and raised within the homogenising tradition of modernity. Thinking-feeling, as Escobar has advocated, may help getting awareness of the tradition in which we grew up, that constrain ourselves and makes us suffer, (and that, besides that, is killing the planet). We need to change at this level, disclose our tradition, get aware and find a bridge between awareness and action. I had the idea of ontological emancipation because I believe it is the only way for those of us who grew up with all those precepts of capitalism and development that are inserted completely in our world: in our education, in our desires, in our conceptions of progress and happiness, in our family relationships, in life itself.

## Purpose on political projects

For those who, like me, think and feel crisis, ontological emancipation might be an interesting trigger point of political experience; Katherine Gibson puts it like this: “taking attention to the care of the self and the way the self changes is a really important aspect of any kind of politics” (Gibson, 2016). I experience this as a transit from the Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies (AFES) existential crisis to a journey of a political involvement. Diana Gomez (2015), a fellow Colombian researcher, has studied how intimate bonds of care under the circumstances of victimization in an armed conflict (in her case, the Colombian) unchain the development of political involvement. Although I have not been a victim of the Colombian conflict and the proportions are not commensurable, I suspect that being a victim activates a condition of self-awareness similar than a crisis does. So, a crisis, just as a condition of victimisation can be a trigger point for the development or strengthening of political involvement.

In the case of my own experience, I felt enormously convened with a political project inspired on J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006): a discursive project which advocates for decentring the capitalism and creating a new discursive space for the replacement of development in Colombia and Latin America. This project would necessarily be related to (re)thinking and (re)orienting the rationalistic tradition and disclosing agency for ontological emancipation. This is, to give the opportunity for those political projects, (new forms) departing from actual economic practices that are existent today, in our day-to-day and that are not shaped by the logics of modernity and capitalism, but instead by care, and love. This resembles a process of reconfiguration, in the sense of Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus (1997). A reconfiguration occurs when peripheral practices become central.

How do peripheral practices shift to the centre? Capitalism has been implanted as the hegemonic, central, space in the language of economic relations, but is grounded on a myriad of non-capitalist economic relations, based on care, solidarity, familiarity and love. These practices have been *maintained as* peripheral (sometimes even with the help of people looking for alternatives) by maintaining capitalism central in the language. Contributing to raise voice and centrality to non-capitalist economic relations and to non-modern, non-developmental practices resembles the kind of embodied political project I started to envision in this journey. The act of reconfiguring the peripheral practices through thinking-feeling and embodiment is a space off possibility for ontological emancipation. It can generate inflection points, history-making shifts or disclosing acts. Even as important as that is to state that *purpose* is a key ingredient in that bridging between awareness and action and, just like in the case of Gomez, political involvement can come impregnated with purpose.

## Relational, not linear, nor individual, process

Notwithstanding that I refer to ontological emancipation as a transition from a state of existential crisis to a journey of intellectual and political activation, it is not and cannot be conceived nor understood as a linear process (say, from A to B). Ontological emancipation must be a relational process; intersected, spiral if you like. In my case, it was intersected through all the manifestations of the AFES existential crises and reflected in the many faces of my own existence and experiences.

I recall again the force of the experience at this point. Because when I started to share my thoughts about the readings I have been doing, and the feelings I was experiencing because of the crisis, and the reflections about all the historicity and positionality, it was then when I realised that I was starting to feel healing, to get to new conclusions, and arrive at new understandings.

The whole process of doing my thesis was a continuous process of introspection, reading, and then talking, putting in conversation the thoughts and feelings. While reading Heidegger for instance I got a mess in my head but when trying to articulate what I had understood was that I *actually* understood. When I talked with someone else was that I got awareness of what I was thinking, feeling or learning. And the feeling was always relieving. This was a *healing relational experience*.

So, in this process of sharing with others I combine this *experienced relationality* with the concepts of phenomenology I was studying. In particular, four concepts became fundamental and are instrumental for my proposal of disclosing agency for ontological emancipation. These are: practices, thrownness, breakdown, and speech acts, on which the framework conversations for action is based. These concepts are neatly explained in the book of Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores “Understanding computers and Cognition” (Winograd and Flores, 1993). Although the concepts look a bit distant at first sight, I have been trying to stress examples of this in the stories I have told in the previous chapters. Again, since it was an experiential journey, the concepts became relevant for me as they represented and triggered important aspects of my life, in my past or my present, recalled through the preparing and writing of this paper.

## Practices

In the account for what is real, phenomenology is more interested in the question of *how* we encounter things than *what* things are. In this account we encounter objects and phenomena as fulfilled with meaning, otherwise we would encounter mere artefacts. *Practices* give meaning to things, according to what those things are useful for. “Things show up for us in the same terms of our familiar practices for dealing with them. The same is true for people” (Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus, 1997:18). So, in our daily life we encounter chairs, desks, houses, stadiums, etc., as meaningful things in accordance with the way in which we deal with (or use) them. The same occurs with people and other phenomena. And that is the habitual state.

Whenever we encounter something that does not fit with the practices we have assigned for them, it appears as a strange thing and we need to give meaning to it as soon as possible, because it implies a stressful situation (let us think, for instance in magic, witchery or anything that is mysterious to us; those things generate stress; in a way, science has been useful as a stress reliever since it has given *an* explanation to many phenomena that were mysterious before).

A reversal process also occurs, when there is stress or disturbance, we may encounter the regular, habitual, phenomena in a different manner, with different sensibility. This is key to my argumentation of how crisis might be relevant for disclosing new things.

## Thrownness

One of the underpinnings of the modern rationality is the idea of detachment: “the Galilean habit of thought that Descartes drew into prominence” (Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus, 1997:6). This is the assumption that a distanced point of view in which emotionality, passion, and other ‘veils of thought’ are left aside to be able to perceive ‘reality’ with the highest degree of objectivity. Nowadays, this detached view is challenged by many philosophers and social theorists, not only because of the problems it carries on (dualist ontologies) but because of the fallacy of its assumptions.

Besides the subject/object dualism, Winograd and Flores (1993) summarise this assumptions in the following terms: (i) a 'real world' made of objects with properties, (ii) 'objective facts' independent of interpretation, (iii) Perception as a process of making representations of the 'real world' in our minds, and (iv) a process of thought and intentions that reflect our physical actions. In their book, they extend on the phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer, and the work of Maturana & Varela to debunk this assumptions, and hence, the hegemony of what they call the *rationalistic tradition*.

For Heidegger, the rejection of all this apparatus relies on what he calls thrownness, arguing that "we have primary access to the world through practical involvement" (Winograd and Flores, 1993:32) and that the majority of time we are in a condition where we are acting unreflexively, responding, reacting to the situation in which we are involved. This is named *thrownness*. We are thrown in the daily situations and, in that condition, we do not have the possibility to plan or reflect nor have any control over the results of our actions (or inactions). Every movement we make or every word we utter is not *planned* nor reflected in a detached process, instead it is the reaction of a *prejudice* or *preunderstanding* that is intrinsic to our experience. Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus (1997) explains this in the following terms: "What needs to be done, said or thought straightaway draws an appropriate response from us. We respond to a situation that appears in terms of the actions we can take. We respond to the ongoing solicitations and not to the facts a detached observer would notice" (1997:18).

The condition of thrownness is our normal (or default) state in our daily lives. And it is Okay, otherwise we would be overthinking every action we take at every moment. This condition applies in larger process such as our life and also in particular things such as in language, in a small chat. As Winograd and Flores say, "language need express *only what is not obvious* and can occur only between individuals who share the same background." (1993:74, emphasis added).

## Breakdown

When the normal, regular or habitual condition of thrownness is dismantled then we have a break, a disturbance that raise our attention to consciously engage in a process of understanding (giving meaning to) what is unusual, whatever is affecting the normality of our background or tradition. This is what Heidegger calls a breakdown. In Winograd and Flores words, a breakdown is an interruption "of our habitual, standard, comfortable 'being-in-the-world'" (1993:77).

Again, this breakdown can occur in minor, particular situations, such as in a conversation where some terms might not be shared by the interlocutors or when the set of assumptions that allow the fluidity of the conversation somehow do not coincide. It also can occur in bigger processes, such when we experience a crisis, like the AFES existential crisis or the convergence of global crisis. A crisis is then a moment of breakdown where we gain an unusual level for awareness which can be used to disclose objects and/or properties that in other circumstances would not be possible. So, it is in a moment of crisis when we can engage to disclose our tradition, to reveal "the rationalistically oriented background of discourse in which our current understanding is embedded" (1993:79), and **to become aware of our ontology**. In plain words, crisis is a perfect moment to engage in ontological emancipation. We must embrace crisis and take advantage of its unusual raise of awareness to disclose and (re)orient our actions; this is, to **disclose our agency**. While we overcome the crisis start our emancipation.

## Conversation and action

The speech act theory developed primarily by Austin and Searle is a tool that Fernando Flores (2015) draws upon to develop a framework of conversations for action. This is intended to understand language as action. Although Flores developed it to be applied in the workplace, (as the subtitle of the book marks: instilling a Culture of Commitment in Working Relationships), it is a powerful framework that can be used in other fields.

I bring this framework for two reasons, first because in my own experience I saw conversation as a trigger for new understandings and second because it might be useful as the bridge to close the gap between awareness and action that I have mentioned before. I will not recreate here the framework for restrictions of space and because I doubt I could explain it better than the author. I will just mention the key points that are important in my proposal of language as the key discloser of our agency for ontological emancipation. However, the key idea is as simple as: *we can talk!*

We can engage in conversations along our daily activities (in our job, in our personal relationships, in the school). New things are created in these conversations. But these conversations must have some particular characteristics: When these conversations are infused with awareness and purpose, I commit. When I do this, I create, I change, I get to new conclusions.

The key to conversations for action is commitment. And it does not come from the individual will necessarily, but from the understanding of language as a social foundational tool. We are embedded in a network of commitments. “The shift from language as description to language as action is the basis of speech act theory, which emphasises the act of language rather than its representational role” (Winograd and Flores, 1993:76).

Conversations for action also needs the cultivation of some critical skills: listening, trust and mood-shaping. Engaging in speech acts, re-evaluate assumptions, and understand the making judgements and characterisations as keys to consider passing from action to commitment.

Commitment emerges from this re-understanding of language, not as a representation system or a means for transfer information, but as an experience rooting our own existence. Heidegger calls this the place where the thought is gathered, the *dwelling of the being* (Bucher, 1996:19 my translation). It is also important to recognise “the shift from an individual-centred conception of understanding to one that is socially based” which allow us to understand that neither language, nor thought, nor knowledge are representations of an objective, external world but that, as a socially based system we create them in participation with others. We create in relation.

In my case, the overcoming of the AFES existential crisis was intersected with this involvement with political purpose, disclosing new realities by conversations with others: my friends, my family, my significant other. I have seen the transformational power of language in our everyday activities. I gained unprecedented strength for instance by disclosing my vulnerabilities and expressing my emotionality with words in environments where I did never before.

The re-understanding of language as fundamental for our personal existence (to our way of understanding and being) and for our society, transforms our speech acts in a *space of possibilities*. Sometimes it can be a battlefield (such as the feminist’s inclusive language or the

project of Katherine Gibson of not addressing “capitalism” as a noun<sup>5</sup>) but in every moment, language is a *political arena*, and a space for resistance, for transformation, and for healing.

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<sup>5</sup> *Post-Capitalist Politics: An Interview with Katherine Gibson* (2016) Directed by Gibson, K.  
<https://youtu.be/Y-FG5l4gUSQ>:

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

*Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery  
None but ourselves can free our minds  
Have no fear for atomic energy  
Cause none of them can stop the time*

**Bob Marley**

(Redemption Song, from the album Uprising, 1980)

For this concluding chapter I would like to bring two excerpts of a conversation I had with Arturo in November 2018 that I feel aggregates important reflections that wrap up many of the topics I have addressed in the previous chapters and that exemplify my point about how it was that I arrived to new ideas and understandings through language, through putting in conversation my thoughts and feelings. Then, some concluding remarks.

### Joining tradition and innovation

We were talking about food, commenting a documentary series of famous chefs around the world and which ended up in a reflection about the relation between tradition and innovation as a way of emancipation. Arturo had listened to my story of Inés and eventually came with this topic...

**Arturo:** In every case [he is talking about the documentary series, where each chapter tell the story of one chef] it is a return to the fundamentals, and not only because we are talking about food, but also about how food is raised, which knowledges are involved; especially the traditional ones. In the case of a Thai chef, she said that she was formed in Thailand and knew how to prepare Western dishes but did not know how to prepare Thai food; because no one in Thailand thinks about stablishing a special restaurant focused on Thai food. So, she went to the UK to learn from a renowned chef of a Thai restaurant in London; she stays there about two years, and then go back to Thailand to realise that many of the ingredients for that traditional food does not exist anymore, partly because the industrial agriculture is moving aside the peasants and the traditional crop rising; the traditional recipes are dying. Then, she started a whole complex project to rebuild the tissue of all this, working again with the traditional producers that are still around, cultivating everything organically, rescuing all the recipes, making everything again, more or less, from scratch. And she becomes very famous because of this.

**Me:** This makes me think about Inés, for instance, about the very way of how to kill a hen and prepare it in the kitchen for cooking a *sancocho*<sup>6</sup>, these practices are dying.

**Arturo:** Exactly, all those are *experiential* knowledges. Varela calls this ‘ethical know-how’. It is a know-how rather than a know-what. Another interesting insight, from another chef, a Catalan one, is that he combines both kind of knowledges; well, I think that most chefs combines both, when they go to their kitchen they rationalise a bit everything. But the Catalan chef

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<sup>6</sup> A traditional dish of Colombia and South America consisting of a soup with vegetables broth, often left cooking for many hours.

indeed articulates both things because he developed a kitchen workshop where they experiment and create new things. It is not purely applied chemistry; it is also intuition, an intuitive way to proceed.

**Me:** It is also, kind of, a conversation between tradition and creation or between tradition and innovation...

**Arturo:** Yes, exactly. And that also can be part of ontological emancipation: how do we re-think the relation between tradition and innovation. Between the know-how and the know-what or between the experiential knowledge and the abstract, rational, knowledge.

## Cultivating ontological emancipation

A bit later in the conversation, we are talking about *agency* through *language*...

**Me:** We can understand language as a political arena in which, every day, we have space for resistance and (re)creation of different *ways*. Because another important concept is the day-to-day practices and the relation of what you recall as the ‘double movement of design’. How we design things, but at the same time, those things that we have designed return again and design ourselves. The same is applied to practices, we create certain practices that return and create us. Understanding that movement is key for transformation.

**Arturo:** Yes, and the role of design... by designing more communal, communitarian, relational ways of existing in the real world.

**Me:** Exactly, if we design some communal spaces, these spaces return and reconfigure us. The same would occur with the day-to-day practices.

**Arturo:** The space is fundamental...

**Me:** And the awareness of the situated practice in a time and place, in the specific moment that we are living... For me, my very small contribution in this thesis is to propose agency as the day-to-day practice of language and, therefore, of conversation for [bridging awareness to] action. But taking aside this framework from the language of organisations to say that it is useful, for instance for healing [and emancipation]; not only for a “culture of commitment in the workplace”. And also politicising it [the conversations for action framework]; because one of the criticisms I have of these books [from where the framework emerged] is that they are still too much Western, too much united states-like; without questioning neither capitalism nor modernity.

**Arturo:** Yes, the same happens with Scharmer<sup>7</sup>. He does not criticise capitalism, just assumes that it will transform, period.

**Me:** Yes... I think it was J.K. Gibson Graham who wrote in their introduction of *The End of Capitalism* [2006], that somehow everything started from a comment of someone who said to them that, in the end, the problem is that we are very bad at imagining alternatives, we lack imagination<sup>8</sup> to think, and even to see, alternatives that are just there... many things we do daily, for our family, for our friends, etc. [that are not shaped by modern nor capitalist logics].

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance: Scharmer and Kaufer (2013); Scharmer and Senge (2009)

<sup>8</sup> This is the quote: “As we embarked on this collective effort, a comment by Fredric Jameson both spoke to us and provoked us:



**Arturo:** Yes, all those things. And, also, your conversations in your [peer-assessment] group; those are ways of being, at least partially, non-dualistic; ways of being a person-in-relation, not separate individuals.

**Me:** Yes. I don't remember who said... there are a lot of daily resistances against the dualisms, resistances in the way of being and behave.

**Arturo:** Yes, yes. More than what we think. So, just there, there is a beginning... How can these ways be cultivated? Ontological emancipation could be an explicit way of developing a theory for cultivating those other ways of existing. Some of which are already there, so it is just about re-creating them. For sure, many other forms should be dismantled [disassembled], but it is not like starting completely from scratch...

**Me:** Yes. I think again about the conversation between tradition and innovation. It is not about turning upside down nor implanting a new ontology, but instead, opening a space of possibilities. In the end, that is all about.

## Pre-conclusion

Since I deal with big and fundamental questions in the philosophy and the epistemology, this is only a very small and partial contribution restricted by the time and space of this paper as the product of a Master of Arts. It is a very personal reflection from my own understanding of Heidegger's phenomenology and my process of experiential knowledge, passing through the readings of Escobar and how they resounded through the feelings and thoughts in a moment of crisis that I was also experiencing as the result of a confluence of several questions that were important for me in this time and space, this is, while doing the MA.

These are also difficult topics. Not just because they are coming from philosophical fundamental questions but because they deal with aspects such as the question of language, a reflection of the language through the language is a very difficult endeavour.

Likewise, I dealt here with topics such as a critique of rationality, but these are some the most common and important tools we have for enquiry: argumentation and logic. Is it valid to make a critique of rationality using rational tools, such as logical argumentation and structured written texts? Similarly, many of the critics of the dualist tradition of thinking and being find themselves also making dual divisions in some of the argumentation. It happened to me very clearly when experiencing my perception of existence as the confluence of four bodies, that is also a dualist way of thinking spiritual vs. physical existence, and rational vs. emotional division. These are miry fields to step on. So, the point then is that we cannot completely deny rationality or modernity. It is also about a conciliation, a reunion among these things, so we can be able to see them, disclose them, and create new things. The conversation among tradition and innovation exemplified in our talk about food is a tremendous insight for further developments and for coming experiential endeavours

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It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination" (Gibson-Graham 2006:ix)

## Conclusion

In order to conclude the argument I would like to go back to the point of how we are facing a convergence of crisis. I argue that these crises are ontological and manifest themselves globally and locally, in our planet and in our own selves.

It is in these moments of crisis where we experience what Heidegger calls a breakdown, which entails a raise of awareness.

The linking between awareness and action passes through language; through a reconfiguration of our understanding about it. Language leads to commitment and commitment to action. These actions should lead to a transformation of our own selves, for our healing. So, a process of transformation for healing *is* ontological emancipation.

Everyday practices are related to ontology, our every day-to-day actions and conversations design and construct our world. In return, this (designed) world strikes back and design and construct ourselves. Escobar (2016a) calls this the 'double movement of design'. Wino-grad & Flores acknowledge a similar movement in the language. In that same ways, there is also an inter-relation between local and global dynamics. We impact our world and the world impact ourselves. And if we are able to heal ourselves, to emancipate; then, we might also be able to heal our planet, to liberate the Mother Earth.

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