

## THE MEANING OF THE GLOBAL CRISIS AND “RECOVERY” FOR STUDY ABROAD: WHAT ARE WE PREPARING STUDENTS FOR?<sup>1</sup>

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*There is universal consensus that we are at the end of an historical cycle. But the consensus vanishes when you try to identify the corpse: we can no longer accept that it is just another business cycle, as the pundits still proclaim, but neither can we blindly assume the end of globalization, neoliberalism, capitalism or the modern era, as many critics currently argue. Raised with a promise of infinite prosperity beyond business cycles, at 'the end of history' after the marriage of capitalism and liberal democracy, our students have suddenly entered an era of decreasing expectations and increasing uncertainty. How to reformulate their hope, any hope? How can they be inspired by what people are doing, all over the world, when they take again in their hands the control of their own lives and destinies, reclaiming their own definition of the good life?*

### **New, dark expectations**

Hard times loom over us. Global fear grows geometrically.

Denial operates its standardized shield masking despair with ‘business as usual.’ At the other end of the spectrum, prophets of doom indulge in apocalyptic randomness, announcing the collapse of poor Mother Earth and a generation sinking in “slow-motion social catastrophe” (Peck 2010, 56).

Beyond globalized optimism or pessimism, we sense our world in turmoil. This is not the world for which we prepared our students. Most of them were raised in scientific and social promises of eternal prosperity. At the end of the cold war experts and pundits celebrated the end of business cycles. The marriage of liberal democracy and capitalism was presented as the culmination of human progress, ensuring stable prosperity forever. A caricature of Fukuyama’s complex thinking became the motto of the day: we were not only living in a Panglosian world, the best possible world, but we could not even think in something better; this was the end of history.<sup>1</sup>

Despite experts’ conviction that booms follow recessions, as days dawn at nights end, however, such expectations recently vanished. While some experts excitedly celebrate any and all signs of recovery, others humbly confess their sinking sense of shaky foundations. “We know that the situation is very serious”, they candidly confess, “but we don’t know how serious it is and even less what to do” (Zimmermann, Director of the

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German Institute for Economic Research, 2008). Robert Solow, the Nobel Laureate in Economics, acknowledges: “No one can possibly know how long the current recession will last or how deep it will go” (Solow 2009: 4). George Soros, the well known Wall Street protagonist, declares: “We are dealing not only with the collapse of a financial system, but also with the collapse of a worldview” (Bradley et al. 2009: 4). “What we face now could in fact be worse than the Great Depression”, thinks Simon Johnson, former chief economist of the IMF (quoted in Zackaria 2009).

A year ago, the broadest figure of unemployment and underemployment reached the highest level since the 1930s. Half of all American families had experienced a job loss, a reduction in hours or pay cuts in the last year. Many experts, including those in the IMF, are calmly assuming that this pain may last forever... (Peck 2010, Krugman and Wells 2010, IMF 2009). It defines a new normality: the rich countries may never recover the rate of unemployment they had before the current crisis.<sup>2</sup>

The current crisis marks not “just” another business cycle. Instead, it is a turning point. This point of turning, however, is not written in the stars. Instead of the certainties in which they were educated, our students are now entering a world of radical uncertainty. A few weeks ago, Ben Bernanke, president of the Federal Reserve, warned that we are before “unusually uncertain perspectives” (*The New York Times*, July 20 and 21, 2010), and Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, observed that the recovery is still “fragile and uncertain” ([http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38354388/ns/world\\_news-americas](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38354388/ns/world_news-americas)) (<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/business/global-markets/2010/07/23/265790/markets/2010/07/23/265790/World-Bank.htm>). This short-term uncertainty is compounded with another, clearly affecting our students. A whole generation of young adults “is likely to see its life chances permanently diminished by this recession” (Peck 2010, 46).

A month ago, the *New York Times* illustrated the situation through the eyes of Scott Nicholson, 24, a brilliant graduate of Colgate University. His grandfather is encouraging him to go abroad – to “go West” so to speak-, given the decline of the American economy. His elder’s urging startled the unemployed grandson.

*As the weeks pass –reports The New York Times- Scott Nicholson, handsome as a Marine officer in a recruiting poster, had gradually realized that his career will not roll out in the Greater Boston area –or anywhere in America- with the easy inevitability that his father and grandfather recall, and that Scott thought would be his lot, too, when he finished college in 2008.*

Scott knows that at least a third of young adults like him are unemployed.

*“I don’t think I fully understood the severity of the situation I had graduated into”, Scott said. And then, he veered into the optimism that, polls show, is persistently,*

*perhaps perversely, characteristic of millennials today. "I am absolutely certain that my job hunt will eventually pay off", he said."* (Uchitelle 2010).

Perversely, this may define the contemporary victory of optimism over reality. Mere whistling in darkness? Surely, Scott will find a job. But he may never find the job of his dreams and educated expectations. Finally, the reality he rejects may force him to accept one of the jobs he is now deliberately refusing. Like millions graduating, Scott has entered a world of radical uncertainty.

### **The end of an era**

There is almost universal consensus that we are at the end of an historical cycle. But when the time comes to identify the corpses – to define which cycle is ending- the consensus vanishes and we enter into highly controversial territory.

These years mark the fact that Wall Street is no longer the financial center of the world...one element marking the end of the hegemonic power of the United States (Wallerstein 2003) and neoliberalism. We are seeing the end of both the neoliberal policies which started in the 1970s and their expression in the Washington Consensus, in the early 1990s (Williamson 1990). The World Bank, one of the main promoters of this orientation, pronounced its obituary in its Annual Report of 2007 – soon followed by the Latin American presidents in El Salvador, president Obama –the day he took office- and Prime Minister Brown and the G8 two months later. Of course, the neoliberal ghost is still there and there are many zombies, pretending it is still alive (Esteva 2009).

Prominent scholars, like Wallerstein, think that we are living during the final phase of capitalism (Wallerstein 2004). Others, like David Korten, offer us hope of a good "life after capitalism" (Korten 1998, 2009). Still others, like Alperovitz, urge Americans to protect their values by going beyond capitalism (Alperovitz 2005).

Other prominent thinkers invite us to celebrate the end of the modern era. The philosophical pillars of the Enlightenment, defining the rationalities of the last 200 years, crumble, completely undermined. In a conversation with Chomsky (youtube.com), Foucault explains why we can no longer use them to understand the current situation and even less to create a new society.

In the 1960s and 1970s Ivan Illich described the counterproductivity of modern institutions and anticipated their decadence. During the last years of his life he observed that "there is a generalized sense now that the future we expected does not work". We are in front of an "epistemic break", "a sudden image-shift in consciousness in which the once unthinkable becomes thinkable". It was simply "not thinkable that a king could be beheaded up until the French Revolution. Then, suddenly, there was a new way of seeing, a new form of language that could speak about such things." (Illich 1989,2).

For Illich, what was emerging in the place of the old era could only be described as the dystopic horror that the literary imagination of George Orwell presented in *1984*. This is the world our students are entering into. They are forced to think the unthinkable... lacking the tools to do it. Bill McKibben mourns: "The Earth that we knew –the only Earth that we ever knew- is gone." (Stern 2010, 35). We can now imagine that, "as Samuel Beckett once said, 'this earth could be uninhabited'" (Illich 1989, 2). Environmental prospects render intolerable more development and industrial growth as progress to be avidly pursued. But do we or our students know how to creatively imagine alternatives to progress?

Giorgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher, describes the emergence of a new totalitarianism, of the kind anticipated by Illich and Orwell, in which a declared or undeclared state of emergency ("state of exception") is transformed into civil war against entire categories of people: those that cannot be integrated into the political system. The state of law is then progressively abolished (2005). These lenses can be used to examine Arizona's new law, contested by President Obama but supported by half of the Americans.

"The state of exception is not a dictatorship...but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations... are deactivated." (p.50) For Agamben, as we advance toward global civil war, "what the 'ark' of power contains at its center is the state of exception – but this is essentially an empty space, in which a human action with no relation to law stands before a norm with no relation to life." (p.86)

If we really are at the end of an era, in that period of uncertainty in which our old concepts and paradigms can no longer support our perceptions and ideals, but new ones have not yet been formulated, our students are graduating into very muddy territory – a space devoid of direction and sense. It is not only the era of decreasing expectations. It is a time in which no expectation stand on solid grounds. "Common sense is searching for a language to speak about the shadow which the future throws" (Illich 1989, 2). Our students suddenly confront a catastrophic break with industrial man's image of himself...at the edge of an abyss.

### **From the Bottom-up**

Seasons of darkness and despair offer us the most compelling invitation to cultivate hope. The virtue of hope is strengthened not by the certainty that everything will turnout just fine...as we are taught to expect. Instead, the cultivation of hope calls us to search for what is right, good and appropriate, what makes sense – even though we cannot predict its consequences, personal or social. Instead of diving into despair by the experts' dire prognosis or into denial, guided by the pundits, I invite you to join me in diverse worlds at the grassroots, where most people on earth live and learn in search of work that offers dignity, fun and beauty. These are what I imagine and enjoy when my

gaze is not trapped at the top but immersed in my own world, at the grassroots: worlds of common men and women seeking to regenerate their commons through the cultivation of commons sense.

In Latin America, neither our common sense nor our hope derive anything from the unholy alliance<sup>3</sup> of transnational capital and the leftist governments now dominant in the region; launching today a new era of capitalist expansion and conventional development; with unprecedented environmental destruction, injustice and authoritarianism. My hope comes from the social movements actively resisting each and every one of such unholy alliances, still associated with the emblem of development. According to Salvatore Babones (2010), “most thinking on development today can be categorized into one of three approaches”, which he calls “the three Sachs’s”:

- **Goldman Sachs:** Development as savage capitalism, 60 years back, to the time in which president Truman coined the word underdevelopment and development was nothing but economic growth and the search for private gain, long before ideas like “social development” or other attractive faces of development were brought to the public arena. This is perhaps the consensus approach. “While we in academia argue over definitions and goals”, observes Babones, “Goldman Sachs pursues development in the guise of its commodities trading desk, its infrastructure finance unit, and its sovereign debt markets division... (This) view is absolutely hegemonic. The highest form of development is an oil platform located at least ten miles offshore and thus relatively free of obstruction from locals.” (BP and the world are currently learning what this really means).
- **Jeffrey Sachs:** Philanthropic capitalism, 40 years back, to the time in which the damages of development were acknowledged. Recognizing that it produced hunger and misery, the World Bank promoted the Basic Needs Approach – in order to continue the promotion of development (and capitalism) but finding ways to satisfy at least the basic needs of the poor, of those affected by development and capitalism. (See ILO 1976, Ghai et al. 1977, García Bouza 1980, Richards et al. 1982). Estimates for such strategies, with better knowledge and precision than those of Jeffrey Sachs (2006), were prepared at the time. In the 1980s this orientation transformed the NGOs into organizations that in many senses represented the opposite of the original, subversive NGOs created in the 1960s and the 1970s: they became GONGOs (Governmental Non Governmental Organizations, supported by the governments and international institutions), BINGOs (Big Northern Non Governmental Organizations), etc. (Esteva 1988). The ideas behind this line of thinking were described as “elusive development” by Marshall Wolfe (1995). Jeffrey Sachs is the most prominent proponent of this approach, but Bill Gates and many others adopt it. For Babones, “it stands for a

chicken in every pot, a net over every bed, and a condom on every penis”...while capitalism continue producing the miseries they try to alleviate. To be sure, “no one endorses starvation, malaria, and AIDS-not even Goldman Sachs”, but this consensus among humanitarians refuses to associate those evils with development and capitalism.

- **Wolfgang Sachs:** No to development (and capitalism), 25 years back, when the idea of post-development became fashionable and the *Development Dictionary*, edited by Wolfgang Sachs, was published (1992). For Babones, “the Wolfgang Sachs approach is to promote active and healthy human life, which can only be realized within active and healthy communities and societies.” Today, millions, perhaps billions of people, are saying ¡Basta! Enough! And resist every and all kinds of development – conventional development, big development projects, humane development, sustainable development, etc.etc.

The struggle for land still characterizes peasant life in Latin America. Sometimes, it takes the shape of a relatively silent, almost clandestine, reoccupation of land, like the recovery of a million hectares in Peru. Other times it becomes a spectacular struggle, with mixed results, like the one waged by landless peasants of Brazil<sup>4</sup>. In recent years it experienced a political mutation and a conceptual shift: it became territorial defense. The Colombian *minga* has been *paseando la palabra*, taking the word for a walk, and exemplify such new, postmodern grassroots initiatives. Indigenous and peasant peoples are weaving their knowledge and resistance for the defense of their natural resources and territory and to oppose the big development projects<sup>5</sup>, redefining agrarian reform.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the land, a specific form of relation with it is claimed. It expresses a sovereign practice of collective will, openly challenging faculties of the government. The political form of this claim is usually presented as autonomy, a notion actualized by the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and adopted by many other social groups (Esteva 2003, 2005).

Last April, 35 000 people from 142 countries came to Cochabamba for the people’s summit on climate change. In his message to this conference, Eduardo Galeano observed that times of revolution and change are now open. “Human rights and nature rights”, he observed, “are two names of the same dignity” (2010, 3). The voices of the Summit will be heard next December, in Cancún, when the governments will try to remedy the failure of Copenhagen. It may perhaps express there a new alliance between those who struggle to preserve the biosphere, and those who oppose a life style based on a monopoly of commodities over activities. “The one value shared by all currents within this alliance is the attempt to recover and enlarge, in some way, *the commons*.” (Illich 1982, 17-18).

Initiatives to reclaim and regenerate the commons is what the team of the prestigious British journal *The Ecologist* discovered all around the world, in the time of the Earth Summit, in 1992. The enclosure of the commons, marking the beginning of industrial

society and capitalism, became the trademark of all forms of predatory colonialism and today defines the operation of the dominant economic forces. *The Ecologist* brilliantly described peoples' contemporary resistance to their enclosures, struggling to recover and regenerate their ancient commons while continuing to create new commons. (*The Ecologist* 1993).

No word can fully express the diversity of the struggles currently creating, everywhere, new ways of life and government. For more than 20 years Ms. Ostrom has been calling attention on them (1990). Her Nobel Prize in Economics hopefully will offer them more visibility and legitimacy by professionals, state functionaries and other bureaucrats. Called the revolution of the new commons in the 1990s (Esteva 1998), they were recently baptized as commonism (Dyer-Witheford 2007).

### ***El buen vivir* (Living Well)**

If one expression could capture the main meaning of these new commonist social movements it would be *buen vivir*, living well<sup>7</sup>. The recovery of verbs illustrates the meaning of *buen vivir*. Instead of nouns like education, health and shelter, generating dependency on entities satisfying those "needs", verbs like learning, healing or settling allude to the recovery of personal and collective agency and enable autonomous paths of social transformation.

- **Eating.** Cultivating food in the cities and establishing new arrangements between farmers and urban consumers define today a vigorous trend. Called Food Sovereignty by Via Campesina, the biggest peasant organization in history, it expresses the freedom to define autonomously what you eat and the capacity to produce it, beyond the market or the state ([viacampesina.org/main\\_en/index.php?option=cum\\_content&task=view&id=47&Itemid=27](http://viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=cum_content&task=view&id=47&Itemid=27)). More than half of the food eaten in Cuban cities today is produced in them. 900 community gardens in Detroit, the very image of decline of industrial development, illustrate the vitality and extension of this movement.
- **Learning.** The educational system is not delivering: it does not prepare people for life or work and marginalizes the majority. While many people still struggle to "get education" and to reform the school, practices of free and autonomous learning are increasingly popular. They go beyond the institutional framework, recover ancient traditions of apprenticeship and introduce contemporary technologies in learning and studying as free, leisure activities.
- **Healing.** The health system is inefficient, discriminatory and increasingly counterproductive. Many efforts attempt to improve it, but new notions of health and new perceptions of body and mind are nourishing autonomous healing practices, recovering traditions marginalized and disqualified by the

medical profession and enabling healthier behavior and more humane treatments, well rooted in families and communities.

- **Settling.** Social and ecological disasters usually associated with public and private housing developments are still common, and stimulate the proliferation of homeless people. At the same time, many initiatives support, consolidate and recover autonomous settling practices, now enriched with contemporary technologies, particularly those inspired in environmental concerns.
- **Knowing.** New centers for the autonomous production of knowledge, out of research centers and universities, are emerging everywhere. They generate new technologies and theoretical innovations, reformulating perceptions of the world and introducing methodologies challenging dominant paradigms.

Initiatives in all areas of daily life, expressing new attitudes well rooted in their physical and cultural contexts, within new political horizons and institutional arrangements beyond dominant ideologies and conventional patterns, are getting increasing visibility in the midst of the crisis: they offer creative survival options in hard times and effectively resist the megaprojects still promoted in the region.

There are strong movements to improve formal democracy and to introduce participatory democracy, with tools like referendum, recall, participatory budgeting and others. But the main effort attempts to put those struggles at the service of radical democracy (Lummis 1996, Calle 2008). Instead of social engineering, they look for what people can do for themselves: to transform social relations and living conditions for commonism, common sense and postmodern commons. Such struggles abandon all obsessions for 'seizing power', through elections or armed uprising. Instead, they cultivate the common sense for regenerating commons that dismantle the state apparatuses (Holloway 2002).

### **Radical pluralism**

When our students study and directly experience such realities, they are often exposed to terms like *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*: challenging all the certainties of the modern world into which they were born and educated.

*Postmodernity* is not just what follows modernity but an epoch in which the value system of the era preceding it remains relevant for that epoch. Newtonian physics, Cartesian reductionism, the nation state of Thomas Hobbes, and the capitalist world system define the modern paradigm. *Postmodernity* is not equipped with a similar paradigm. The word describes a state of mind for those dis-illusioned with the great truths of the previous epoch, unable to find a substitute. This is experienced as a loss of values and orientation, or as the insight that there cannot be the one truth (Dietrich 2010,1).



We can understand *postmodernism* as a particular way of forming knowledge. Postmodern thinking is a method. Before the loss of the basic truths of modernity and the insecurity it creates, social sciences attempt to elaborate a new way of interpreting social reality (Dietrich 2010, 2). Postmodern thinking does not stand for arbitrariness<sup>8</sup>. It defines a mental and social opening implicit in the theme of this symposium and explicit in many of our programs. “Unlike modern thinking, postmodern thinking will never attempt to dissolve plurality, it will instead demand respect for and coexistence with difference”. Postmodernism “embrace concepts which are located beyond universalism and the civilizing process, beyond the modernist belief in the objective truth of scientific stock-taking, and beyond the belief in the solvability of conflicts.” (Dietrich 2010, 3).

All this, presented here in a crude simplification, is a source of confusion and perplexity for our students: they are exposed to radical critiques of all the beliefs in which they are educated, but they don’t get appropriate substitutes for them or even clutches to support them in their journeys through the worlds they are currently discovering.

A new attitude observed today in many social movements offers a way out of such confusion. It implies abandoning conventional universalism without falling into cultural relativism. It expresses in practice, based on local traditions and ancient experiences of resistance and liberation, what Raimón Panikkar (1993, 1995) has conceptualized as radical pluralism. This position acknowledges the existence of human invariants, but not cultural universals. In accepting cultural diversity as a precondition for harmony among peoples and recognizing that no person may represent the totality of human experience, cultural relativity (not relativism) is assumed, which means that every view of the world is relative to its context and no one can hold a complete and absolute view of reality.

### **The intercultural dialogue**

Since 9/11, I have heard many sensible calls to tolerance, stimulated by unacceptable violence wrought by intolerance. But despite the olive branch proffered by tolerance, we cannot ignore its thorny prick that stings and wounds. Tolerance fails to fully embrace the otherness of the other.

Tolerance merely suffers difference with patience. The person who tolerates perceives the other as someone who has not the right color of skin, the proper God, the correct behavior. He feels the generosity of tolerating the other, of suffering him with patience. Though more gentle or discreet, tolerance is merely a different form of intolerance. “Toleration”, Goethe observed, “ought in reality to be merely a transitory mood. It must lead to recognition. To tolerate is to insult”.

Hospitality, on the other hand, is rooted in recognition, an association, a coming together of an entirely different sort. Being hospitable, we learn to recognize and embrace the pluralism of reality. We open our hearts and minds to hosting the otherness

of the other; even when we are disagreeing with his arguments, his versions of the multiverse of the real world. Hospitality does not compel us to follow the other, to adopt his views, to affirm or negate him. Hosting the otherness of the other simply means opening our arms, our hearts, our doors for him; to honor and accept his forms of existence in his own place.

In our many worlds brought close by technologies like never before, we are now compelled and invited to take a stance in the presence of the other. The reality of our daily life makes it impossible to avoid mutual intertwining. No action or choice stays confined to one group or territory. With intermeddling, conflicts emerge. What we directly suffer, the impasse now implicated in every kind of violence, is the incompatibility of differing worldviews. The question of pluralism is thus urgently posed to every one of us: the current situation throws us into the arms of one another. Are we going to open hospitably our arms or to arm ourselves? This question poses as much a moral challenge as it does THE political challenge of our times fraught with radical uncertainty.

How do we learn and teach the creation of mutual openings in our concern for ourselves and those we call “other”: those with whom we don’t share ideas, concepts, beliefs, even words? How do we look for and find elements to share something that offers guidance, inspiration, light, ideal, whatever both parties acknowledge and neither party controls? How do we re-enact and engage in dialogues, transcending the logos of both parties, of our conceptual systems?

These are questions for shared meditations, reflections and choices that lead to actions for *buen vivir* for all; and not just for some privileged minority.

What has been and continues to be our challenge is the pretension associated with imposing on others a particular good, your own good, for their benefit. This is colonialism. "The Others" --- barbarians, infidels, savages, natives, underdeveloped or undemocratic --- have been seen as peoples in need of evangelization, civilization, economization, development, or democracy. Always for their own good. Some people even “seem to believe that they always may, should, and actually can choose others with whom to share their blessings. Often times, they end bombing people into the acceptances of gifts.” (Illich 1971, 19). The doves sending food, medicine, or developers, and the hawks sending bombs, belong to the same species. The current hell is paved with good intentions. “I am here”, said Ivan Illich in 1968, in a speech that many in this room know by memory, “I am here to entreat to use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.” ([www.swaraj.org/illich\\_hell.htm](http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm)) These phrases are always a source of intense debate with the students. It is easy to understand why the National Society for Experiential Education uses the speech for its students.

If fear, weakness, and hate packed in a set of beliefs, ideologies and educational curricula are breeding grounds for terrorism, we need the opposite. In the expression of hope, strength, and love, we seek to create and nourish neighborliness through intercultural exchanges and conversations.

As we consider the plural world as a place in which many worlds can be embraced, it is imperative that we re-consider the friend-enemy distinction now reigning as the insane frame for political life (Schmidtt 1996). We must come back to our senses and look again for the common good, the very essence of political acts. Instead of destruction of the constructed enemy, our political struggle is more appropriately oriented towards protecting our own place --- that place which can never be reduced to the shapeless and genderless space defined by any ideology, belief, national identity or transnational engineering like NAFTA, the WTO and the like.

The place of politics, like that of democracy, best belongs to where people know what they live in the dailyness of their relationships. There, in their own places, known, understood, loved and cared for, can common people offer freely expression of their own free will and views.

This is the moment for recovering good sense, common sense, the sense one has in community. With common sense and a hospitable spirit, we need to bring back home the initiative, to our own territories of meaning. Only in our own places, the field of social and political struggle is transparent, natural, and therefore understandable. In their places real, ordinary men and women can occupy themselves with the common good, drawing upon their common sense. From there, coalitions of discontent can undermine the very base of all formal, constituted powers, while meeting from time to time to celebrate each other and to express our common rejection to the globaphiliacs. In real places among real peoples, our shared pain and suffering can become a source of hope that is fully rooted and grounded in reality.

Only at home, can we be hospitable to the radical otherness of the other.

Only at home can we define ourselves in our own terms rather than from within the mirror of constructed enemies.

Only at home, can we regenerate our arts of living and dying, of suffering and enjoying.

Only at home can we deal with our own grief and find, below our feet, our grounding in both soil and virtue.

Yes, it is time to evoke wild, uncontrollable, non-managed friendships at the grassroots, among those who stand ready to abandon fearing and mis-labeling “the other”. Applied to nation states or to abstract entities, friendship becomes its negation: a flag defining allies before a common enemy, a pretext to define enmity. At home, in our

own places, it is time to express affection, mutual sympathy within immediate neighborhoods as well as embracing distant places. .

It is very difficult, next to impossible, to change the world as it is. We can instead dedicate ourselves to creating a whole new world, a world in which many worlds can be embraced.

A world embracing hospitality, not mere tolerance.

A world localized and placed in the soil under our feet, not globalized and spaced in the simplification of a blue bubble.

A world where hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the conviction that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

A world of common sense, the sense you have in community and give to it its proportion, the portion and proportion of everyone of us.

### **Back home**

“I hate travels and explorers”, wrote the tireless traveler Claude Lévy-Strauss at the beginning of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955, 1). Dedicating most of his life to exploring other worlds, his final confession express humility in recognizing his inability to discover or understand the mysteries of the otherness of the other. Complementing this humility with wisdom, he appreciates how much “the other” has helped him better understand himself and his society.

Here lies our hope in our students going abroad to explore other worlds. On returning to their own places, while healthily puzzled about the mysteries or intricacies of Gujarat or Oaxaca, they seem unable to fully share with their families and friends the otherness or estrangement they experienced in those distant lands. Our hope with all those we host is that they will leave with a richer, better understanding of themselves, their position in the world, the role of America today, and how they can share their genius in doing their best work in their own places.

This is how, anyway, I cultivate hope in myself and those I work with, locals or visitors from distant lands. Two decades ago, I left the big city to root myself in my ancestors’ small Zapotec village in the South of Mexico. International indicators dismiss my immense privilege, in my beautiful ancestral paradise, as underdeveloped and poor, for clearly my life here is marked by seven of the eight indicators defining Mexico’s international poverty line: no connection to state potable water or sewage, no access to official health care, social security, or pension for life... Seeing all these “deprivations” from our own cultural lenses, Zapotecan and others, I cannot but celebrate with you our beautiful crying rock in the mountain behind my house, that brings me fresh clean water with a pipe of 800 meters. In the same spirit of radical cultural pluralism, I celebrate our

magnificent zero flush dry toilet...liberating my intestinal tract from being plugged into miles and miles of city sewage leading to highly toxic treatment facilities.

18 years ago I got a call from Teddy Goldsmith, in London. He wanted me to give a lecture to a group of American students coming to Mexico. I accepted these IHP students full of uncertainties, especially since he wanted visits to our Indigenous communities. My friends also accepted hosting Teddy's students with some uncertainties, and our experiment started. It continues to offer us many surprises and endless reasons to celebrate growing hope in our diverse exchanges with our students. Instead of the centuries old dismissal suffered by our people, looked down upon or dismissed as superstitious, backward or plain poor, our students were celebrating their rich natural and cultural worlds. The contrast was startling.

Enjoying more and more the hope that attends these transformations year after year, when our students celebrate these communities instead of dismissing, I was easily seduced by Joan Tiffany into being a country coordinator for the International Honors Program, currently a division of World Learning, or by Bill Stone, to collaborate with SIT in Oaxaca.

When asked by students why I spend so much time with them, despite my growing age and commitments, I honestly confess: "You have become one of my most important sources of hope. Your sensitive antennas teach me much about how each passing generation is learning to avoid the stakes and hubris of those who came before five or ten years ago. This source of hope is further strengthened by what you teach me about re-rooting your hopes in your own native soils on your return."

Three years ago, in a colloquium in Chiapas, I had the honor of sharing the podium with Subcomandante Marcos and Naomi Klein. She described herself as a journalist embedded in movements resisting corporate domination, and explored the romantic perspective of the foreigner mentioned by Marcos: that gaze limited to seeing only what is convenient or inspiring. And Naomi talked about the new age miners. True, she said, "the old miners are still here, to drain the veins of Latin America extracting gold, silver, copper, oil." Others are now extracting hope and inspiration. "In spite of ourselves, we are miners of inspiration," she confessed, while warning about the dangers of this new export. For "exported hope cannot last. It rots... If North Americans want something more than ephemeral hope...(they) need to cultivate it locally," she said. She also observed that today, in Latin America, we suffer from peak hope, rather than from peak oil. (Klein 2009, 284-286)

My urgings and invitations today keep clear of those of hope miners. Our peculiar trade enriches us all when our students discover mines of totally endless and contagious hope and inspiration during their stay with us; and, once back, begin creative forms of

local cultivation for reciprocating in ways generous and mutually nurturing. Such stories of mutual *crianza* grow happily with each passing year.

Two weeks ago I got a letter from a brilliant young man who recently ended his journey around the world in one of our programs. He was here last Monday.

*I have been experiencing – he wrote- a whirlwind of chaos and confusion having just finished college. After a lifetime of preparation, I have been dropped, naked, vulnerable, and unskilled, into a lonely pit of social pressures to pursue a career, to have my life figured out, and to make money. None of these things, however, are my priority. Instead I am seeking personal fulfillment, excitement, knowledge, and work that support and develops my values.*

Millenials repeatedly reciprocate our hospitality and hope with such vast varieties of gifts, each time they confirm our experience that people who graduated from high school in the last decade “dislike the idea of work for work’s sake, and expect jobs and career to be tailored to their interests and life style” (Peck 2010, 48). Inevitably, in their search for fulfilling work, they are offered jobs which seem boring, ugly and undignified to them. Instead of seeing this attitude as a problem, however, instead of asking them to take jobs they hate, as the President of the University of Connecticut urged his students in the commencement of 2009, we cultivate hope in their creative searches to birth new worlds rather than merely seeking the security of fitting into the prefab boxes that industry multiplies mindlessly.

Michael Sacco, a young Canadian, came to Oaxaca seven years ago. Confused by the processes of his graduation, brimming with energy and talent but lacking clear direction or meaning, he combined some low-tech Canadian inventions with local Oaxaca genius to produce solar arrays: our first intercultural technology. Discovering our gift of cacao, he returned to Toronto and began with other young people a creative production of chocolate with no fossil fuel.

Michael, called *chivo* in Oaxaca because of his peculiar beard, discovered that chocolate is very nutritious –you can live on it- and produces a peculiar, healthy kind of intoxication when you take a lot of it. He thus started to organize *chocolatadas*. 200 or 300 young people come together and participate in vibrant political discussions, listen to lectures, and share generously the delicious chocolate produced by *chivo* and his friends. Their intense and enlightened debates, minus any fights, full of poems, music and dance, have brought far North many elements of our great Mexican fiestas. Enjoying such experiences together, we find ourselves writing a book: “Reclaiming chocolate: a political manifesto”. It celebrates dignified work that combines beauty and leisure with abundant enjoyment. Instead of boring, ugly and undignified disappearing jobs, our political manifesto, born out of creative grassroots intercultural initiatives like the *chocolatadas*

reveal endless opening for regenerating life, work and leisure in our own places in ways that amaze and delight.

Last Monday, when a group of IHP alumni came to Battleboro, two of them gave me a great gift. They shared with me the information that they are creating chocolate cooperatives in Burlington, Haiti and Nicaragua, articulated to cooperatives in Chiapas and Oaxaca. “Do you feel a kind of reciprocity in what you are doing?”, I asked, following the conversations of that morning in this Symposium. “We don’t know”, they said. “For us reciprocity is now a way of being, not really an attitude or something that we consciously do”.

How can I stop before bringing William into our midst? He rooted himself in The Aprovecho Institute, in Oregon, and came back for a few weeks to Oaxaca, to share with the women of Teotitlán who had offered him *Oaxaqueña* hospitality during the program what he now knows about ecological stoves.

Finally, I feel compelled to invite Tom, a brilliant philosopher, into our midst as a necessary ending. At the end of the program ten years ago, Tom returned to India to learn Tamil. He has now published two books on Tamil poetry, and lives near Seattle. After staying for a while in Oaxaca and mastering the Spanish he needed to translate into English a book of one of our best writers, he wrote to me recently with a most fascinating petition: now seeking to make connections in Argentina. Why? Because he now wants to write a novel that can only exist in that country. His passing comment:

*To earn a little money, I am working again as a magician. But now with a great difference. No longer is it a question of mere tricks; but, instead in offering and creating metaphors for poetry. Such metaphors were for Illich vital, authentic expressions of human aliveness.*

To witness such metaphors for aliveness, I invite you to visit Tom on [www.thepoetmagic.com](http://www.thepoetmagic.com). Performing on this site, Tom reveals to us neither just a show of tricks nor a simple talk about poetry. “The poet’s magic combines poems with the art of illusion to explore the hidden possibilities of daily life. It is a performance as much about the magic of words as about the wonders we discover when we see the world as a poem. There’s nothing in all of magic quite like it.”

While my heart urges me to share endless tales of hope offered by our graduates, the obligations of time compel me to end by reiterating our conviction about our students genius and ingenuity for discovering and creating unimaginable, whole unexplored frontiers for innovation in our troubled times. Their experiences abroad could be sources of inspiration for all of us. Once back, collaborating and creating afresh with friends and kindred spirits sharing their concerns and challenges, they will continue to sow and reap hope in their own places; rediscovering ancient wisdom that assured us that hard times are also times of immense creativity. Instead of trying to follow a pre-defined path to

achieve a prescribed destiny, now in jeopardy, they may attempt to reinvent themselves and the world.

Not far from here, and not so long ago, our beloved Howard Zinn revealed revolutions not of great leaders or violent socialquakes. Zinn's history celebrated and rescued from obscurity "the innumerable small actions of unknown people which produce the greatest social changes." He knew that "even marginal gestures can become the invisible roots of social change". He wisely urged us to see social, revolutionary change as something immediate, as close to us as the palms of our own hands:

*It is something that we need to do today, right now, wherever we are, where we live, where we work or study. It implies to begin right now to get rid of all the authoritarian and cruel relations, between men and women, parents and children, between different kinds of workers.*

*This is not an armed uprising. It happens in the little corners which cannot be reached by the powerful but clumsy hands of the state. It is not centralized or isolated: it cannot be destroyed by the powerful, the rich, the police.*

*It happens in a million places at the same time, in the families, in the streets, in the neighborhoods, in the work places. Suppressed in one place, it reappears in another until it is everywhere.*

*Such revolution is an art. That is: it requires the courage not only of resistance but of imagination.*

Confronting courageously our current overwhelming challenges, Zinn's wisdom guides us towards recovering our sense of reality with serenity. His wisdom helps us escape the crutches of today's dominant paradigms and systems of education. His hope in common people invites us to find the joy and passion needed to walk in freedom; on our own feet, on our own paths, dreaming our own dreams.

Instead of trying to find, in a dark room, a black cat that does not exist, lets escape yesterday's promises of old, dying worlds. Instead, lets enjoy reinventing our traditions while creating a whole new world; a world in which many worlds are embraced and enjoyed in celebrations of *abundancia*. Abundance of hope, abundance of friendship, abundance of commonsense.

San Pablo Etna, August 2010



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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In his famous article of 1989 (Fukuyama 1989), Francis Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy may constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and “the final form of human government”, and as such constituted “the end of history”. Assuming that history is not a cycle but advances in a certain direction, towards a goal, Fukuyama affirmed that the goal of the human society “liberal democracy, had finally been reached” (Fukuyama 1992a:1), and that we cannot even imagine something better: “the *ideal* of liberal democracy cannot be improved on” (1992b, xi). Francis Fukuyama is a very sophisticated thinker and we must avoid any simplification of his thinking. He was elaborating on Nietzsche’s critique of Hegel and his image of the “last man”, the one without passions or prejudices, who does not want to seriously take risks. “He is a fearful gregarious being, a beast of consumption” (1992a:10). This can be a very fruitful line of reflection. But a caricature of his complex thinking about the end of history became conventional wisdom and was incorporated one way or the other into our students’ soul.

<sup>2</sup> See the study presented by Carmen and Vincent Reinhart in the annual conference organized by the US Federal Reserve with the directors of central banks in Jackson Hole, August 27, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> ‘If Christ came here and Judas had the vote of any party, he would have called him to negotiate a coalition’, said president Lula to *Folha de Sao Paulo* on 22/10/09 (*La Jornada* 23/10/09, p.25).

<sup>4</sup> The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST), is in fact a very important movement in Brazil and a leading force in Latin America. It has been in continual tension with the government, in a country where 1% of the population own 46% of the arable land. In October, 2009 the powerful agribusiness sector forced the creation of a Congressional commission to investigate MST.

<sup>5</sup> The “Foro Nacional Tejiendo Resistencia por la Defensa de Nuestros Territorios” (National Forum Weaving Resistance in the Defense of Our Territories), organized on 17-18 April, 2009, in San Pedro Apóstol, Oaxaca, México, illustrates well what is happening. Representatives of more than 20 Indigenous and peasant peoples expressed in their final declaration that they came together ‘to weave collectively our efforts, knowledge and resistance in the defense of our natural resources and territory’, to oppose ‘the big ‘development’ projects’, and to deepen ‘the processes of local and regional organization.’ (<http://www.oaxacalibre.org/.../ind.php?>)

<sup>6</sup> In October 2009, the International Commission for Integral Agrarian Reform, in the framework of the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform organized by Via Campesina, said in their *Declaración de Quito* that they came together to examine ‘the situation of the agrarian reform and the territory’, blamed the Green Revolution and trade policies for the current food crisis and climate change, denounced how the big corporations pollute rivers and privatize the access to water and explained that the peasants are now united to struggle for the agrarian reform and to defend their territories. (<http://www.viacampesina.org/.../index.php?>)

<sup>7</sup> This expression is usually complemented with *crianza mutua* (mutual nurturance) (Apffel Marglin 1998; América Profunda, 2007; Chuji, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> The dis-illusioning insight implies that the one truth can no longer be found in the premodern/Christian/occidental sense or in the enlightening/civilizing sense of modernity. But instead of arbitrariness, such insight calls for a definition of difference, after acknowledging a plurality of societies and pluralism in societies and their truths, often contradictory and incompatible.