



Book Review

Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds

Arturo Escobar

Duke University Press, Durham, 2018. 312 pp. ISBN: 9780822371052

We live in a time when our goal of achieving a just and equitable world is being challenged by multiple, interlinked crises. According to a plethora of critical scholars, the roots of such crises remain firmly entrenched in historical processes, including colonisation, patriarchy, and industrial capitalism. Addressing the effects of these historical processes requires mobilising a collaborative effort across scales and disciplines. A mobilization which is ontologically driven and goes beyond mere renovations of our institutional tools. In this book, Escobar explores how *design* fits into such mobilization, and asks:

Can design be reoriented from its dependence on the marketplace toward creative experimentation with forms, concepts, territories, and materials, especially when appropriated by subaltern communities struggling to redefine their life projects in a mutually enhancing manner with the Earth? (preface)

It is a complicated, all-encompassing question. It challenges the roots of mainstream design principles which remain grounded in colonisation, patriarchy, industrial science and capitalist growth. Escobar sheds light on the spectrum of alternatives that reject such design, and envisions different worlds. He explores this complicated question within the context of 'contemporary Latin American epistemic and political experiences and struggles'.

His arguments are tethered to concerns about the three following current situations.

The first situation concerns the current pervasiveness of global socio-ecological crises, including climate change, economic inequality, ecological destruction, and cultural subjugation. To him these are a result of "deeply entrenched ways of being, knowing, and doing" (p.19). Escobar asks how is design implicated in the production of these crises? And can design be transformed to address such issues?

The second situation Escobar explores is the power discrepancies between western dualist ontology (Cartesian instrumentation) and others who advocate for the deep relationality and interconnectedness of all that exists. Questions of access are questions of ontology (worldview; what we think the world is). Can design be ontologically produced? And can such production address the historic inequity of power?

Given the existing crises, the third situation Escobar explores is the rise of various nodes of transition thinking. Transition thinking is having a particular impact on design theory and practice. This has resulted in challenges to design's utility, role in projects of justice and representation, across objects, spaces and processes. Such contentions have given rise to movements such as 'design for transitions' and 'design for autonomy', that are "centred on the struggles of communities and social movements to defend their territories and worlds against the ravages of neoliberal globalization" (p.20). What do these new emerging fields look like, both in theory and in practice?

While the above questions demarcate specific political and ideological debates, their overarching question is the question of modernity. The viability of modernity as a proxy for wellbeing, or sustainability, or even justice has often raised questions. For example, can modernity consider, and truly make space for, 'other-than-modern world making possibilities', or is it 'fatally compromised' given its allegiance to certain institutions of exploitation? The Pluriverse Escobar mentions in the title of his book is a counterweight to this idea of one modern world. Not a universe, but a pluriverse: space for many worlds inside the one we all share. As he interrogates the life of design within such a vision, he returns to the earlier question, slightly reworked:

Can design be extricated from its embeddedness in modernist unsustainable and defuturing practices and redirected toward other ontological commitments, practices, narratives, and performances? Moreover could design become part of the tool kit for transitions toward the pluriverse? (p.15)

Escobar explores and wrestles with this question in three acts of the book. He first situates design within the field of cultural studies and argues that a critical design studies field 'is under construction'. It is a descriptive introduction to the world of design studies, covering vast intellectual territory and engaging with some of the current key debates within the discipline. The second act advocates for an ontological approach to design, building on ontological re-imaginings from other fields. Escobar uses literature from varied disciplines and fields to manifest this idea, which is built around Winograd and Flores' proposition from the 1980s. This multiplicity of worldviews sets the stage for designs of the pluriverse: as a radical tool for reimagining and reconstructing the world through a relational matrix of autonomy and justice. The final act attempts to explore such designs for the pluriverse. Escobar does this by identifying the various transition narratives emerging from both the Global North and the Global South. Ultimately, Escobar proposes the idea of Autonomous Design as a particular avatar of ontological design. To flesh out his idea of Autonomous

Design he presents a case study from Latin America (Colombia). The book ends with an invocation for further research in this area, in the space between the 'politics of the real and the politics of the possible'. Such research is critical given the enduring exploitative structural legacies of patriarchy, colonization, and industrial global markets within communities across the world.

I enjoyed reading the book and resonate with the emancipatory ethic it advocates for, given my own long-time engagements with many people within the 'transition thinking' movement. However, there are some points of contention which I noticed and discuss in this section. The scale of this book is incredibly ambitious, as Escobar himself states, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of modernity" (p.8). In order to represent the brutal exclusionary machinations of modernity Escobar moves through a wealth of different literature, including feminist political ecology, science and technology studies, anthropology of design, critical development studies and political ontology. The fields mentioned explore ideas of equity, justice and dependence within human and nature relationships. And Escobar employs them to castigate a framework that has been widely criticized for the past three decades by post-colonial and critical studies literature. Thus, his evisceration of Cartesian bordering (and ordering) that is the foundation of modernity is nothing novel, and actually fails to address the significant critiques levelled at such attempts. Furthermore, the relational prism, presented as an alternative to such dualism, though well theorised very rarely materialises outside of academia.

Even though Escobar asks, "What does nondualist existence mean in everyday life?" the answer he provides fails to travel the distance between metaphor and practice. While meshing together visions of radical activism from (mostly indigenous communities) in Latin America and notions of 'conviviality' as imagined by thinkers like Ivan Illich and Thomas Berry, Escobar uses his description of this vast thought-scape as his prescription. Escobar's vision of ontological design meanders through the deconstructive

landscape of Heidegger and Varela, but still fails to remain true to its own notion of non-duality. In constructing monolithic notions of indigeneity, markets, and even community, the pluriverse within them is reduced and caricatured in their representation.

Following this train of thought reveals a critical point: in taking the axe to the structural forests populating modernity, Escobar misses the myriad trees of agency. The many worlds he mentions are brimming with many different ideas and actions, but by making design the central subject of the book, the agency of the many communities he mentions are inadvertently excluded. Various communities are experiencing different engagements with modernity. Such engagements lead to a spectrum of world-making politics which may or may not democratically represent the complex intra-communal assemblages. The 'community' much like 'modernity' is not a sum of its parts, and this idea is absent in Escobar's analysis. The leviathan whom Escobar is attempting to hold accountable is modernist design praxis and philosophy. However, Escobar's overwhelming dependence on theoretical tools ends up stretching theory to its limits and comes up short. If instead, Escobar had shared this burden by focussing on everyday points of resistance undertaken at specific places by specific humans and non-humans, and their corresponding potential for solidarity, he would have addressed the question of misrepresentation and communal erasure that he identified.

Having said that, I do believe he does an impressive job compiling a huge trove of intellectual work that grapples with the very soul of design. For me this is the key contribution of this book. It acts almost as a reference volume and primer, identifying the thousands of tributaries flowing into the Pluriversal Ocean. Enzo Manzini's *Design, When everybody Designs: an Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* and Humberto Mautaurana and Francisco Varela's various books seem to be informing much of the conceptual inspiration, along with the Zapatista resistance struggle and Bob Marley's music.

Ultimately, autonomous design, which rests heavily on Latin American struggles for autonomy, emerges more as a vision of the relational engagements of 'indigeneity and modernity', than as simply an 'onto-epistemic' moment of resistance. This is the vital conjecture at the heart of this argument, defining a set of rules and devices with which to engage with the ongoing manifestations of modernity. At times, Escobar seems to advocate for a bounding of modern processes and artefacts within certain spaces, almost as a form of containment to allow the other worlds to flourish. At other times, the call to action is one of more intellectual syncretism, imagining equitable collaboration and symbiotic flourishing. I believe this unresolved question: What to do with modernity? Reflects the situation on the ground. Therefore, *Autonomous Design*, while an admirable goal fails to adequately address the question of modernity. Furthermore, I find it strange that the modern western university, which is often the stage and conduit through which ideas about how to relate to the world are decided and dispersed, is left unchallenged until the very end. Hopefully, an extension of this work can explore the probable material and affective interventions needed in the academy to usher in the pluriverse.

Despite such drawbacks, the greatest strength of the book is its marvellous journey through hundreds of projects, ideas and practitioners that are rethinking the very foundations of design and implementation. Ultimately, this has inherent value to the pluriverse of different ideas and initiatives that are encountering the powerful developmental machine. Challenging the status quo, both theoretically and otherwise, can feel like such a solitary and exhausting battle. *Designs for the Pluriverse* addresses this by highlighting the community that exists and is growing.

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