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Review: *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* by Arturo Escobar

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Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, *Redes* by Arturo Escobar. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 456 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4327-1.

This work investigates forms of alterity, difference, and heterogeneity that emerge through the dynamics of postcolonial development and modernization along the Pacific coast of Colombia. Escobar's work looks specifically at the Process of Black Communities (*Proceso de Comunidades Negras*, PCN), a political organization that represents the larger community of Afro-Colombians who had been geographically, politically, and economically isolated until the 1990s. With the advent of efforts to integrate these communities into the mainstream Colombian and global economy, Escobar documents the ways in which PCN attempted to transform this integration process in their own terms. Escobar's ethnographic account of PCN's efforts elegantly traces the continuity between the activists' practices of economic and cultural self-determination and the larger theoretical discourse of alterity, difference, and heterogeneity. This continuity between practice and theory provides a sense of globalization and economic integration as an epistemological encounter in which the Afro-Colombian communities' ways of knowing and acting in the world are wholly threatened. Escobar's work is thus largely motivated by identifying possibilities for exit out of this epistemological encounter; that is, possibilities for exit out of a modernization and rampant capitalism that leaves little room for alternate forms of being. On the whole, his work provides an ambivalent response to this overarching question; nevertheless, this is an important work for scholars interested in understanding the epistemological and power dynamics within the global political economy of environmental activism and conservation.

By looking specifically through the prisms of *place*, *capital*, *nature*, *development*, *identity*, and *networks*, Escobar analyzes the various forms of alterity, difference, and heterogeneity that occur through the work of biodiversity conservation among the PCN activists. For example, traditional Western accounts construct the concept of place as a territorial configuration. Escobar demonstrates instead how concepts of place for the Afro-Colombian activists are inclusive of notions of history, culture, environment, and social life. This distinction, he argues, is one of the epistemological fault lines around which the political debates of place and environment form.

Through his inquiry of alterity, difference, and heterogeneity through the additional tropes of capital, nature, and development, Escobar makes several broad arguments. First, Escobar argues that capital and forms of economic organization should be seen as fundamentally heterogeneous and diverse in order to prevent the universalizing tendencies in economic frameworks. Second, he asserts that Western models of science are based on culturally specific

epistemological grounds that construe nature as antithetical to culture. Third, he argues that we need to take a critical eye towards the epistemological grounds of economic development in order to consider not only alternative forms of development, but more importantly, alternatives *to* modernity. Lastly, Escobar claims that identities are anchored in traditional practices while also formed through cultural and political negotiations.

The ensemble of these arguments represents a complex portrait of the underpinnings for a social theory of alterity, difference, and heterogeneity. Through each discussion of place, capital, nature, development, identity, and networks, Escobar covers extensive ground and thus provides a theoretical prism that is rich and thought-provoking, all the while carefully balancing between ethnographic exposition and theoretical inquiry. Interwoven throughout these chapters are serious discussions of the intellectual histories of each of these concepts in relation to the ongoing practices of the Afro-Colombian activists. As such, Escobar creates an overarching discursive space that weaves together postcolonial development, the role of science and knowledge therein, and the cultural dynamics of modernization. This represents a very rich intellectual space in which there is still little work.

However, Escobar's turn towards network theories as the conceptual culmination of these intellectual efforts is somewhat limited. Within this work, network theories serve two specific functions. First, network approaches represent a theoretical explanation of the dynamics within which his informants were able to carve a form of alternative existence for themselves in light of the growing encroachment of capitalist development projects that undermined the Afro-Colombian communities. Second, network theories comprise a kind of advocacy methodology; that is, Escobar argues that environmental activist groups should, in fact, incorporate network strategies to leverage political action. His use of network theories for these two aims is well-argued; however, given his sophisticated and compelling theoretical analyses throughout the book, his treatment of network theories in this limited manner is disappointing. The turn towards network approaches as a potential theoretical panacea appears somewhat naive since it can potentially take on its own form of universalization, a characteristic of modernity he severely critiques.

Escobar's use of network theories would have been strengthened had the book integrated a more network-like approach in its methodology. By focusing primarily on one social entity in the wider political fight for environmental protection in Colombia we do not see network theories in practice; that is, we do not fully see the ways in which PCN worked in relation to the other social organizations as part of their political fight against encroaching neo-liberal globalization. In short, we do not see the links and relations across a wider network of actors. The work would have also been further strengthened had the

author articulated more clearly the ways in which practices among the Afro-Colombian activists reconfigured extant network theories. Thus, rather than turning to the network as an explanatory framework, it would have been helpful to understand how the emergence of a black social movement in Colombia's Pacific coast can shed new light onto extant network theories and give new shape to this body of social theory.

Overall, the book is a welcome alternative to traditional Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholarship that all too often ignores the overt political economic conditions in which science and knowledge are formed. For this reason alone, Escobar's postcolonial framework opens up exciting new avenues of inquiry across several inter-related disciplines and fields, including the anthropology of development and anthropology of social movements, along with the aforementioned STS. Moreover, his work reveals the exciting possibilities of forging these fields with area studies, in this case Latin American studies. Future research will undoubtedly return to Escobar's work. His embrace and ethical positioning of alterity, difference, and heterogeneity paves the way for future research of their nuanced expressions in various forms of knowledge production in global circuits.

Reviewer

Lilly U. Nguyen is a PhD candidate in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA. Her research interests explore the cultural dynamics of knowledge circulation in postcolonial contexts. She is especially interested in the moral economies of software, methodological questions of data representation, and forms of data narratives. Her research explores the modes of hybridity that emerge through the encounter between free and open source software and piracy in Vietnam. She previously received her bachelor's degree in Political Economy from UC Berkeley and her master's degree in Media and Communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science.