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**SENSING-THINKING WITH THE EARTH
AN ECOLOGY BEYOND THE OCCIDENT***

Abstract

This book review is about the French translation of a book by the anthropologist Arturo Escobar that, though it has not been translated into English yet, deserves to be known by English readers. This book is quite important since it allows one to understand occidental, capitalist and modern hegemony not only as an economic domination but above all as a cultural, epistemological and ontological colonisation. Indeed, according to Escobar, this domination takes its roots in the Occident's ontology which translates into hegemonic practices that are concrete threats to the other worlds and their dwellers. Thus, Escobar highlights the deep link between ontologies and practices and argues for a new field of study he calls political ontology or ontological politics. To accompany the proposition of a shift from a universal nature to a pluriverse composed of many worlds, Escobar does not only undermine the prejudices of modernity but also puts forward the relational ontologies from indigenous communities of Latin America that concretely resist colonisation, underlining the ontological dimension of their struggles. Such a framework enables one to overcome or at least minimize the distinction between theory and practice.

Keywords:

anthropology, axiology, development, epistemic decolonisation, modernity/Occident, pluriverse, ontological politics/political ontology

Arturo Escobar is a Colombian and American university lecturer in anthropology who subscribes to the recent “ontological turn” within anthropology, on top of being engaged in a collaborative project about relational ontologies and the study of the pluriverse with the Argentinian anthropologist Mario Blaser and the Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena. In their work, ontology is not understood as the study of the real entities belonging to a single nature but refers to multiple worlds that each contains their own entities or relations, that don't fully overlap and can never be reduced to a single view. The notion of pluriverse

* Book Review: Arturo Escobar, *Sentir-penser avec la Terre. Une écologie au-delà de l'Occident*, Seuil, coll. Anthropocène, 2018, 240 pp.



is the framework required by this conception of ontology as a “world that can contain many worlds” (Escobar, 2018, p. 32)¹, in opposition to a nature or a universe that implies a single and unique real or true world and many subjective representations of this one world. This second option is the one adopted or postulated by the occidental and modern ontology that Bruno Latour calls “mono-naturalist,” with several dualisms such as between nature and culture, body and mind, subjects and objects, or between the individual and the community. It is important to already be precise and keep in mind that the pluriverse is not a position that Escobar defends theoretically. Indeed, he even says that it is impossible to prove its truth over the hypothesis of the universe and he doesn’t aim to do so. Instead, Escobar “suggests considering the pluriverse as a work tool” (2018, p. 167) that is needed for taking seriously and seeing as an autonomous or heterogenous ontology each of the different worldviews or cultures, on top of allowing them to coexist peacefully. It’s in this commitment and in the fact that Escobar is interested in the practical relations between the worlds but not so much in their articulation, that we can feel he is an anthropologist rather than a philosopher. It could be worthwhile to theoretically and philosophically investigate the pluriverse and the articulation between the worlds, in an ontological way (this time in the philosophical sense of the study of Being, beings and their relations). Nevertheless, we need to underline that this lack of interest for theory allows Escobar to delve into more concrete data and cases that are often lacking in philosophy, which ultimately makes his anthropological approach very complementary to the philosophical one, building bridges between the latter and lived situations facing concrete and urgent problems.

The present book, *Sentir-penser avec la Terre. Une écologie au-delà de l’Occident*², composed of five essays that sum up the author’s previous researches while linking them to his most recent ones in the pluriverse’s work paradigm, is important for understanding the evolution of Escobar’s viewpoint and the novelty that characterises his position. Indeed, his specificity is that he adds a political dimension to the anthropological debate by arguing that every ontology has political consequences, and every politics or set of practices have ontological implications and claims. The different ontologies create or allow the enaction of different worlds that in turn involve, incite or produce different practices and consequences (depending on the values or prejudices that are at the roots of each ontology). In this way, depending on the enaction of an ontology in which a mountain is a lifeless and isolated object or another ontology in which

¹ This quote and all the following ones are my own translations from French into English.

² The original title of the book in Spanish is: *Sentipensar con la tierra. Nuevas lecturas sobre desarrollo, territorio y diferencia* (2014). It has been adapted in French with the author’s collaboration and translated collectively by a group of five persons from La Minga Workshop: Roberto Andrade Pérez, Anne-Laure Bonvalot, Ella Bordai, Claude Bourguignon and Philippe Colin.

it is considered as an embedded, sensible and relational being, the consequences will be very different. Those differences become clearly visible in the political and local struggles, like the ones of communities resisting against a mining project that would destroy the mountain in order to make profit. This example demonstrates that ontologies have practical implications or consequences; and reciprocally, according to Escobar, those struggles also bear an intrinsic and deep ontological dimension: it is a conflict between worlds. Therefore, Escobar wishes for a field of study he calls “ontological politics” or “political ontology” that would analyse this intertwining; the processes of constitutions of the different worlds and their interactions as well as the consequences of their ontologies, beyond the traditional distinction between theory or academic field and practice. The essential questions in such a framework are: “what kind of world is being instituted? Through which set of practices and with what consequences for which groups of humans and non-humans?” (2018, p. 117)

If we follow this logic and look at the consequences of the occidental and modern worldview, it is undeniable that it brought about social and ecological crises, to the point that it threatens the preservation of the conditions of life on Earth. According to Escobar, those crises are linked to the ontological model of occidental modernity and especially to its dualisms as well as its conceptions of the individuals and the objects as isolated beings, distinguished from the rest and replaceable or interchangeable. In this ontology a one-hundred-year-old tree is equivalent to a dead tree or a freshly planted one in a field without any biodiversity; it fails to capture or take into account so many bounds, relations and services that living beings constantly bring to each other. The value or compass of occidental modernity is the supposed economic value; however, they grant economic value (or even any value at all) to entities only as long and insofar as they can be used as resources. This priority granted to the economic dimension leads to (neo)liberalism, capitalism, and a particular way of development (considered as the emancipation of man from nature thanks to technology and as a perpetual economic growth because the negative impacts inflicted on the whole are not calculated or taken into account). Therefore, the dualist ontology is not only a theoretical position, but it also implies much more than this: through its enactment and its preferences it removes the holistic relation to the whole, the sense of belonging and of community with all things, thus becoming blind to the damages done to non-humans, the planet and life in general. Moreover, modern epistemology – believing in universal, objective and independent knowledge – gives to occidental science the role of absolute referee in any intercultural dialogue, thereby enticing modern humans to think that they can legitimately impose their views on indigenous people that don’t have an objective enough knowledge to let them understand what is good for them or how the world truly is and functions. As a result, the capitalist, rational and modern occidental view is not only a threat to life but also to other ontologies since it reduces them to opinions or cultural beliefs. It becomes a problem for

the balance of the worlds or ontologies when one of these world views claims to be the universal and solely real or true one, inducing hegemonic and colonial practices throughout the whole planet. From the pluriversal standpoint, the problem of occidental and modern ontology is that it forgot that it was a particular world – one among many others – and developed hegemonic claims. What it means for an ontology to be hegemonic is that it aims at erasing all the other ontologies and ways of worlding, imposing its own views on them. Therefore, the most terrible effect of global and occidental modernity is that it destroys the ontological diversity or the cultural wealth of worlds.

This ethnocentrist project is the driving force of globalisation or what Escobar calls cultural, epistemological and ontological colonisation. In this multifaceted colonialism, “the occupier is the modern project of a unique world, that tries to reduce all of the other existing worlds to a single one” (2018, p. 93). In order to oppose this project and uproot modern ontology’s hegemony we need to analyse and undermine its presuppositions – to show that they are prejudices that rely on partial and particular choices or preferences, belonging to one world among others – but we also need to propose concrete and practical alternatives enacting different ontologies that are more in tune or in harmony with the pluriverse and that are compatible with a plurality of worlds. It’s for this second purpose that Escobar has a particular interest in the relational ontologies of the indigenous communities resisting against the modern world through political and concrete but also ontological struggles. In this way, “what is at stake is not anymore to change *the* world but to go from one world *to* another” (2018, p. 52. Escobar’s emphasis), to enact and promote a radically different type of ontology that is more respectful towards life, non-humans and the plurality of worlds or the pluriverse and its dwellers. The shift towards a non-dualist and relational type of ontology and towards the pluriverse is not being done in the name of truth or in order to “establish a new hegemony but on the contrary to end any kind of hegemony” (Escobar, 2018, p. 67) and to balance modern ontology’s position, as one particular and historical world among many others, thus allowing a more peaceful coexistence between worlds, on equal footings.

As a first step, in order to give credit (even as work tool) to the hypothesis of the pluriverse and of the many worlds, we need to undermine with Escobar the occidental and modern ontology’s claims of universality, neutrality, naturalness, exclusivity and hegemony. One of the most concrete and striking forms of hegemony or colonisation by which occidental modernity exerts a hold over the other worlds is through the concept of development. It is this notion that Escobar tackles in the first chapter of his book, summing up his analyses on this problem. Such a synthesis is interesting, knowing that this author dedicated several years of his career to the topic of development and wrote an authoritative book about this subject titled *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third-World*. The theory of development argues that any country can increase its well-being, happiness, political freedom and its general conditions of life if they

seek economic growth and the creation of wealth. Escobar distinguishes three different phases or periods in development's appraisal. The first one is the liberal period, from the 1950s to the 1960s, that fully accepts the assumptions of the development theory and tries to elaborate the knowledge, capital, technologies, regulations, international agreements or institutions and policies in order to spread this worldview and allow the countries of the so-called Global South to become more developed, on the condition that they adopt occidental modernity's world, values, way of life and capitalism. The second period, from the 1960s to the 1980s, is the Marxist period, that contests the capitalist conception of development but not the notion of development itself, that remains as the aim to increase happiness and life conditions thanks to modernisation and a shift towards socialism. Whether in its capitalist or socialist form, the concept of development is deeply linked to the notion of progress with the underlying assumption that "at the end of history we would all become rich, rational and happy" (Escobar, 2018, p. 39). However, such a statement implies the prejudice that only one universal and linear goal is the common aim and destination of humanity in its totality. What this prejudice is blind to is that there are other existential or life choices that are also relevant for societies. Progress, as a unilinear and homogenous idea, swallows the wealth and diversity of worldviews with their own goals and happiness; it imposes a single scale on them and labels them as under-developed while they each have their own way to "thrive". If there is only one goal and one path to reach it, then this aim also becomes the sole criterion or the unique measure by which we evaluate the value of the different cultures, societies or communities: the more one will be advanced towards this goal and take part in this matured and perfected stage of humanity, the more it will be valued, deemed complete, developed and rational; whereas other communities will be regarded as immature, juvenile, late, slow or under-developed. It is in this way, through its institutions, discourses and practices – through the enaction of its ontology – that the Global North has labelled the countries of the Global South as under-developed and made them strangers to themselves by transforming this discourse into reality, changing their world for the modern one in which they are inferior. The third period that Escobar distinguishes, from the 1980s onwards, is the poststructuralist period that understands very well the prejudice in the notion of progress and criticises the concept of development itself by analysing it as a discourse that managed to shape the reality and self-perception of entire continents. In other words, the poststructuralist movement problematises the notion of development by understanding it "as a strategy of cultural, social, economic and political domination" (Escobar, 2018, p. 41). The poststructuralist approach is more radical than the Marxist because when it considers development as a discourse it allows to see beyond it, enables one to oppose other discourses to it and thus find "concrete alternatives *to* development, instead of alternatives *of* development" (2018, p. 44. Escobar's emphasis).

Development is not the fate of the whole of humanity but rather a particular discourse that surged in a historical configuration, with a beginning and most probably an end. Once the concept of development has been decentered, or in other words when its hegemonic claims have been undermined and when it has been put back in its place as one choice, aim or value among others, then the path is opened for examining the different cultures or worlds according to their own values. The whole field of axiology can now bloom, while it was previously sealed by the colonisation of development. Axiology, as the study of the different values, acknowledges that there is a plurality of values, not distributed on a single line but each growing their own separate and heterogenous lines. In order to emphasise the fact that each culture or world is radically different and heterogenous, Escobar puts forward the concept of autonomy, in the sense of self-determination of the community's goal and mean to do so. To grant autonomy to every culture or society is a way to respect their own particular course of life and the aspects or dimensions of existence that they choose to value. It can be translated as the right to set their own goals for themselves, to have their own values, their own vision of the future with their own way to achieve it.

In this way, when we try to consider the communities from their own perspective, we can see that they are not under-developed and that they don't consider their territory as a land to fructify only in order to yield an economic profit. In a much broader sense, it is for them a space of life, identity, culture, interactions, ancestrality. Indigenous people are not using conveniently their habitat as a mere object or resource but they dwell with and within their territory, they co-exist with it, draw emotional bonds with it, want to protect it, maintain it, preserve its conditions of life and they hold it dear, as an entity that doesn't deserve less respect than humans. The communal logic takes into account the various bonds between living entities (between humans, humans and non-humans, and between non-humans too altogether), it values reciprocity and rests on belonging, the "us," relationships and the whole; this is the reason we call such an ontology "relational". Economic value is not the compass of a relational culture nor the centre of its world; the usual aim in this ontology is to take care of life and try to nurture it, to make it flourish.

Nevertheless, despite the strength of this type of ontology, occidental modernity keeps the means to deny the other worlds by treating them as mere cultural views. Indeed, in the modern framework, the occidental world can concede that maybe indigenous people have different values; however, it refuses to acknowledge that they live in another world; there is only one unique world – the natural world – and indigenous people only have beliefs about the world, it's a cultural difference of representation that they put forward and not another ontology. Therefore, the axiological relativism or decenterment from modern culture is not enough yet to repel occidental hegemony because the diversity of

values could be argued for even within a single epistemology or a world made of a single word. Thus, we need to deepen the analysis and carry out with Escobar an ontological and epistemological decenterment.

The existence of a single world as a nature in itself (that annihilates the diversity of other worlds as ontologies) is postulated by the moderns in order to discredit relational and non-dualist worldviews and claims. This denial is strengthened by the assumption that the modern kind of knowledge (their rational and abstract science) is the only one that can reach and understand this world. Nature appears as a universal truth that can be opposed to any other world, becoming a cultural view: “it is thus that alterity or difference is tamed as «culture» inside a global and hegemonic ontological frame” (Escobar, 2018, p. 127). The postulates here are that there is only a single world, real and true in the same way for everybody alike, that there is a gap or a hiatus between this reality and the cultural views or representations of the people (so a dualism between nature and culture) but that there is a miraculous equivalence between the cultural representation of the modern and the reality itself (which is a faith in science’s objectivity and in the superiority of the abstract use of reason). These postulates can be reduced to a double “duality between nature and culture, and between «us» and «them»” (Escobar, 2018, p. 126); or, to put it in other words, an ontological assumption that there is a single and unique reality or universe made of only one world, and an epistemological distinction between those who know and those who believe. Therefore, the modern, occidental world is once again based on assumptions or prejudices. The epistemological bias lies in an unfounded difference and preference which is granted to science as the only knowledge that can reach the real and unique world, while the knowledge of indigenous people cannot, only reaching the sphere of representation and is a false opinion or a mistaken belief about the world. The latter has more to do with the culture and the subjective imagination of the people than with the world itself, while on the contrary mighty and superior science is independent and separated from the view of the scientist, it is objective and reaches the world itself beyond the sphere of representation.

However, how can science be so certain that it reaches beyond the sphere of representation? In what way does science go beyond a cultural and historical experience? It would seem that its measures are taken from perception and then abstracted into general laws, but if this is true then it implies that those are laws of our experience and nothing certifies that they are (also) the laws of nature in itself beyond our experience. To affirm such an adequation between the laws of our experience and the laws of nature, we would have to leave our experience, be radically out of our representation and experience the nature in itself, which is self-contradictory since you cannot experience something in itself: its definition is to be considered outside of its relation with you. But if science is solely the abstraction of our perception, then it is also dependent on its cultural and historical dimensions, peculiar to the occidental world. Thus, according to

modern epistemological dualism, science doesn't escape the sphere of representation and is also a belief. Some conclusions have to be drawn from this assessment. First of all, if science shares the same epistemological status as indigenous knowledge, why would it receive an epistemological privilege and priority or superiority over them? Indigenous knowledge shouldn't be disqualified by science, their kind of knowledge as an embodied relation to the world that doesn't separate thoughts from emotions, sensations and feelings – that Escobar calls “sensible or sensing-thinking” and that gives its title to the book – is not less valid or in contact with a world than the sole use of abstract reason. Science also relies on a particular view of the world that is not independent from its scientist as an incarnated, historical, cultural and situated being, therefore it is not the only form of knowledge but only one among many others, that permits knowing only one particular world (the modern dualist and mono-naturalist ontology). Furthermore, if we acknowledge that any kind of knowledge (science included) is cultural and historical, then should we continue to treat each of them as beliefs and representations according to the partition between knowledge and belief, or should we overcome and forget this dichotomy as an irrelevant framework since it doesn't enable discrimination between anything (because there is no objective or exhaustive knowledge and all forms of knowledge fall into the category of belief or representation)? Consequently, instead of maintaining the position of an objective and single universal nature that no knowledge could reach, wouldn't it be more relevant to acknowledge that every cultural worldview or ontology is a world in a strong sense, reaches or expresses nature in a particular and non-exhaustive way (so that it tolerates diversity) and cannot be reduced to a representation completely detached from nature? If we follow the previous suggestions and try to understand nature from a pluriversal point of view (in order to find alternatives to the universal conception and challenge its supremacy), then we can suppose that nature could only be reached – known, expressed, perceived or enacted – by historical and cultural situated beings that dwell within it, producing many different ontologies according to their particular anchoring. Thus, far from being an obstacle to knowledge, this anchoring could very well be a condition of knowledge. Any knowledge is situated and partial, any worldview expresses or enacts the pluriverse in an ontological way without exhausting it: such a perspective would help overcome the dualism between nature and culture as well as that between knowledge and belief, which are the source of the occidental world's hegemony.

In addition, the birth of anthropology, as a separated or isolated field of research, was also linked to this partition between nature and culture, and between knowledge and belief: it left to science the responsibility and task to know nature while anthropology confined itself to study the cultures or diverse representations of the communities, without considering that their worldviews are also linked to nature and could be alternatives to the vision of science, of

modernity and of the occidental world. By considering (and imposing) its own world as nature in itself, “this modernity seized the right to be «the» world (civilized, free, rational), at the cost of the other existing or possible worlds” (Escobar, 2018, p. 94), opposed to this nature and swallowed by it as subjective cultures or representations. However, the ontological turn in anthropology radically renews its relation to science and to nature. Indeed, ontological anthropology precisely aims at rejecting the previously mentioned dualisms and the privilege granted to modern science and the occidental world, thus distinguishing between “culture as a «symbolic structure» [or representation] and culture as a «radical difference»” (Escobar, 2018, p. 30) or as heterogeneity, that contests the supremacy of a single nature. Therefore, according to anthropologists, Nature is not a world made of a single world but is rather a pluriverse that is able to contain simultaneously a plurality of worlds, with a radical ontological difference acknowledged between each of these worlds. This principle of ontological difference can be understood as the rejection of the domination of the dualist and mono-naturalist conception of the Occident and opposed to it that each cosmivision is heterogenous and holds as much weight, value and claims as others: they are put on an equal footing in order to acknowledge their diversity and become free from the occidental ethnocentrism and hegemony. That’s the reason why it is so important for Escobar and anthropology to talk about the cosmivisions in terms of ontology (instead of the more ambiguous term of culture): doing so negates the possibility to reduce those radical cultural differences to the mere sphere of representation and denies that there is only one exclusive way or access to a “true world in itself”.

Each culture is a world, a world view, it implies a world, is a relation to the world (that implies a way of life, an ontology and an epistemology or forms of knowledge, as well as practices and a social organisation) that cannot be reduced and interiorised in the sole subject: they are always already a link between humans and their realities or the pluriverse. Moreover, as soon as we show that other cosmivisions are possible and do exist, the modern vision loses its naturalness, its preponderance and its hegemonic claims. This ontological fact forces us, through the enaction of other “modalities of existence [that] are practical criticisms, or critics in act” (Escobar, 2018, p. 94), to acknowledge that modernity is one worldview or cosmivision among others. In this sense, the perseverance of indigenous people in enacting their worlds can be seen as political and ontological resistance to occidental supremacy and the modern colonial project. Thus, the ontological turn in anthropology allows us “to re-establish an equal dignity between the occidental and non-occidental cosmologies in order to dwell together in our planet, a pluriverse composed of numerous worlds” (Escobar, 2018, p. 25).

As we tried to show it with Escobar, the superiority or naturalness and hegemony of the modern worldview is based on its distinction between nature and culture, and on its absolute faith in abstract reason. Once those two

prejudices have been elucidated as such, modern ontology can become once again a particular, cultural and historical worldview among many others. The goal of the previous arguments was not to suggest that science or abstract reason are false but simply that they are not exclusive and have no right to disqualify other means or forms of knowledge. In the same way, Escobar doesn't say that occidental ontology is false (nor true) but simply that it is not the only one, that there are other ontological options or other worlds, heterogenous and irreducible to the modern and occidental one. If there is no longer a privilege for science as the only way to reach nature and no longer decisive evidence for affirming a single nature or a unique world, then we cannot hierarchise different cosmologies according to their objectivity: they all have their own claims about reality and establish their own existing world that partially intertwine but that cannot eliminate other options. Consequently, the ontological and epistemological statuses of all the worlds are the same: each of them is one world and one form of knowledge among many others, not a single one of them stands out or could be deemed as superior according to its degree of truth or reality (depending on if it reaches nature itself or is a cultural belief: we have rejected or overcome the privilege of this distinction). Therefore, political ontology fulfils its mission to put the occidental and modern world back in its place as one particular world among others and to contain its hegemonic claims.

For if it is no more self-evident that there is one exclusive objective truth or one single objectively true and accessible world, we cannot evaluate the worldviews, cultures or ontologies according to this criterion. Nevertheless, there is still a possibility to hierarchise them in another way: with axiology taken in its deepest sense, its Nietzschean sense of evaluating the value of our values. Indeed, even though all the different worlds have the same epistemological and ontological statuses, it doesn't mean that they are equivalent on all other aspects. Thus, when truth or abstract reason is no longer a benchmark to evaluate worlds (because not a single one of them is independent from cultural choices or preferences), then the field of axiology opens as a new criterion in order to classify those worlds, that are not true or false, nor natural or cultural and not even good and evil, but simply according to their practical consequences and their influence or impact on life. It is precisely in this way that Escobar argues for the pluriverse, as an "ethical and political position that cannot be «demonstrated» as true but rather felt and experienced in its practical and political implications" (2018, p. 131). This is what ontological politics or political ontology are about, an axiology studying the practices and the consequences of the ontologies or the kind of life they promote in order to evaluate them and choose the ontology we believe is best, not objectively or in itself but as an individual, cultural or societal choice. This conception goes along the lines of the notions of autonomy and self-determination of cultures and worlds that Escobar constantly highlights and emphasises.

Furthermore, a classification deriving from axiology is less susceptible to produce another hegemony than truth or objectivity, because there is more room for discussion in the field of axiology than within the question of reality that can “make us fall again in the trap of modernity’s truth and power games (*épistémè*)” (Escobar, 2018, p. 131)³. Axiology allows us to better see that there is a plurality or multiplicity of options and that it is a question of choice and preference; while under the name of truth, a hegemony can quickly rise and impose its view on every other, it can even consider this colonial task as a moral duty. Truth claims can be an obstacle to a real debate or discussion between cultures and between worlds, and even within a single world by limiting its options. On the contrary, with his axiological and political ontology, Escobar aims at “the creation of a space for debates and collective reflections: it is a matter of constructing stories and strategies of transition towards models of social life and relation to nature that are less destructive than the present ruling ones” (2018, p. 159–160). With this in mind, and without denying the uniqueness and particularities of each world, Escobar observes two major trends of values within ontological diversity: there are worlds that destroy diversity as a mono-culture or a mono-nature and cause an impoverishment of life, and worlds that promote life and the wealth of different relations and interrelations on the planet as a world that can contain many worlds. What Escobar sees here is that along the local fights of the indigenous communities from Latin America, in all continents, within modernity and elsewhere, with the “Zones to defend”, the project of Pan-Africanism or even with some academic schools of thought, there is something common: they favour life, diversity, the wealth of cultures and the pluriverse. Escobar knows that “a stronger dialogue between those different movements would be useful today” (2018, p. 53), and although his book is sometimes repetitive, one of its biggest achievement is to have built bridges between the concrete resistance of local communities and academic fields of study or preoccupations. Those bridges are crucial in order to allow the struggles to merge or at least converge and provide a better resilience, collectively, against the colonisation of the modern, capitalist and occidental world.

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³ Escobar refers to Foucault and his analyses about power by mentioning his concept of *épistémè*.