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### **Review / Reseña**

Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*.  
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

## **Imagining Radically Different Worlds in Emergence in the Colombian Pacific**

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Over the last few decades in Colombia and many other Latin American countries there have been significant changes happening in the relationship between the state and citizens of African descent. There are new ideas and practices of recognition and belonging, of territory and citizenship, of culture and politics, of being and becoming. There have also been new ideas and practices of displacement and deterritorialization, of exclusion and of violence. The creation and development of these ideas is a continuing process with multiple actors, located in many places, that are

themselves changing. How are we to make sense of these changes in the present? How are we to understand the vision, goals, and plans being actualized? Are they part of globalization? Of neoliberalism? Of modernity? How should we, ethnographers and social theorists, as Escobar asks in this book *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*, study the dynamics of today's world, and more importantly, what are the consequences of how we study it?

These two questions of how and why we should study the dynamics of today's world are what drive Escobar's investigation into social movements of the Colombian Pacific. In order to address these questions he engages theories and literature of topics made important to him by activists of social movements within the Colombian Pacific. While each chapter deals with one topic, intended to be read as a network, the book as a whole gives an impression of the dynamics and processes taking place today in Colombia. Each chapter sets up a series of "how should we study" questions, then looks at a number of theories that give different perspectives and then ethnographic examples from which a perspective would be called for or necessary. As such, within each chapter (divided into place, capital, nature, development, identity and networks) Escobar engages theories about each topic and through examples from the Pacific suggests the consequences of using particular theories at present. While his work comes out of many years of working and thinking with activists from the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN) in the southern Colombian Pacific, in this book he continues to return to concerns that he has addressed in other works for some time: the working of social movements, of modernity, of development, and of globality.

The book then is a combination of a methodological exercise and an ethnography of a social movement. It attempts to give a picture of the PCN as a social movement embedded in place, history, society and different imaginaries of past, present and future, of being and becoming. At the same time he is posing questions about the consequences of addressing PCN as a social movement through some theories rather than others. On the one hand, he is positing a methodology for looking at social movements, and on the other hand he is positing a question about what would happen if we

studied social movements otherwise. In the process he raises as many questions in this book as he answers. What can be constructed as a methodology for studying social movements today? What new perspectives would we have to bring to the study of social movements to understand what is currently taking place? How can we study social movements taking activists' premise—of building radically different worlds—seriously?

Escobar's book is focused on activist knowledge and thus looks at different ways of thinking about place, capital, nature, development, identity and networks developed by PCN activists. While the ethnographic part of the book is overshadowed by his conversation with literature, it provides the basis for his engagement with the literature. In the ethnographic sections of the book he presents a broad and comprehensive outline of processes taking place in the Pacific for Black communities with a focus on the last three decades. These processes include identity formation, territorial definition, political engagement, and displacement. He looks at the development of the Pacific as a territory for ethnic groups in light of AT 55 of the 1991 Constitution. He gives us interesting details and background into how law 70 was shaped by the communities from which it emerged, in particular how ideas such as traditional production systems or territories of ethnic groups came into existence, and also what they mean in the particularities of the southern Colombian Pacific.

In addition, Escobar looks at activist actions and reactions to threats to territory as a lived space, including the advancement of African Oil Palm as a colonial project in the Tumaco region and the violent displacement of Afro-Colombian leaders and communities by armed groups. He looks at their alternative projects to development including traditional production systems, and at projects transformed by activist ideas and participation including literacy and biodiversity projects. Importantly, he looks at PCN as a collective identity and at its structural framework as a network and its ability to be local and trans-local at the same time. While scholars have addressed separately a number of the issues Escobar raises, for researchers interested in the Afro-Colombian social movements of the Pacific and the history of the process of the developing ethno-territorial identities he brings together in one place a

comprehensive look at some of the different factors working to shape and construct the space, identity, and language of current social movements and spaces of maneuver in Colombia.

Escobar sets out to structure his book like a network where the different parts/chapters are necessary for obtaining a broad picture of the processes in any one single part. He is thus adamant that we cannot study things in isolation and he is interested in the way things interact and affect each other. For instance, he argues that one cannot address the issue of territory without addressing culture, or the economy without addressing both culture and place. He is particularly concerned with including culture into the analysis of social, ecological, economic, and political phenomena. He thus calls for “a *cultural* redefinition of conservation, sustainability, and production” (155) arguing that “biodiversity and sustainability have to be seen in their biophysical and cultural context and in relations to the empowerment of local groups, not in the commodified and decontextualized terms of much of the official discourse and the idioms of genetic resources and intellectual property rights” (153). In the process, he raises the following questions: Can we have a new theory of economy that treats it as diverse, is embedded in natural and social process, and takes a cultural-political approach? Is it possible to rethink production from an ecological perspective? And, how would sustainability and conservation look if approached from the perspective of the world construction of the black groups of the Pacific?

These questions shift the perspective in the study of the economy and the environment to one that includes culture and, more importantly, the social worlds of local communities. The third question is at the heart of Escobar's work, for he is generally interested in working with and through theories developed by activists. Escobar argues that we should think of social movements as “expansive, heterogeneous, and polycentric discursive fields of action, which extend well beyond a distinct set of civil society organizations” (272). It is from this discursive field of action that new ideas of different worlds develop. In taking these activists' theories seriously, can we imagine alternatives, differences, and things otherwise?

In the network of the different topics of his chapters Escobar is looking for a way to imagine and analyze and respond to different worlds. This search is important to him because of the different power or powerlessness accorded to various knowledges and cultural practices and the conflicts that arise from this power differential. His book also details these conflicts as they arise in the southern Colombian Pacific. As such, he argues that struggles in the Pacific should be seen as “struggles for culturally specific alternative paradigms of productions, development and sustainability” (104) and territory should be thought of as subaltern strategies of localization (52). Within each of the chapters he highlights the different imaginaries at work within each example, bringing forth important questions about each topic, as well as about how we should engage the theories of activists and social movements. Because of his long work with PCN activists he returns to his concerns about modernity, development, and globality with new insight as to how perspective might affect the kinds of theories we develop around these topics. As such, he asks us to imagine not just the possibility, but the actualization of a radically different world.

I find the arguments and propositions of this book intriguing. How seriously do we take the possibility of radically different worlds, much less their actualization? How do we escape the bonds of the structures of our own thinking to imagine and study these radically different worlds? How do we do so without making the worlds our opposite and thus not really change our conceptualization? Although not always successful in his arguments, Escobar makes some interesting suggestions. In rethinking this radically different world Escobar argues for an alternative construction from the perspective of colonial difference. Colonial difference is the space of emergence of particular knowledges, shaped by the systematic suppression of subordinated cultures, which have the potential to become sites of articulation of alternative projects. It is living as dominated groups that makes all the difference to these projects. For Escobar, activists “conduct their struggle from colonial difference—in this case, a colonial difference that has to do with blackness or indigeneity and with living in particular landscapes and ecosystems” (13).

He sees colonial difference as crucial to “the possibility of imagining an era in which development ceases to be the central organizing principle of social life” and “a moment when social life is no longer so thoroughly determined by the constructs of economy, individual, market, rationality, order, and so forth that are characteristic of the dominant Euro-modernity” (197). In addition, he argues that identities are part of the working out of colonial difference. As such, identities articulate the combination of culture with political, social, economic and ecological worlds from a place-based, historically specific perspective. For activists identity is both anchored in traditional practices and forms of knowledge and an ever-changing project of cultural and political construction. In his discussion of colonial difference Escobar provides a nuanced way of thinking outside of the box of modernity and enables a space from which to understand why identity and territory are such large parts of the current changes in Colombia.

The book discusses identity in some detail. In particular, it focuses on how one should see the emergence of new identities (black ethnicities) in the Pacific. The book asks: why did the narratives take the form of ethnic identity, cultural rights, difference and black communities? Whose voices and perspectives should we privilege and why? How should we study this change? This is a central part of the book but is at times a bit unclear. At first Escobar talks about the creation of an ethnic identity and later he focuses on the creation of PCN as a collective identity. The overlap or difference between these two identities is not drawn clearly. He refers to other scholarship on the development of an ethnic identity for people of African descent in the Pacific but does not draw it together with the creation of the Pacific as territory for ethnic groups. When talking about place ethnicity appears as a taken-for-granted category. When talking about identity it is more flexible.

Although Escobar asks why the narratives took the form of ethnic identity, the examples of personal identity formation of PCN activists, most of whom talk about discrimination and race, are not brought into conversation with the creation and particular importance of ethnic identity promoted and understood by activists, nor the conceptualization of territory for ethnic groups. I found myself asking why ethnicity? I feel there

was very interesting information to answer this question within the book that was for some reason not addressed in full. A few times in the book Escobar refers to organizing against racism as conventional. This surprised me and made me think of the legal spaces opened or closed to the concepts of ethnicity and race respectively. At this particular point in time it seems far more conventional to organize ethnically than racially. But the issue of identity is more than spaces opened by the state and what is conventional or not. As Escobar points out, “identities are dialogic and relational; they arise from but cannot be reduced to the articulation of difference through encounters with others” (203). Furthermore, “in political situations, identity involves ethical commitments by activists” (203). What his book emphasizes is the incredible importance of the different worlds, different cultures, and different ways of knowing that PCN activists display, some of which were brought to light through encounters with others, with racism, and with discrimination. Neither the discussions nor conceptualizations of race or ethnicity so far (here or elsewhere) deal with the complexity of this perspective and the emergence of very different ideas of race through ethnicity (or vice versa) only hinted at in this book.

*Territories of Difference* is an ambitious project that brings together a wide range of theories and literatures in a complex and dynamic space, while at the same time tries to shift our conceptual perspective to seriously engage the theories and knowledges of activists in the southern Colombian Pacific. Escobar presents a broad history of changes within the Pacific region for Afro-Colombians while highlighting Afro-Colombian activists’ participation in the actualization of their social worlds through the transformation of projects and of ways of knowing and practices. He challenges us to think through colonial difference and develop the spaces in which to imagine radically different worlds in emergence. For scholars of the African diaspora in Colombia and for social scientists and social theorists in general, Escobar provides an insightful analysis that sheds new light on the way we could study social movements and globality.