

Imagining Futures in the Anthropocene: Eduardo Galeano's Socioecological Model

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The Anthropocene has emerged as a term used by scientists to denote a period in which humans have had a noticeable impact on Earth's structure and ecosystems. It was popularized by a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, Paul Crutzen, who in 2000 proposed the term as a new geological epoch. At the International Geological Congress on August 29, 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group presented the recommendation to formally designate the new epoch. Although it has not yet been officially adopted, its significance and implications for the future have been discussed not only by scientists but also by environmental activists, ecocritics, artists, and writers.¹ Across diverse fields, we find apocalyptic visions of the future and the need for socioecological transformations to avoid catastrophe. One of the important contributions to this debate is a postcolonial critique of economic growth in the light of anthropogenic climate change.

¹ The Anthropocene debate generates a variety of responses from scholars of different fields. There are various proposals to when the new epoch should begin, some of which argue for the Neolithic spread of agriculture, others for the twentieth century. James Lovelock, in *A Rough Ride to the Future* (2015), traces the origin of the term *Anthropocene* to the invention of the steam engine in 1712. According to the author, "the emergence of this crucial period may change the Earth and its futures as much as did the origin of life on Earth more than 3 billion years ago" (7).

This essay focuses on Eduardo Galeano, who addresses the colonial and postcolonial historical contexts needed to comprehend the current environmental crisis. Already in 1971, in his acclaimed *Open Veins of Latin America*, Galeano explored the links between capitalism, resource exploitation, and the degradation of local ecosystems, pointing out the divide between the Global North and the Global South: “The capitalist ‘head office’ can allow itself a luxury of creating and believing its own myths of opulence, but the poor countries on the capitalist periphery know that myths cannot be eaten” (3). His later works, specifically *Upside Down* (1998), “El derecho de soñar” (1999), and *Úselo y tírelo* (2004), continued to criticize capitalist systems, bringing into dialogue theories of degrowth as a postcolonial gesture.² By promoting nonmaterial values, such as social relationships and appreciation of nature, Galeano calls for a shift from unlimited economic growth to a lifestyle of moderation and simplicity. Criticized for being a “naïve utopian clouded by sentimental ideals” (Fischlin and Nandorfy 21), he opens space for creativity and experimentation in the Anthropocene, the literatures of which have been dominated by dystopian visions of the future.³ In contrast to those cynical and bleak future scenarios that perpetuate despair and stagnation in the face of crisis, Galeano offers not only hope and inspiration, but also a social critique that can influence the course of concrete decision-making. One of the solutions to ecological crisis proposed by the author is the reduction of corporate production and consumption, which corresponds to the theory of degrowth. This essay demonstrates that Galeano’s vision is not utopian in the sense of an unreachable fantasy; rather, it is an instrument to guide society towards a sustainable future.

In *Upside Down*, Galeano states that “no natural world is capable of supporting a mall the size of the planet,” challenging the paradigm of economic growth in the face of a global ecological emergency (267). He redefines the concept of progress, associated with economic and technological development, pointing out that quality of life can be increased through non-consumptive means. As Anitra Nelson observed in “Degrowth Equals Regrowth” (2016), Galeano’s idea of degrowth is not a recession but “the regrowth of humane and ecological values” (np.). In a

² For a detailed study of the theory of degrowth see Serge Latouche, *The Farewell to Growth* (2009).

³ The apocalyptic theme is present in novels, such as *Blindness* (1997) by José Saramago and *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, as well in films like *The Turin Horse* (2011) and *Snowpiercer* (2013).

Latin American context, these values can be reclaimed from indigenous traditions, which, in contrast to capitalist systems, are community-centric and ecologically balanced. The return to the social order from before European colonization has had a long tradition in Latin America, as reflected in the ideas of Simón Bolívar, Pablo Neruda, Ernesto Guevara, and Ernesto Cardenal.⁴ In the same line of thought, Galeano's idea of progress is "una vuelta al origen," since "nada hay menos foráneo que el socialismo en estas tierras nuestras. Foráneo es, en cambio, el capitalismo: como la viruela, la gripe, vino de afuera" (*Úselo y tírelo* 33). The reference to the "foreign" capitalism indicates that it was European colonists who introduced the economic system based on profit and growth by exploiting silver and gold. Galeano considers the indigenous traditions more sustainable, and that is why he advocates degrowth, which in this context means the return to origin—to communal and ecological indigenous practices as alternatives to development.

The theory of degrowth stems from the anti-industrialist trends of the nineteenth century, and it was later adopted by the radical environmentalism of the 1970s. It has been increasingly promoted by European scholars, such as Serge Latouche, in the context of climate change. The fundamentals of degrowth have been incorporated by an indigenous philosophy of *Buen Vivir* in Latin America, *Eco-Swaraj* in India, and *Ubuntu* in Africa. Degrowth advocates for the downscaling of production and consumption, and increasing well-being through non-material means: devoting more time to family, community, art, nature, and culture. The proponents of degrowth reject economic expansion in the North as well as the South, arguing that the South should develop self-sufficiency and autonomy through the recovery of traditional technologies and skills. As Latouche observed, even though it is not necessary to reduce the ecological footprint of the South, a growth society should not be built there, because the current system reinforces structures that generate poverty and environmental degradation: "Like a cancer, a veritable consumer society, with battered old cars, broken mobile phones and computers undergoing repairs and everything else the West has thrown away, is eating away at Africa's ability to resist. It is hoped that the crisis hits the North in time to give the other Africa a chance" (60). In his

⁴ The return to origin in Latin America is discussed in detail in *El eterno retorno de Quetzalcóatl* (2012) by Jorge Majfud. According to this tradition, the return to indigenous values in the future "no es una utopía sino un orden preexistente a la violencia europea" (269).

criticism of the Western discourse on development, Latouche quotes a Guatemalan indigenous leader: “Leave the poor alone and stop talking to them about development” (61). This message is also promoted by indigenous and social movements, which are challenging the idea that industrial development and resource extraction are the only way out of poverty. In fact, these practices increase the poverty of certain groups of people living in “sacrifice zones”—places that “can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress” (Klein 169).

Galeano laments the “sacrifice zones” of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where the colonists destroyed the existing industries and imposed the monoculture in order to produce raw materials for the North. These ecologically degraded regions continue to survive on the export of cheap goods and are kept in a state of dependency. Galeano also criticizes the “generous” World Bank’s loans for forestation in the devastated areas of India, Chile, and Uruguay: “conmovedora historia, digna de ser llevada a la televisión: el destripador distribuye miembros ortopédicos entre las víctimas de sus mutilaciones” (*Úselo y tírelo* 15). These loans and projects do not solve the ecological problems, but in fact create them—the artificial wood plantations, in which “no cantan los pájaros,” have caused land erosion, biodiversity loss, and droughts (15). That is why countries in the North, like Finland, in order to protect their territories from environmental degradation, plant trees and import wood from Uruguay. Besides, the debt owed to the North for these project keeps the South in a state of dependency: “cuanto más pagamos, más debemos, y cuanto más debemos, más obedecemos” (12). Recent statistics show that the developing world spends \$13 on debt repayment for every \$1 it receives in grants (*The End of Poverty*). Also, the loans do not help the poor—they go to corporations that invest in infrastructures to extract and export resources. Like Latouche and the indigenous activists, Galeano calls for breaking away from economic dependency from the North and relying on community bonds, local traditions, and internal market (13).⁵

⁵ The revival of community bonds and local tradition has been a mission of contemporary indigenous authors. Javier Castellanos Martínez exposes the problem of indigenous migration to the cities in “El cultivo del maíz en Yojovi” (1988). In the same line of thought, Latouche observes: “The invasion of the international media thanks to radio, television, the Internet, and mobile phones is having a corrosive effect on the social bond . . . the young people who want to leave their own countries, which they have come to see as hell, for the artificial paradises of the North” (60).

Both Latouche and Galeano are often referred to as utopian, because they envision a radically alternative society and attempt to distance themselves from the present reality. However, they also offer pragmatic steps to realize their visions. That is why their ideas can be referred to as a “concrete, fertile utopia” (Latouche 63). Galeano perceives utopia as a source of inspiration and activism, as he expressed it in “Ventana sobre la utopia”: “Ella está en el horizonte . . . Me acerco dos pasos, ella se aleja dos pasos. Camino diez pasos y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá. Por mucho que yo camino, nunca la alcanzaré. ¿Para qué sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve: para caminar” (*Úselo y tírelo* 184). This text captures the essence and goal of utopian thinking: it is not a perfect plan that can be easily achieved, but a “navigational compass” that keeps us walking—that keeps our ideals alive (de Geus 89). Galeano’s utopia is not a static vision of a perfect future, but a dynamic process producing action and change. Similarly, “El derecho de soñar,” which imagines a world in the twenty-first century, expresses a strong conviction that without the ability to dream we do not have anything: “si no fuera por este derecho, los demás se morirían de ser.” This statement conveys the message that imagination is essential to stimulate creativity and innovation in any aspect of human civilization, such as science, technology, and policy making. As observed by Marius de Geus, literary utopias are like a “virtual reality” that gives us “an opportunity to participate in an imaginary world, by dreaming away for a while, and by entering a fictitious, ecologically sound society to come to one’s senses” (95). In “El derecho de soñar,” Galeano invites us to fantasize and imagine such a world. He offers a reflection on desirable changes in current society: reducing consumption, emphasizing social and environmental justice, as well as eliminating separation between human beings and nature. These ideas are a source of inspiration for degrowth, being conceptualized in the *Buen Vivir* movements in Latin America as a response to the negative impact of economic development on the environment and society. In 2008, the social philosophy of *Buen Vivir* was incorporated in the new constitution of Ecuador.

Like other authors from the Global South, Galeano questions the notion of a universal human agency in transforming the Earth (the collective “we”), pointing out that ecological crisis is a result of socioeconomic inequality: “si somos todos responsables de la ruina del planeta, nadie lo es” (*Úselo y tírelo* 9). In recent years, however, scholars of the Anthropocene, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, have expressed the need to envision human beings as a whole, as the dominant species, who

collectively transform systems of the planet: “because humans constitute a particular kind of species they can, in the process of dominating other species, acquire the status of geological force” (“Climate of History” 214). In this view, the conception of human species as a biological totality diverts attention from the issues of social justice. This universalist perspective has been a source of controversy among the ecocritics who, like Galeano, consider the role of socio-economic factors in current environmental geopolitics. They continue to emphasize the question of social inequalities in the discussion on climate change in order to find new directions for thought and practice: “There is no freeway from ecological crisis to human universalism that does not have to retrace the byways and detours of difference” (Heise n.p.).⁶ According to this approach, it is essential to address socio-economic differences in order to propose changes toward a just and livable planet.

In his reflection on how socioecological transformation might be imagined and advanced, Galeano advocates limits to growth-oriented development based on fossil fuels. He specifically criticizes the autocratic capitalist system run by oil companies, which makes people dependent on automobiles. According to the author, many Latin American cities follow the “Los Angeles model” of modernization, disregarding public transportation, walking, or cycling as symbols of backwardness and underdevelopment (*Úselo y tírelo* 166). Galeano’s vision of the Anthropocene coincides with that of Paul Crutzen, who states: “With countries worldwide striving to attain the ‘American Way of Life,’ citizens of the West should redefine it—and pioneer a modest, renewable, mindful, and less material lifestyle [which includes] changing from private to public transport” (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2). Galeano proposes this paradigm shift in the Global South, advocating for opening bike paths in Montevideo, which has a favorable size, climate, and terrain.⁷ In contrast to some Latin American cities struggling with criminality and environmental degradation, the Uruguayan capital manifests creativity,

⁶ As observed by Rob Nixon, these conversations about the collective human agency fail to address “unequal human agency” in the process of transforming systems of the planet. Nixon also challenges the visions of the Anthropocene oblivious or unwilling to address the “inequalities in access to resources and exposure to risk” (n.p.).

⁷ The focus on environmental policies and activism in the South has recently produced considerable interest in ecocritical scholarship. Jay Watson’s “The Other Matter of the South” calls for “intellectual workers in southern and environmental studies to unite” (160).

innovation, and a desire to adapt to future changes. In recent years, Latin America has experienced community-driven efforts to raise awareness of the societal and environmental benefits of cycling. In spite of limited existing infrastructure and the lack of governmental support, Montevideo is at the forefront of a rise in advocacy groups, like CycloVida Urbana, Gente en Bici, and Urubike. These urban activist groups pursue innovative endeavors, such as building bike paths, reclaiming parking spaces for cyclists, offering bike-repair workshops and bicycle-sharing programs, as well as helping people “restore [their] sense of liberation and well-being” (*Cycling in Latin America and the Caribbean* 21). Such advocacy groups embody the sense of liberation and well-being that, Galeano believes, can be achieved by reducing our dependence on cars (*Úselo y tírelo* 160). By doing so, he suggests, we will become less dependent on the economic system, which perpetuates desires for constant consumption and the need for constant work to satisfy these desires.

Galeano criticizes the American model of transportation—the automobile, which pollutes the air, transforms the landscape, and wastes time and energy. The alternative that he proposes is a simpler, cheaper, and healthier way of transportation; however, it requires a change of values. This step is challenging because of the indoctrinating power of the media and advertisers controlled by corporations: “Los gigantes que fabrican automóviles y combustibles, negocios casi tan jugosos como las armas y las drogas, nos han convencido de que el motor es la única prolongación del cuerpo humano” (*Úselo y tírelo* 159). Because of “the immense power of repetition by the media to rule our minds and the world” (Lovelock 125), the use of a bicycle as transportation is still considered in many Latin American cities as a sign of poverty and inferiority, as expressed by Galeano: “Los latinoamericanos nos hemos tragado la píldora de que el infierno de Los Ángeles es el único modelo posible de modernización” (*Úselo y tírelo* 166). Therefore, it is difficult to focus on ecological innovations while the model promoted by the United States is based on motorization and over-consumption.

The focus on urban environments is a frequently discussed topic in Anthropocene discourses, as many scholars agree that the human impact on the environment could be reduced if the majority of people moved to big cities (Lovelock, Miller, Brand, Crutzen and Schwägerl). Living in cities concentrates resource need, preserves space for ecosystems outside, and decreases population growth by facilitating access to education. Latin America is one of the most heavily urbanized regions in the world,

therefore, as observed by Shawn William Miller, its future depends on the sustainability of its cities: “The city is Latin America’s biggest environmental problem and its only solution” (192). Galeano’s focus on a Latin American city, such as Montevideo, demonstrates a new tendency to focus on the cities in the Global South, which according to contemporary scholars of the Anthropocene “will become the global cities of the future” (Braun 240).

Although socioecological transformations have been adopted mainly in North America, Europe, and Australia—the regions with resources to adapt to environmental changes—cities in the South can be equally resourceful and creative, as proved by the innovative endeavors and community efforts in Bogotá and Medellín. The Colombian capital has been recognized internationally as a model to follow due to its Bus Rapid Transport system, parks, bike lanes, and restriction on cars (Rodriguez n.p.). Medellín’s latest project—the Metropolitan Greenbelt (*el Cinturón Verde Metropolitano*)—aspires to expand the city’s recreational opportunities and places to grow food, as well as to create a boundary to prevent urban growth further up the hillsides (Bakker and Brandwijk n.p.). Another example of a Latin American city where the environmental infrastructures are emerging is Curitiba, Brazil. Due to its sustainable urban planning and focus on social inclusion, the city placed third in 2007 in the list of “Green Cities” in the world (after Reykjavik and Portland), and in 2010 received the Global Sustainable City Award. Curitiba’s rapid bus system, with a fixed ticket price regardless of distance, encourages all citizens to use public transportation. Even though the city has one of the highest per capita rates of car ownership in Brazil, 75 percent of commuters use buses and bikes, spending less than 10 percent of their income on transportation, compared with Americans, who on average spend more than 18 percent, and the poorest Americans, who spend 40 percent (Miller 186). Also, Curitiba’s “green exchange program” allows low-income families from shantytowns to exchange recycling and garbage bags for bus tickets, food, school supplies, and tickets for shows.

As seen in the above examples, some Latin American cities manifest desire and action for transformational changes to build a sustainable society. Therefore, Galeano’s optimistic ecological vision of the future is not a utopia—an unreal and unattainable imaginary—because the changes are actually happening. So, rather than speculate whether the transformation is possible or not, the questions that should be asked are: do we have enough time left to build a sustainable society? And what is

the most important change that needs to be made, given that scientists and scholars predict the Earth cannot sustain the present level of human population for much longer (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2)? In a Latin American context, Miller's prognosis is also grim: "the region will continue high to modest growth for much of the next 50 years, but if current trends play out, the end is in sight" (190). In order to reduce the adverse consequences of climate change, "the best course of action may not be sustainable development but a sustainable retreat" (Lovelock 3). In the same line of thought, Galeano proposes degrowth, arguing for reducing the use of fuel and consumption.

Degrowth calls for community-based and small-scale production, which would include local people protecting local environments and serving local needs. Degrowth would reduce monoculture and production geared for export, which destroy the natural environment. Galeano is especially critical of the industrial production of meat, stating that each hamburger costs nine square meters of the Central American rain forest (*Úselo y tírelo* 14). According to the author, reviving local economies would reduce corporate power, allowing the communities to be more self-sufficient and sustainable. Degrowth not only means the reduction of consumption, ecologic footprint, waste, and dependency, but also the reduction of work. In Galeano's future there will be time for rediscovery of other aspects of life: "Nadie vivirá para trabajar pero todos trabajarán para vivir" ("El derecho de soñar"). The author argues for more leisure time while exposing the relationship between work and stress-related health problems in contemporary society. He questions the idea of economic progress, arguing that it impedes social progress by depriving people of time that should be devoted to cultivating social bonds and individual passions.

Galeano claims that economic growth is only possible at the expense of others, which is reflected in his portrayal of Latin American cities: "inmensos suburbios acorralan a las fortalezas amurralladas de los barrios de lujo" (*Úselo y tírelo* 25). The economic inequality in these cities, where the rich and the poor are separated by a wall, is a result of capitalist development. The underdevelopment here is not an "original" stage of development, but rather the historical product of imperialism and colonization.⁸ Galeano also uses an image of a wall in the following

⁸ For more information about the capitalist dependency and underdevelopment, see André Gunder Frank, "Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution" (1969).

passage: “Ya ni los escombros quedan del fugaz muro de Berlín, pero está cada día más alto y más ancho el muro mundial que desde hace cinco siglos separa a los que tienen de los que quieren tener” (25). The reference to the five centuries calls attention to the perpetual exploitation of the poor since colonial times. According to Oxfam, an international organization striving to alleviate global poverty, in 2014, 85 members of the world’s economic elite had the same amount of money as 3.5 billion of the world’s poorest (Boff n.p.).

The trope of a wall, or division between people, is a relevant concept in current international politics (e.g. the US/Mexico border wall) and in the context of the Anthropocene. Since climate change affects all humans, even though it was not contributed by all equally, there is an urgent need for solidarity. The efforts to create alternatives to social and economic exclusion may help to create a better future for all. Also, the image of the dividing wall can be applied to the human/nature dichotomy in the Anthropocene: “The wall of separation between natural and human histories that was erected in early modernity and reinforced in the nineteenth century as the human sciences and their disciplines consolidated themselves has some serious and long-running cracks in it” (Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies” 10). The idea that human beings are separate from nature, which allows them to dominate it for the sake of their progress, is one of the main causes of ecological crisis. Many of the Anthropocene discourses perpetuate this anthropocentric view by arguing that in order to confront extreme weather changes and adapt to them, humans have to take control over the planet. Stewart Brand, in *Whole Earth Discipline* (2010), proposes this idea, claiming that the only way to combat ecological crisis is through the practical application of science and technology (urbanization, geoengineering, transgenic crops, etc.). His perspective offers solutions to reduce the adverse consequences of climate change; however, it does not address the roots of the problem. In the face of current crisis, the separation of humans from nature is no longer reasonable, since “despite the immense impact of human activity, we remain subject to, rather than the authors of, many large-scale events” (Braun 242).

Galeano’s work challenges the human/nature dichotomy and emphasizes the need to deconstruct this metaphorical wall. In “El derecho de soñar,” he argues for changing human attitudes toward nature, phrasing it as a commandment “forgotten by God”: “Amarás a la naturaleza de la que formas parte.” His inspiration comes from indigenous traditions,

which, in contrast to Western/Christian ethics of dominance over nature, emphasize a relationship of mutual respect with local ecosystems. Galeano revitalizes the indigenous attitudes toward nature in order to provide models for a sustainable global future. He expressed his solidarity with the indigenous worldview in the following words: “somos todos parientes, de todo lo que tiene piernas, patas, alas y raíces, y por lo tanto la defensa del agua, de los bosques y la defensa de la tierra, es también nuestra defensa” (“Félix Díaz junto a Eduardo Galeano”). The author calls for a more bio-centric world view, like the concept of *Buen Vivir*, which considers all species as part of a system of interdependence. He promotes animal rights and environmental protection, insisting that all living creatures deserve the same compassion and consideration as human beings: “los cocineros no crearán que a las langostas les encanta que las hiervan vivas” (“El derecho de soñar”). In his future world, the values are built on an ethic of care for all living creatures and the environment.

Galeano emphasizes the need to reconnect humans with nature, as well as the material with the spiritual: “Serán reforestados los desiertos del mundo y los desiertos del alma” (“El derecho de soñar”). The reference to the “deserts of the soul” implies the spiritual crisis, which is intimately linked to the environmental crisis. The focus on revival of spirituality reflects the need to address this issue and change our value system. Galeano proposes a transformation from materialist to postmaterialist values: care, compassion, and awareness of the integration of spirit and matter, which would ultimately improve quality of life and promote environmental protection.⁹ His work, which has not only a material but also a spiritual dimension, offers a deeper understanding of the crisis.

Eduardo Galeano emphasizes the role of socio-economic factors in anthropogenic climate change. He rejects the idea of universal human agency in this process, pointing out the marginalized position of the Global South. However, he recognizes that the pressure of global change requires a human collectivity—a universal response stemming from a shared sense of crisis. According to the author, a change of values, habits, lifestyles, and goals should be applied everywhere, in both the North and the South, although he specifically focuses on Latin America. Galeano's perspective is not in conflict with the authors who discuss human universalism in the context of the Anthropocene, because his vision of the future calls for a

⁹ On the role of postmaterialism in environmental protection, see Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*.

universal approach: an awareness of planetary connections and respect for nature. This vision is not a utopia in the sense of an ideal place, as the author himself clarified: “Seremos imperfectos porque la perfección seguirá siendo el aburrido privilegio de los dioses” (“El derecho de soñar”). Instead, it is a guide toward an alternative society, in which people will be fully aware of the impact that economic growth and material consumption have on global ecology. Galeano’s dream of a future world carries a belief in human potential, mindfulness, and creativity.

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