

## Two Dissident Ways of Reading on Inequality

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In 1492, natives discovered that they were Indians, they discovered that they lived in America; they discovered that they were naked; they discovered that sin existed; they discovered that they owed obedience to another world's king and queen, and to a god from another sky, and that this god had invented guilt, and clothes, and that he had ordered that whoever worshipped the sun and the moon and the earth and the rain that wets it, should be burned alive.

Eduardo Galeano

Equality is one of the basic components of the normativity created by capitalism. A paradoxical reply to the struggles against the patrimonialism of feudal lords, churches and empires, equality is one of the basic supports of modernity. Equalization of men before the law, which leaves behind a wide range of human beings, maybe starting with the feminine, turned out to be one of the premises that permitted the establishment of *universal* parameters. From the moment in which equality among men is proclaimed, an absolutely excludent process of decantation begins, restoring the proliferation of othernesses; it is the time of the epistemological generation of Orientalism, in a generic sense. Easterns, Indians, Africans, wilds and savages, and whatever emerged in the historical way of the process of western capitalist expansion were registered as the *others* in Calibán, *others* from the western whites, *others* from modernity; with a special treatment in the case of women.

It is never enough to remember Marx's arguments about the existing contradiction between the ideological or legal equality as a means to cover up and even deepen structural inequality. That all men are equal means that they are recognized as equivalent private owners who will be able to relate among themselves through their exchange of merchandises of a similar value, though of a completely different nature one exchanges to

accumulate and the other, to survive; one exchanges material life conditions, while the other delivers a part of his own life. All of Marx's work is a critique of social relationships established on such bases of 'equality', and the type of society therefrom derived, but it is not my intention to expand on this question. The importance of rediscussing it is that equality is not only a basic normative component, to a certain point perverse, but that it is still a longing for part of society.

### **Monsanto as a paradigm of capitalist equality (first dissident reading)**

Monsanto is one of the biggest 500 most powerful enterprises of the planet. In the well-known annual list of *Fortune*, Monsanto occupies the 197th place in 2015, and it has been on that list ever since its beginning in 1955 (*Fortune*, 1955; 2015). Created in the United States, Monsanto is now displayed around the globe. It is not the largest food producing enterprise, but it is the largest seed producer. It currently produces seeds of the eight principal agricultural grains: alfalfa, canola, corn, cotton, sorghum, soybeans, sugar beets and wheat, besides 2000 vegetable seeds sold in 160 different countries (Monsanto, 2016).

Three companies control more than half of the seeds market in the world. This means that the reproduction of the world population, including that of animals raised as cattle, has an extremely high vulnerability. Monsanto (26%), DuPont (18%) and Syngenta (9%), the first two resident in the United States, have the key to put the world in crisis.<sup>1</sup>

According to the ETC researcher Phillips McDougall's (2013) data base, Monsanto owns 26% of the world's seed market, and leads the list of 10 which control 75% of the world seed market. We may well assume, according to its recent evolution, that its leadership position must have been strengthened in the past few years.

Monsanto marks territorialities in an extended zone of the world. Its infrastructure is located in 66 countries – besides those in US territory – and it has 32,000 employees, 21,183 of whom are outside the United States. Nonetheless, its strategic character does not come from its size in terms of production and market, though both are undoubtedly significant. Its major relevance lies in its capacity to define the conditions for reproduction – or not – of life.

The area cultivated with transgenics was raised from 2 million hectares in 1996 to 170 million in 2012 (Marshall, 2013). This represents a shift,

both in material conditions of reproduction according to the type or quality of a product, but also in the way of using territories and relating to nature.

And it is precisely in this space of definition where one can identify the paradigmatic nature of Monsanto. Capitalism is a combination of greed and power: its profits guarantee a power position and this allows it to increase its profits. The difference between a common capitalist and a top capitalist is basically the way in which he is inscribed in competence and manages to handle it. This means, in the way in which he is successful in transforming a confrontation among equals (seed producers, for example) into an asymmetrical confrontation, in which one of the competitors is way more qualified than the rest. But even more than that, the advantage must imply submission, or leadership. And by controlling the essential part of a process, he establishes the conditions to create *general equivalents*, relatively unavoidable directions and normativities (Ceceña, 1998).

Monsanto transforms creole seeds into other types that substitute them, and imposes modes of use for them:

1. Regularized seeds, which allow a standardized production: corn ears, in the case of maize, will almost be of the same size and thickness, with aligned and regular seeds. In this way, they can be administered easily and more quickly (cut or kept mechanically, for example), and the returns will always be close to the average.
2. Patented seeds, whose use necessarily generates a rent.
3. Objectified seeds, suggestively called *Terminator*, without a capacity of reproduction, due to genetic transformations operated by Monsanto. Seeds no longer contain long life (transgenerational) and they cannot be kept from one crop to the next one. They are objects or merchandises, not seeds of life.
4. Dependent seeds, from a technological package that forces the use of agrochemicals to ensure a good performance. Natural interaction among species is cancelled, and so is the organic fertilization of peasant economy.

This supplanting of natural creole seeds by *Terminator* seeds – or genetically modified seeds – has completely modified the logics of agricultural production and the treatment of soil. Monsanto seeds are also invasive and tend to eliminate all the rest. By only watering their seeds using their patent, Monsanto<sup>2</sup> guarantees that, in a reasonable term, it will have control of all basic grains crops.

The question is in what sense is this Monsanto's behaviour, or this competitive strategy, a paradigmatical example of capitalism or, even more, of

modernity, and how does it relate with the principle of equality? In regard to modernity, it is indispensable to define which are the elements or epistemological and organizational principles that characterize it. This is not an easy question to solve, given the different interpretative currents that exist on the matter. For an argued approach I quote some of my previous texts. I will be here just referring to some questions that I consider essential.

1. Modernity is built upon the basis of the superiority of men<sup>3</sup> over nature. It is mostly so because of the advance of technics (artistic, linguistic, mechanical or of any other kind), after which man perceived himself as the subject of history, over and separated from the rest of the alive species, thus establishing a relational dynamic objectifier of the non-human and even of what can be considered, in this hierarchical-lineal vision, semi-human.<sup>4</sup> A fundamental axis of modernity, built as contrary to the magical or mysterious forces of nature,<sup>5</sup> was the one of *subjectness*,<sup>6</sup> exclusive of humans – or of a certain kind of humans – when facing the correlative objectivation of all other living entities, assimilated to the inorganic or inanimated, according to geographical, cultural, phenotypical, economic and political criteria. With this desubstanciation, relationships and social hierarchies were lineally established as subject–object relations.
2. The criteria of technical ordering the objectual took to a process of simplification and disciplining, in order to turn reality into comparable, measurable and easily administered dimensions. The chaotic forests were substituted by ordered woods, as James Scott's research (1998) proves. Not only were superfluous species (from the standpoint of profit) eliminated – or attempted to, at least – but also those which were kept had to be ordered. Among the *accepted* species, the extremes were also eliminated: a tree too high or too low, searching to keep the population in question centred around its mean. Equality of measures, the capacity to reduce everything to comparable terms, was – and permanently is – an unavoidable condition to concur to the ordaining space of social relations which is the market.

A voiding of concrete, distinct, incomparable substances is operated, in order to place everything in conditions of comparison and exchangeability. Universal, abstract and epistemologically committed to the modern vision, referents are built and they prevent the recognition of diversity, while tending to displace it to the level of abnormality or insufficiency. Thus, an impulse towards homogenization is generated, and it tends to confuse itself and be processed as an equivalent to equality. Specificities, differences or variations are considered accidents, abnormalities or roughnesses that have to be physically or symbolically remodeled, in order to

guarantee a good performance of market or of the political arena where everyone comes to be a citizen. The way of ordering the infinite diversity is achieved through abstraction.

This homogenization, which does not consider real disparities and differences, is studied by Marx with respect to value. The abstraction of concrete conditions is what allows to establish the general comparability, the general equivalence, which makes the kingdom of merchandise, possible.

3. The nature-object was considered not only unduly magical, but also imperfect, and the technical capacities developed by *man* were oriented towards its correction. Human beings were conceived as a model of perfection. That explains the cult exhibited in Renaissance arts, and this superior quality was sustained in man's ability to create the means or tools capable of controlling, correcting and directing both the processes of life in the face of the forces of nature, and well as other phenomena concerning the material world. Either the elements considered inadequate were eliminated, or they had to be corrected. And what best than correcting once and for all the original matrix: the intervention in genetical definition to avoid the appearance of elements with an unadmissible degree of imperfection. The same happens in the case of molecular intervention. A kind of preventive war, applied to the reproduction of life. Not letting an imperfect element – or a noxious one to the standardization required by market – to be born. Instead or besides applying energies in the subsequent selection of adequate or inadequate elements, the idea of unique *subjectness* was taken to the manipulation of the objectual, to the point of wanting to correct the ways in which nature has chosen to give way to life. Imperfection justifies elimination.

Taking only these three founding traits of modernity, which gave way to capitalism, we can undoubtedly state that Monsanto is a faithful expression of its epistemological core, of its *way of being and doing*. As a buoyant company, in complete process of expansion, we may examine Monsanto in order to better understand our present capitalism.

We can say, without exaggeration, that Monsanto has proposed itself to direct nature: design it, correct it and even generate it. Maybe this was meant to establish, in a planetary dimension, what Scott observed in the European woods. All ordered by a qualifying entity, in its undisputed carrier of the idea of perfection: 'At Monsanto, we believe agriculture should be improved [...] because human innovation is at the center of human progress' (Monsanto, 2016).

And being true to that premise, Monsanto launches the total ordering of seeds and crops, convinced that '... the world [...] needs to find ways

to make the process of growing food more efficient and aligned with our environmental needs ... ‘ (Monsanto, 2016). But ‘our’ environmental needs are not similar to those of nature. They are ruled by enslaving criteria, like that of producing more grains today, in the idea that grain equals food, even though that may imply levelling the planet.

In all senses, there is a tendency towards unilineality:

The world population has to be fed as if it did not have the capacity of feeding itself. Human beings are denied its subjective capacity. It is mass.

Grains are the best food and then everything else must be eliminated, because it does not possess the same levels of nutritional efficiency, thus impoverishing nutrition itself. There is a hierarchization of species according to Monsanto’s evaluation of its efficacy and profit.

To extend grain crops to their limit, contrary to any other plant growing in them. To clean the earth of everything that is not defined as productive from this perspective, which in this case is considered evil herb.

Biological complexity is *individualized*, just as happens in human communities, and also stereotyped, and thus, enormous and growing cultivation camps<sup>7</sup> are implanted, with all plants of the same species nearly the same size and almost with the same aesthetic and nutritional characteristics.

Traditional and communitarian knowledges are ousted by technical instructions – not even technical reasoning – and these, once again, impact the desubjectivization of direct producers, converting them, as Marx said, in a machine appendix.

Impoverishment of biodiversity, elimination of the variety within each species, *de-subjectness* of producers and consumers, elimination or reduction of vital processes and of the versatility of nature. The zombies’ army thus created can redress the image of immense cultivation camps aligned and in equivalent forms and sizes, with only one species and variant, to produce *objects* so similar that they will have a great degree of exchangeability. It can also look like the image of hungry, incapable or undefended human beings who cannot do anything but raising their arms to ask for food and accept, of course, anything that is given to them. It is not strange that Hollywood today insists in that image.

Producing individuals, in any of these camps, depersonifies, desubjectivizes, devivifies ... and concentrates. Just the system that reproduces and deepens power relationships, but, also, generates an defenselessness propitious to manipulation, be it genetic, or social.

By the introduction of technological packages and seeds, Monsanto promotes credit packages that often come through the State, and that have been a powerful element for submission of peasants, who are thus obliged to depend on buying seeds or, so to speak, become completely incorporated in the market and subject to financial fluctuations that in India alone have already caused 300,000 suicides.

If creole seeds keep their diversity and furnish a large spectre of variations, Monsanto seeds are relatively equal, same and exchangeable, produce relatively equal plans, same and exchangeables, and result in eating objects devivified, relatively equal, same, and exchangeable. That equality does not serve for life.

### **Cherrapunji as a paradigm of diversity and disorder (second dissident reading)**

In a hidden corner of India, called Cherrapunji –which we will consider as a paradigm of non-predatory civilization – the main protagonist is water. It rains so much that these rivers of Cherrapunji are always vigorous and abundant, and the population, instead of trying to control, dry, deviate them or anything of the sort, has learned to live with them and has organized its life, its knowledges and its activities in a permanent relationship with water.

At a time of generalized draughts, it is a privilege to have water in abundance, as the inhabitants of Cherrapunji have, but it can't stop being a problem when its presence is so overwhelming. It has required time, patience and wisdom to establish a convivial relationship in which both rivers and trees are as members of the community, as are the inhabitants of the place.<sup>8</sup>

The world visions that have been built in India are multiple and varied, and it would not be adequate to bring them in to this text. However, in order to understand Cherrapunji, from my own vision, I believe it worthwhile to rescue some of its elements of substantiation:

1. One of the most epistemologically transcendent elements is referred to as the idea of incompleteness, which holds that no one or no one thing can be explained by its own self, but in connection to its surroundings. A tree is the rain that wets it, the soil that feeds it, the sun, the air, the animals that inhabit or visit it, and of all the other elements or processes that fill it with substance.



The same happens to persons, who exist in interrelation with other persons, but also with plants, animals, the mountains, the weather, rivers or any other of their surrounding elements. In contrast with the Monsanto epistemology, in which it is the seed that makes the plant (and Monsanto, who plants the seed), the Cherrapunji epistemology supposes a relational and interdependent existence. The idea of incompleteness also has a sense of process, in which everything happens until the end of the time. Life processes or social processes do not end, they are constant. The movement of life is infinite. Life itself is understood as that process without limits that is not stopped with the singular existence, but refers to existence in a generic sense. Incompleteness is an essential principle that reappears in the conception of time, complementariness, permanency-impermanence, *subjectness* and proportion, guaranteeing a life organization intrinsically non-predatory.

2. Time conception as circular, present also in the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas, allows us to think of an individual person as part of the community. The permanency of the community, the integrated and moving totality is what gives sense to the contribution of the individual person, which is impermanent. Whoever lives in the community takes care of the good conditions of permanency of the totality (soil, *pacha mama* or whatever it is conceived as), which will be revisited with the return of time. Everything passes again through the same place, which is the place of everyone, where it must be preserved and enriched. In the lineal time of capitalism there is never a return, the construction is always ahead, and must abandon the past; it is a perpetual present. Here, the past lives with the present. And that conviviality between past and present determines that the intergenerational relationships have a great importance, as they constitute the space of transmission of the accumulated knowledges, and of the creation of the new knowledges. It is that conviviality that sustains the continuity of the community. And this supposes a constant presence of long circular time.
3. Complementariness is a construction. It is not *natural*, it requires an interaction in which terms of exchange are adjusted. Complementariness is deliberate and can also be broken, it can be out of joint. It appeals to a political action. The negotiation it supposes comes from an *agreement* among the concurrents, which in this case are humans, and with what is called nature in the West. It is a kind of negotiation that is set upon the wisdom emanating from a large and patient relationship of observation and experimentation in order to understand the ways of mutual coupling.
4. Placing oneself in the long time, in circularity, complementarity, intersubjectivity and intergenerationality implies a special care about proportions. There cannot be coupling or *agreement* based in disproportion. Disproportion is epistemologically absent, contrary to what happens in the case of Monsanto paradigm, in which disproportion is part of the success.



One of the main public works in Cherrapunji is the building of bridges, in order to coexist with the rivers. Many bridges are required because of the exuberance of rivers that, already being abundant, grow in more intense rain seasons. And that is where the experience of complementarity starts, because the bridges are made by weaving the roots of trees that grow to one and the other side of the river. Thanks to these tree roots, the community can move from one edge to another. And as there is so much water, trees and roots keep strengthening themselves. But being right on the edge of the river could cause the trees to be dragged by the water, if it were not for having their long roots interwoven. But time goes on and the live structures grow stronger because they are also constantly reinforced by the community, which has to guarantee that their bridges stand up.

Interweaving those roots requires long periods of time during which they grow until they reach the necessary length to get to the other edge. These are not the times of one generation, but the sequence of several generations. It is necessary that grandparents and grandchildren work together to extend human times and couple them with that of the trees. Intergenerational relationships thus established are not egalitarian, but neither are they hierarchical: they are communitarian. No one can do without the other and the agility of grandchildren is combined with the experience of grandparents.

Cherrapunji is a difficult place where it would be hard to say that there is equality, but there is not inequality. There is no disproportion, though there is a difference. There is diversity and complementarity. There is not an established order, but a complexity in movement being organized according to the demands of its relationship with nature. Community's wisdom, its capacity of coupling and its permanence are just the opposite to the Monsanto way of solving problems. Equalization, order, homogeneity, individualization, disproportion, de-subjectivization is what makes the Monsanto way exactly the contrary to difference, diversity, complexity, complementation, proportionality, subjectness, intersubjectivity and coupling in the Cherrapunji way.

In the case of Monsanto, the process has a beginning and also a precise order and end. It starts with the Terminator seed and ends with the crop sale. There is no continuity. There is no long time. Equality here is indispensable to achieve the highest levels of efficiency.

For Cherrapunji, the process has a life duration and, as such, it is complex, uncertain and disordered or driven towards the order of chaos. Equality here is unthinkable, unnecessary and even undesirable.

## From paradigms to challenges

Ecological disaster, systemic crisis, climate change, desertification, unprecedented social exclusion, forced migration, focused wars, diffuse wars, accelerated extinction of species, generalized violence, impunity, permanent exception states, necropolitics, indiscriminate pillage, accelerated extinction of species, are only different names of the same tragedy. They are facets of a general collapse that lead to the total elimination of life if this does not have the capacity and strength enough to face it.

The crisis configured within the framework of all these dimensions and problematics comes from the conception of reality itself, as generated by capitalist modernity. It is the crisis of the world vision carrying progress, equality and market.

The life organizing system which grew during the last 500 years has come to the limit of its sustainable conditions of possibility. The snake has bitten its tail and its destructive capacity is faced by the strength of life struggling to find the remains of other life systems. The regards, the conceptions and the practices that correspond to them are spaces of challenge and of uncertain and varied construction, but all of them alive. To imagine, from the diverse experiences of life, non-predatory, non-capitalist paradigms, and make them walk or strengthen their steps is the only chance of breaking the perverse spiral of general desertification provoked by the Monsanto capitalist modernity.

L'armée la plus puissante dans les mains de l'opresseur est l'esprit de l'oppressé.

Steve Biko, Black Consciousness

## Notes

\* Translated by Raquel Sosa Elizaga.

1 At present, Monsanto is in a merger process with the German company Bayer. Bayer offered US\$ 65 billion to guarantee the merger, which indicates the strategic importance of Monsanto. To finalize the agreement, they are only awaiting the approval of the corresponding authorities who are in the process of evaluating the merging based on two criteria: the impact on national security and German's antimonopoly policies. We must emphasize that just a little earlier, Chem China started a similar process in order to absorb Syngenta. This must have surely been considered among the reasons to accelerate the Bayer-Monsanto process. See: <http://www.monsanto.com/global/es/noticias-y-opiniones/pages/bayer-y-monsanto-crear%C3%A1n-un-l%C3%ADder-mundial-en-agricultura.aspx>.

2 I took Monsanto as a paradigmatic case, but in practice, agricultural control of basic grains could, as in fact happens, be in the hands of an oligopoly. This does not change anything in terms of the generated territoriality, nor in the implications in the discussion of the derivatives of the principle of equality.

3 Modernity is not announced as a human conquest over the other forms of life and subjectivity, but, significantly, as a conquest of man, though understood in a generic sense that rapidly acquired an exclusive specificity. This question has been dealt with by feminist thought, and in some other way, by all the expressions of anti-colonial thought. On one hand, the relation of gender is emphasized, while on the other hand, that of interculturalism of world visions is seen as determinant. See O’Gorman, Federici, Said, Mariátegui, Bonfil.

4 Such a conception not only establishes generalized subject-object relationships, recognizing thus a subjective exclusivity to the human species, but it also extends and is multiplied by the same by adopting criteria of geographical, cultural, phenotypical, economic and political criteria.

5 Magic was synonymous to the uncontrolled, of the limits of possibility of a way of life centered in man as a figure destined to supremacy. The vitality of nature was understood as a barrier or challenge to be beaten, and this explains in a great measure, the spectacular development of techniques. See Elías, Wallerstein, Ceceña.

6 By subjectness we understand the essence or active force that constitutes and embody the subject. Taking Castoriadis’ words, subjectness can be considered as the magma which makes the emergence of the subject. There is not a passive subject (this would be a *contradictio in adjectio*), although the subject can opt for a way of low intervention or relative invisibilization in certain moments. Even so, and with varied modalities, this refers to a political act or a particular exercise of politics.

7 Monsanto has a goal to duplicate the world’s cultivated area in 2000, by 2030 (Monsanto, 2016).

8 A community is a space of contradictions and conflicts, as much as one of agreements. Communities are sewn and unsewn, break and rebuild. For the purposes of this text, we gather that community is a space of synthesis or confluence, as the result or political agreement of the conflicting encounters among its constituents.

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