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# Decolonizing education in Latin America: critical environmental and intercultural education as an indigenous pluriversal alternative

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## ABSTRACT

Following an argument that the 2030 Agenda consolidates a neoliberal hegemonic 'development' system, we analyze how SDG4 deepens an instrumental and utilitarian 'education for sustainable development'. Alternatively, the Epistemologies of the South are presented as ways of knowing that are capable of accommodating a critical environmental and intercultural education (CEIE). Under a qualitative methodology, two extensive ethnographic studies were carried out, based on convivial individual and collective interviews with indigenous peoples. In addition, documentary analysis was carried out. This strategy made it possible to analyze two different cases of intercultural education (one of *'that which is'* and the other of *'that which is not'*) in Latin America: the model of intercultural bilingual education of the schools for the qom in Rosario, and the autonomous education model of the Zapatista schools in Chiapas. We show how the experience of Zapatista's 'true education' allows us to look beyond 'development' and 'schooling', to where life is a melding of ecosystem(s) and culture(s).

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## Introduction

The current world-system is configured around a hegemonic model of unequal, ecologically predatory and neocolonial capitalism. Additionally, neoliberal globalization has contributed to the fact that Western epistemologies and ontologies prevail as the only ones acceptable. Within the consolidation of hegemonic capitalism and subalternization of *'other'* knowledge(s), the pre-eminence of neoliberal and instrumental 'education' has played a key role. An 'education' founded in the production, distribution, and use of 'knowledge' and 'information' (OECD 1996) to provide 'learners' to contribute to the operation of the system. This hegemonic model in the global North also has implications for education in the global South, especially within the context defined by the 2030 Agenda (2030A) and its sustainable development goals (SDGs), which constitute the categorical framework that defines and

structures the hegemonic ‘development’ model – the *Global Development Agenda* (GDA) (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias 2019).

Mainstream scholars have considered the 2030A a ‘new’ framework for ‘development’, a paradigm shift inspired by broader and transformative narratives, with the aspiration of ‘*leaving no one behind*’, and allowing the combination of ‘development’ and ‘environmental sustainability’ (Langford 2016). It is seen as innovative in conception and ambition, with transversal, ‘universal’ and symmetrical objectives, more horizontal and consensual, and with deep and broad mechanisms for financing.

However, under that surface of a plural, multi-actor, and multi-objective framework that theoretically embraces sustainability and equity, the 2030A exhibits a clear continuity with the model of hegemonic development. Thus, it contributes to the consolidation of a neo-liberal GDA through a strategy in which changes of apparent depth are introduced but the ontological and structural bases remain unaltered or even reinforced (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022). In effect, the 2030A is based on a market episteme (McMichael 2010) which introduces epistemological and ideological elements that seek to depoliticize ‘development’ itself (Schöneberg 2019), converting it into a mere technical debate around goal-setting and the measurement of results through standardized indicators (Gabay and Ilcan 2017).

In the 2030A framework, ‘education’ plays a key role as SDG4: ‘*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*’ (United Nations (UN) 2015), interconnected transversally with many others (Wulff 2020) – SDGs 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15–, so that the vision of education in (and for) the global South, mediated by this GDA, shall be an ‘education for sustainable development’ (ESD). Critical political economy literature (Kedir et al. 2017; Soederberg 2017; Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022; Garcia-Arias and Cuestas-Caza 2024) has pointed out many problems regarding the 2030A: the impossibility of compliance with the vast majority of the SDGs; the contradiction that implies the reaffirmation of growth while seeking to achieve ‘environmental sustainability’; the ambiguity of most of the objectives; the absence of a solid institutional and accountability design, and so on. On the environmental dimension, the 2030A adopts a privatizing and business-as-usual position akin to the notion of ‘nature capitalism’ (Spash 2016), leaving its declared objectives orphaned of political measures and implementation practices, lacking adequate financing instruments and sanctioning mechanisms and, consequently, impossible to comply with (Raftery et al. 2017). Furthermore, it consolidates the pre-eminence of the power granted to private agents, corporations, and public-private partnerships, with dramatic consequences for a fair global governance.

In sum, the 2030A consolidates (as ‘another brick in the wall’) a ‘development’ model based on a market episteme and inserted into a financialized, neocolonial, and ecologically predatory capitalism (Garcia-Arias and Mediavilla 2023).

Faced with this hegemonic vision of ‘development’, a multitude of critical and dissenting views coexist (Büscher 2019; Ziai 2019; Garcia-Arias and Cuestas-Caza 2024). Among these, are the ‘alternatives to development’ approaches (Lang and Mokrani 2012), the contributions of post-development (Ziai 2017) and the pluriversal alternatives (Reiter 2018; Kothari et al. 2019). For these critical views, the GDA reproduces the colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2000) that, anchored in modernity and neocoloniality (Mignolo 2007), promotes a ‘cosmology of development’ based on relations of domination and control, establishing and perpetuating a hegemonic model of exploitation (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022). Escaping this *domination trap* requires not only deconstruction of the concept of ‘development’

(Escobar 1996) and its (re)politicization, but also the claiming of a pluriversal way of understanding the world, of feeling-thinking (*sentipensar*) it, and of understanding it from ‘other’ knowledge(s) built from the diverse epistemologies of the South (Santos 2014; Esteva 2020; Kothari 2020). Through repoliticization (Schöneberg 2019), the pluriverse provide the necessary space for the construction of different cultural and experiential models based on ‘living together in harmony’, prefigurative and autonomous politics, ‘other’ knowledge(s), and ‘alternatives beyond development’.

As Maldonado-Villalpando et al. (2022, 1302) pointed out: ‘*These alternatives are often based on the production of new knowledge and the revitalization of traditional knowledge. [they] seek the (re)construction of political and territorial autonomy, reclaiming the commons, (...) ecotechnology, sustainable architecture, educational practices and social enterprises, the design and application of critical decolonial pedagogies (...)*’. In this context, alternative educational practices to the hegemonic model play a key role in constructing not only alternatives to education itself, but also broad pluriversal alternatives, based on ‘other’ epistemologies, ontologies and knowledge(s), that contribute to the construction of ‘other’ social models of coexistence.

Under pluriversal structures, there is no room for an ‘education’ built on the coordinates of the Global Development Agenda. Instead it is necessary to (re)imagine an education that, in the context of the current ecological civilizational crisis, needs to be defined as ‘critical environmental and intercultural education’ (CEIE). That is, an education anchored in ‘other’ epistemologies and ontologies. A CEIE designed, lived, and felt ‘*from within and from below*’, by Afro-descendant and peasant communities, and indigenous peoples themselves; an CEIE truly autonomous, intercultural, pluriversal, and critical.

The sociological methodology that gives rise to this article combines secondary research on critical intercultural education, Latin American critical environmental thought and epistemologies of the South, with multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with the Qom people and the Zapatista movement, carried out over many years. The ethnographic approach was carried out by fieldwork with the Qom people in the city of Rosario, Argentina (Corbetta 2015, 2016, 2019, 2021) and the Zapatista movement in the lands of Chiapas, Mexico (Baronnet 2013, 2015, 2022).

In the case of the work carried out in Qom territories, the ethnographic approach (Rockwell 2009) allowed for observations and analysis of the schools and their local contexts; with the voices of Qom and creole directors, teachers, parents and community representatives, as well as documentary material to complement the data collected in the field. A total of 35 interviews were carried out, including individual and group interviews. A relatively similar ethnographic and sociological approach has been carried out during the last two decades with educators and families of different Mayan peoples in their territories in the Lacandona jungle of Chiapas. In addition to a committed and prolonged dialogical relationship with adults, youth and children (Baronnet 2008; Baronnet and Stahler-Sholk 2019), the fieldwork included strategies of educational intervention and teacher training, play and art, as well as the analysis of oral discourse and of printed and audiovisual archives that mark the history of the struggles of indigenous peoples for a self-determined education in accordance with their rights and pluriversal aspirations.

Based on this qualitative analysis methodology, this article shows how SDG4 forms part of the neoliberal ‘development’ system consolidated in the 2030A and based on an instrumental and utilitarian model of ‘education for sustainable development’. In contrast, the

epistemologies of the South are presented as ways of knowing, understanding, and being that are capable of accommodating a CEIE. Two cases of intercultural education are analyzed (one of *'that which is'* and the other of *'that which is not'*) in two Latin American territories: the model of intercultural bilingual education of the schools for the qom in Rosario, Argentina (an education *'from outside and from above'*); and the autonomous education model of the Zapatista schools in Chiapas, Mexico (an education *'from within and from below'*). We show how the first of these models is functional and reproductive of the sub-alternization of subjects and knowledge(s), and of the racism and anthropocentrism by which the West continues to operate, thus perpetuating the coloniality of knowledge, power, and nature. The second model, on the other hand, is built from an autonomous political reality that engenders a CEIE *'that truly is'*, centered on the defense of life with dignity and dialogues of knowledge for the defense of the Earth, nature, and culture(s).

The article is organized as follows: in Section II we analyze SDG4 as a device of the GDA and we present the epistemologies of the South and their capacity to support a pluriversal and decolonial CEIE. In Section III, we examine the differences between a functional intercultural education, and an autonomous and critical one, based on analysis of the Qom and Zapatista schools. The article concludes postulating a departure from the 'sociologies of absences' in order to think of other pedagogical models based on other experiences and subjectivities that are not new, but have been hidden. These alternative learning models are founded on principles that go beyond 'development' and 'schooling'; where life is a weaving together of ecosystems, (living in) harmony, and pluriversality.

## **From 'education for sustainable development' to a pluriversal and critical environmental intercultural education**

### ***SDG4 and 'education for sustainable development' as artifacts of the global development agenda and the capitalocene***

A core element of the hegemonic 'development' model is the central role given to the concepts of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development'. Hence, in terms of education, the totemic phrases employed by the 2030A are 'education for sustainability' or 'education for sustainable development', understood in their most standardized meaning. Although the SDG4 discourse is one of *'inclusive and equitable education'*, *'education for all'*, or *'leaving no one behind'*, SDG4 poses significant problems (Getzin 2019; Wulff 2020). It does not discuss what is understood by quality education, who should provide it, or under what parameters; it does not establish a clear link between the educational priorities it sets forth and specific policies that should be implemented to achieve them; it does not design or recommend precise instruments to finance them; and it establishes virtually no mechanisms of control, supervision, or accountability.

The SDG4 is based on a model of ESD that, while presented as an instrument for the ecological transformation of society, is more closely associated with a vision of 'weak' sustainability in which education serves as an instrument to train 'learners'. That is, an environmental education model that is prescriptive, unidirectional, and utilitarian, serving to perpetuate the status quo (Jickling and Sterling 2017). Thus, under the guise of promoting 'sustainable development', itself an empty signifier and a mechanism of *apparent* depoliticization (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022), the concept of ESD embedded in the SDG4

*'actually serves as a reproductive factor to the unsustainable, dominant economic model by way of its instrumental conceptions of education'* (Getzin 2019, 73).

Within the Capitalocene (Moore 2017) and the GDA there is unlimited economic growth that is incompatible with environmental sustainability, the maintenance of biodiversity, the fight against global warming or the defense of social and ecological justice. The ESD paradigm enshrined in SDG4 cannot be dissociated from the market episteme that underpins 2030A as a whole, where economic and social issues prevail at the expense of ecological considerations (Kopnina 2015; Sitka-Sage et al. 2017).

Additionally, SDG4 assumes that the ESD must include standardized indicators and promote the development of competencies aimed at converting learners into a workforce at the service of neoliberal capitalism (Kopnina 2020), implying the assumption of a utilitarian conception of education and the existence of a supposed 'universalist' vision of the concept of (sustainable) 'development' that enshrines a hegemonic, Western-centric, and neocolonial system of cultural domination (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022). Furthermore, SDG4 consolidates an educational model that is anthropocentric (Washington 2018), in which the 'environment' is placed at the service of the 'sustainable use' of 'resources' and of the instrumental use of nature, without respect for non-human species, or for nature itself.

In sum, the SDG4 contributes to the consolidation of an education model that is incompatible with the sustainability of life, and at the service of the neoliberal capitalism and the hegemonic model of 'development'. The question arises, is it possible to build a CEIE from other parameters, from *'other'* cosmologies, epistemologies, and knowledge(s)?

### ***Toward a pluriversal and CEIE informed by the Epistemologies of the South (EoS)***

In a pluriversal 'real utopia' (Wright 2010) constituted *'by many kinds of worlds, many ontologies, many ways of being in the world, many ways of knowing reality'* (Querejazu 2016, 3) on which counter-hegemonic alternatives to the GDA are built, education should play a key role. This would be an education (re)situated in a critical and emancipatory path that contributes to (re)imagining our world(s) in dialogue with *'other'* knowledge(s), with *'other'* ways of being and feeling-thinking. An education that allows for *'inéditos viables'* ('viable untold') hereafters (Araújo Freire 2018, 240), because *'there is no inevitable future, but several possible futures'*, if we assume *'the challenge of thinking what is "not thought"'* (Galano 2006, 3 and 17). In this sense, Latin American *environmental thought* (Leff 2012) invites the conception of an environmental education<sup>1</sup> that recognizes, in the present ecological crisis, a concurrent civilizational crisis that degrades the environment and ignores the 'subalternized' (the indigenous, the poor, women, the black, the South), while privileging an unsustainable mode of production and lifestyle (Galano et al. 2002, 1).

A pluriversal CEIE should question both the 'development' and the 'schooling' models, inviting us to retrace what is known, and to conceive an education for the sustainability of life (Corbetta 2021) – a CEIE that serves as *'a connective tissue between the different worlds (...), connecting everything and everyone into the "relatedness of the whole", a relatedness of the pluriverse'* (Silova 2020, 144).

The experiences of critical, autonomist, and emancipatory pedagogies carried out in the global South – some in Latin America, and spanning what are today called the *epistemologies of the South* – constitute a source for learning to build pluriversal forms of education. Critical pedagogies, critical intercultural education, epistemologies of the South, and Latin American

environmental thought, all share the same origin matrix: they define themselves from an epistemological and political-pedagogical plur(ivers)ality as *anti-colonial Souths*, demanding a plurality of forms of producing knowledges. For the EoS, there are ways of doing that are knowledge, and ways of knowledge(s) that emancipate. In order for ‘the unthinkable to be thought’ (Santos 2014), they aspire to generate inter-learning in ‘other’ ontological and epistemological forms.

Critical pedagogies propose ‘polycentric ways and sites of unlearning and learning’ capable of generating a double hermeneutical effort (Santos 2018, 38): a ‘*hermeneutic of suspicion*’ to take distance from the Westerncentric/modern tradition in its ways of knowing and being; and a ‘*hermeneutic of the affirmation of the denied*’, which allows the design of notions of subalternized experiences that propose an ‘other’ understanding of the world. ‘Universalism’ (Corbetta 2021), while silencing the *epistemes* and the ‘other’ ontologies, constructed the ecosystem violence that characterize the ‘*Western-centric/Christian-centric/modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world-system*’ (Grosfoguel 2013, 39), contributing to ecological and civilizational crises mediated by capitalism and the Capitalocene. From this critical Latin American perspective, intercultural education and environmental education share identical political-pedagogical horizons and epistemological roots, and are traversed by the EoS by which they radically challenge the hegemonic world-systems (Corbetta 2021).

Simultaneously, critical pedagogies de-hierarchize knowledge by dismantling the conception of a one-way political/pedagogical subject – understanding that educator and learner must be producers and builders of knowledge(s)–, questioning neoliberal relations and building new epistemic territories (Suárez et al. 2016) where these ‘*pedagogies that decolonize*’ propose forms of re-existence, resistance, and insurgency (Walsh 2013, 28). Therefore, the pedagogical praxis is built on ways of living (*Buen Vivir*) and (re)producing, and in liberation practices exercised from the social struggles of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities that compel us to inquire about the scope of coexistence experiences in Abya Yala. In that sense, ‘*critical interculturality*’ goes beyond education (Tubino 2015), de-hierarchizing all power relations (socio-economic, cultural, educational, political-institutional, epistemological, spiritual, linguistic, geographic, sex/gender). This implies a process of *construction in conflict* where the causes of the multiple asymmetries that affect subalternized peoples are de-structured (Walsh 2009). Almost none of the current Latin American states operate or have ever operated in this key; rather, they have in practice initiated processes of ‘*functional interculturality*’ (Tubino 2015) with actions, focused fundamentally upon the educational field, that do not modify the central core of inequalities, but that are merely actions of ‘positive discrimination’ in terms of tolerance policies.

Therefore, ‘*intercultural bilingual education*’ (IBE) in its plural enunciations should be pointed out as ‘*modalities*’ – organizational and/or curricular modes or forms of educational systems whose objective is to provide specific training responses according to certain particularities – through which the states claim to guarantee the educational rights of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. In practice, they remain models managed ‘*from outside* and ‘*from above*’, in which the actions are designed, managed and/or administered by the states or, at most, where a certain delegation of the administration of the system is allowed to indigenous organizations. Usually, these *modalities* imply an ‘education for indigenous people’ designed and managed by whites, where the states assume cultural diversity as an ‘indigenous’ issue, and no efforts are made to approach general education from a critical approach of *interculturality for all*.

Far from these modalities anchored in the State, there also exist *critical educational experiences* – conceived as part of an autonomous, prefigurative, and convivial governance – designed and managed ‘*from within and from below*’ by grassroots organizations and indigenous or popular movements.<sup>2</sup> In Abya Yala, a pluriversal educational approach would require a critical, intercultural and transversal approach to education, with the equalization of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant ways of knowledges that until now have been prohibited and/or subalternized by Western knowledge. Only to the extent that the white-creole/mestizo societal component can be made a political-pedagogical subject of interculturality, would the deactivation of structural racism – which operates as a perpetrator of inequalities in educational systems – become viable (Corbetta 2021).

In the following section, we analyze two Latin American educational experiences inspired by very different models of interculturality and, therefore, very unevenly traversed by the epistemologies of the South: one indebted to a modality of State education and an example of a functional ‘*that is not*’ interculturality, and another one designed and managed horizontally within a comprehensive project of collective transformation which provides an example of critical interculturality in action.

## How functional intercultural education, and autonomous and critical education differ

### *An IBE from outside and from above: the case of the schools for the qom in Rosario, Argentina*

The fate of the Qom (or Toba) peoples and their habitat – a forest ecosystem in the Gran Chaco region of northern Argentina – starkly summarizes the relationship between genocides and ecocides that grounds the modern/colonial world-system. The Qom peoples, of nomadic or semi-nomadic customs, had previously based their economies on hunting, fishing, gathering, and rudimentary horticulture (Lanza et al. 2012). The arrival of Christian missionaries forced them into a process of sedentarization, itself marred by various stages of forced migration, the product of violent ecological dispossession and exploitation. The clearing of the land and its consequent loss of productive capacity turned the Gran Chaco region into a territory of expulsion and sacrifice in several periods, beginning in the nineteenth century. In the 1970s the expulsion of the Qom from even marginalized works increased their need to migrate to other provinces in search of economic resources, and Rosario was one place of settlement.

There, the ongoing struggle of indigenous migrants began to inspire the municipal and provincial governments (respectively) to guarantee housing and education,<sup>3</sup> the latter in the key of their own language and culture (Arias 2010). To satisfy this educational demand, an IBE model designed by the State and configured under a *functional intercultural model* was put into practice, amid strong rejection with racist overtones by the creoles of Rosario against indigenous migrant families settling into middle-class neighborhoods. The situation brought the demands of creoles and indigenous into a ‘*convergence of divergent interests*’ (Corbetta 2017): the racism of the former and the demands of the latter led to the creation of ‘bilingual schools’ for the Qom.

However, the educational regulation (Decree 3346/1990) that created the first school (School No. 1333) omits any reference to the conflict between creoles and indigenous people

and assumes as its motivation the high numbers of Qom children without educational assistance, and the lack of facilities with the capacity to absorb them. Behind what was hidden in the regulations is a State that has lost the possibility of deactivating racism, inciting the fragmentation of the educational system under the 'ghetto school' model (Corbetta 2019): Qom schools for the Qom, and general schools for the creoles. Frustrated the possibility of challenging the existing ethnic, social, and epistemic asymmetries, this system persists on a foundation of neocolonialism and 'educational apartheid' (Chiodi 1990) as a system of preponderant socialization.

In addition, the Qom school was created without infrastructure, and without local indigenous teaching staff (Achilli 2003; Arias 2010). Vacancies were filled by Qom teachers brought from other jurisdictions; but after a time, these teachers were returned to their provinces of origin. A new regulation (Decree 2200/1998) created the second Qom bilingual primary school, *Escuela Cacique Taygoyé*, but the same challenges persisted: a lack of positions and appointments of teachers in Qom Language and Culture and Crafts; poor educational quality; the absence of specific curricular content; and the difficulty in forming teaching pairs (Spanish-Qom) in all subjects.

However, through the period 1995-2004, the IBE schools in Rosario were supported by varied actors from the University, from where intervention projects were implemented and where the national State also provided training and educational materials. This mobilization of support led in 2005 to the formal recognition of the IBE as a modality of the Educational System in the Jurisdiction of Santa Fe (Decree 1719/2005). Although this latter Decree can be interpreted as an advance, the provincial State again missed an opportunity to direct pedagogical actions of a real and critical intercultural nature into the creole schools (and thus to mainstream the rest of the educational system).

After 2005, and until 2017, the IBE was again left off the provincial public agenda (Corbetta 2017). The political decision not to address the new educational demands of the Qom people contributed to the wearing down of some actors who, post-decree, were left isolated, working through scattered initiatives and without sufficient networks to problematize their own education (designed and carried out by the State, and by creoles) and the education targets of white populations. In 2017, two advances were formally introduced: 19 schools were added to the IBE modality, along with the training of suitable bilingual teachers (fluent in the indigenous language but not yet trained as teachers) and of indigenous representatives, to educate future teachers entering the system. However, to date, the provincial management of the modality remains in the hands of a creole administrator, missing the opportunity of indigenous/creole co-direction.

Thus, from the lived experience of the Toba families, this *functional intercultural* model represents a poor and weak device that makes explicit the infeasibility of an educational model where the deep and historical causes of asymmetries are not deactivated. Qom families point out (Corbetta 2015) that the education received by their children is a devalued education designed by the creoles, who continue to enjoy greater facility of study and greater availability of positions. At a theoretical level, indigenous actors tend to define the qom's IBE for the qom (Corbetta 2015, 369) as a 'bridge' to overcome obstacles and unite cultures. The expectation is that through this modality, indigenous people come to know the world of Western knowledge, while creoles come to know the world of indigenous knowledge. However, in practice, the *bridge* merely leads in one direction, and only the indigenous cross it. Creoles are not (and do not feel) challenged to appreciate the indigenous horizon,

thus configuring a '*that which is not*' interculturality that fails to challenge both populations but becomes an 'Indian matter' (Bello, 2009).

Indeed, for the dominant culture, IBE is reduced to minority participation by the indigenous through scant positions and teaching hours of Qom Language and Culture and Crafts, with a restricted presence of the Council of Language and Culture composed of wise women of the community. By giving unequal treatment to knowledge(s), the educational system does not create the conditions to advance the 'inter-', but instead tolerates the indigenous as subaltern, wasting indigenous ecological knowledge and the ethics of caring for the nature they inhabit and that inhabits them. Rather than spaces for the exchange of knowledge(s), schools for the qom promote devalued experiences.

In the case of the Qom schools' IBE model, we face a vertical State model, with specific interventions but without measures that reach the entire educational system. Such an 'interculturality' proves episodic, moved by functional events that connect with the Western-centric hegemonic matrix. By implementing few spaces to develop content, and few positions for indigenous Qom teachers, this represents a clear example of how educational policies operate *from outside* and *from above*: denial of the latent colonizing and racist conflict; 'folklorization' of the ethnic entity; epistemic and ontological violence; omission of the ecocides, and so on.

This IBE model operates as producer and reproducer of social, political and cultural asymmetries, and it omits any reference to the interdependence between the destruction of ecosystems and the oppression of the cultures that inhabit them. As with general education, IBE is an education that is functional to the modern/colonial world-system (Quijano 2000): its aim is not 'education for the sustainability of life' (in all its forms), but the maintenance of a 'development' model that serves as a (re)producer of ecocides and genocides. If intercultural and environmental education is incapable of rescuing and converting to pedagogical topics the relationships of care toward ecosystems that are ancestrally sustained by Qom culture, then *it is not* education.

Monoculture and the Capitalocene continue to (re)produce at least two deserts. On the one hand, that of a predatory capital-centric productivism that devastates ecosystems, their inhabitants, and the cultures within them, which are exposed to continuous dispossession. And on the other hand the epistemic desert where the history and memory of indigenous peoples remains absent, along with the cognitive-ecological systems transmitted by generations in the Qom people and their care for life (Guarino Correo and Pirondo, 2019). In this sense, the Qom IBE designed by creoles becomes a producer of absences: a monoculture of being and of knowledge, and a naturalization of differences (Santos 2006).

### ***Autonomous education in the Zapatista movement in Chiapas***

In Mexico, analogous to the Argentine case, State-led 'neo-indigenism' has adopted an intercultural discourse in public education since the second half of the 1990s. However, indigenous struggles continue to oppose a school based on a violent, '*mestizophylic*', and Western-centric model that deepens *linguicide*, *ethnocide*, and *ecocide*. In Chiapas, intercultural education aspires to be respectful of traditional indigenous education (Gómez Lara 2011) based on learning through action and councils, and on learning the communal way of life.

Coloniality and State racism are manifested in the institutional imposition of a national curriculum that excludes political autonomy in the production of knowledge(s) of indigenous peoples, and that prevents their cultural (re)production. The State IBE (*from outside and from above*) refuses to vindicate indigenous cultures as an instrument for the transformation of cultural identities, seeking instead to de-historicize different cultural subjects (Pérez Ruiz 2016). Dehistoricization translates to racial oppression, to cultural isolation and alienation derived from historical structures of exploitation and dispossession, in which the neoliberal and functional school has played a predominant role for the exercise of social and political control over the subalternized populations.

Through their insurrection and resistance, the indigenous authorities of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) and their rebel autonomous municipalities have constituted the key agency for regional community education policies. In the years following the 1994 uprising and the recuperation of farmland, thousands of children dropped out of 'official schools' and entered new 'autonomous schools' in occupied public school buildings run by municipal councils and community assemblies.

Opposed to State schooling programs that deny their sociocultural identity, Zapatista schools take on the unpaid positions of promoters and committees of education, acting under the control of the assemblies and their representatives at the regional level (Baronnet 2008). Educational self-determination completely transfigures the mission, operation, and representation of schools, impregnated with Zapatista Mayan culture (Baronnet 2013).

Autonomous education questions the fictitious 'multiculturalism' with neoliberal roots that the State has sought to impose in Mexico, rejected by indigenous movements that aspire to exercise their prefigurative autonomism in the educational field as elsewhere. The praxis of critical education in Zapatista schools corresponds to a decolonizing logic, placing the culturally endogenous and exogenous into a dialogic tension between what is 'indigenous' and what is 'foreign', because knowledge to be taught in school is selected by the very recipients of the education act, making them 'democratic practitioners' (Jickling and Wals 2008).

This critical intercultural education '*that which is*' becomes viable as a result of an administrative organization and pedagogical management that is independent from State bureaucratic structures. Peasant families are committed to the construction of original pedagogies aimed at strengthening the decolonizing processes, as forms of political dissidence and resistance, reaffirming critical consciousness and subjectivities that express the pride of belonging to an indigenous community. The education promoted by these autonomous municipalities responds above all to a prefigurative praxis of collectivities in movement, intersubjective in nature, and critical of the immediate social reality.

This *autonomous education* is based on reflections and pedagogical praxis founded in the political demands of the Zapatismo, in order to understand and resist policies of dispossession in a context of limited material resources and socio-environmental conflicts tied to the defense of Mother Earth. At the pedagogical level, the particularized content and multilingual forms of teaching in the Zapatista schools are not assumed to be 'libertarian', 'socialist', or 'decolonial'; rather, the movement refers to its practices as '*autónoma*' (autonomous), '*verdadera*' (true) or '*rebelde*' (rebel) education, meant to 'open the eyes' and 'awaken the conscience'. What emerges is *not* called 'intercultural bilingual education' but rather 'true education', sustained from epistemologies of the South '*from within and from below*', and from a collective knowledge in order to teach and learn to 'achieve our struggle', 'solve the people's problems', and 'make our own way to fulfill our demands' (Baronnet 2013).

The '*compas*' responsible to the community for teaching classes are the '*promotores*' (promoters), elected at an assembly between the young people of the rural locality and removable from their teaching positions at the request of the community. Unlike an official teacher from outside the village, an autonomous educator does not intervene in local communities as a privileged intermediary of the State, coming from a higher social position; rather, s/he acts as a facilitator, a servant and defender of the radical communal democracy project (Baronnet 2015).

Autonomous education favors a decolonizing CEIE based on an ethic of responsibility in the management of natural commons, considering sustainability within the framework of a learning approach that is situated and fairer, both culturally and environmentally. It aims to strengthen the ability to defend the territory and to place the care and perpetuation of life at the center of the agenda. The education encompassed by Zapatista schools inhabits the entire *lived* curriculum and transcends it, raising the focus to a more global strategy of geopolitical and socio-cultural struggle – which is fundamental given the current context of imposition of industrial mega-projects in indigenous communities, along with repression by the State and the criminalization of social protest.

Hence, ecological awareness in autonomous education is expressed in the pedagogical praxes of each community's educational project. For example, the agro-ecological character of Zapatismo is manifested in daily practices of caring for forests, rivers, and organic farming plots, extensive animal husbandry in farm enclosures and collective pastures, prohibition of cutting down trees and the sale of precious wood, sustainable management of firewood for use in cooking, and the reforestation of communal lands. With agro-ecological production cooperatives Zapatismo embodies a movement of popular and solidarity economy that includes fair-trade networks and permanent educational efforts for self-development and mutualism.

By leveraging their own political, economic, and cultural mechanisms, the rebel communities tend to address schooling issues in idiosyncratic ways, responding pragmatically to their collective priorities and relying on internal resources and mobilization capabilities. For example, some municipalities have yet to construct secondary schools or libraries, although they have developed an extensive autonomous health system in the last decades. However, amidst the current violence and political tensions in Mayan territories, communication barriers blocking access to other regional, national, and international experiences that pursue projects of self-determined and free education hinder the collective formation of new community educators (Baronnet 2022).

Across different regions of Chiapas, the communal system of autonomous education has grappled with significant challenges when it comes to determining and developing curricular contents, teaching methods, reading materials, and written languages at school. This has been especially pronounced in small localities where young people are often unwilling to take on teaching roles. Autonomous municipalities have struggled to recruit and train enough teachers to foster a truly multilingual and holistic education model that can mitigate territorial disparities and gender inequality. In some communities, women and elders have demonstrated lower levels of participation than the fathers of the pupils due to the limited appeal of teaching in autonomous schools, which hinders their engagement in the construction of new pedagogical praxes.

The Zapatista project of *education for autonomy* is inseparable from the idea that political autonomy is not an established situation, but an ongoing process, a political-pedagogical

praxis that moves by freely determined paths and counter-hegemonic strategies of indigenous dissidence. To Mayan peoples in resistance, educational autonomy is the most appropriate way to learn to recognize the value of cultural belonging to a territory, and the potential of community ties for sustainable self-development, in order to understand and act to confront ecocide and ethnocide, capitalism and heteropatriarchy, and cultural and environmental racism (Harvey 2016; Stahler-Sholk 2017; Baronnet and Stahler-Sholk 2019).

In Zapatista's education, political consciousness is strengthened from the cultural perspective of feeling-thinking subjects, increasingly interdependent on one another and on the ecological context. Additionally, the concurrent processes of educational construction are based on symbolic resources and identities that give meaning to a collective imagination, and an emotional educational praxis linked to the revolutionary culture and popular education of the social movement (Baronnet 2015; Pinheiro Barbosa 2020).

Instead of promoting a teaching fixed by the folkloric essence of ethnic traits and ties, the Mayan autonomies promote original ways of articulating intercultural and ecological knowledge from an ethno-political perspective. The ethical values and demands expressed by the insurgent movement represent the elements of social and political-cultural identity that help articulate the relevant educational content from an indigenous peasant perspective (Baronnet 2022). With the Zapatista project, school content, educational agents, and school itself are all re-signified, as are identities themselves (Gómez Lara 2011).

Faced with a multiplicity of internal organizational problems over more than two decades, not every autonomous region has managed to build and expand its secondary schools, health facilities, auditoriums, and storage capacities. Not all schools function successfully: some open discontinuously, or fail to appoint educators, while others have found ways to facilitate the rotation of teaching functions. In some communities, the education committees have encountered difficulties in motivating the inhabitants to sustain educational self-management. The continuous involvement of families and their participation in collective work are key to ensuring free schooling. But despite constant obstacles and threats, education for political autonomy and the defense of life unfolds in a feeling-thinking political-pedagogical praxis (Pinheiro Barbosa 2020) marked by the identity specificities of each Mayan locality and producing a revolutionary political culture that unites the popular peasant movement in its territorial plurality.

The autonomous schools are also opposed to official schools to the extent that they promote the formation of the '*identity of the Zapatista being*' – built upon their own epistemologies – which prepares them to participate in the militant and civil responsibilities that sustain the largest political, social, and indigenous movement in Mexico. Zapatista education has become a mechanism for inter-generational connection, a 'true' application of the concept of 'leaving no one behind', but understood in a practical, autonomist, and counter-hegemonic way, *from within* and *from below*, and far from the hollow rhetoric of 2030A. Elderly persons are honored as sources of information when promoters and children gather community knowledge in the framework of research tasks, and, in general, they tend to express satisfaction with a literacy that values their own language and indigenous culture without resorting to the punishments and humiliations of yesterday (Gómez Lara 2011; Baronnet and Stahler-Sholk 2019), thanks to the circulation of knowledges for the perpetuation of life in all its forms.

The fact that their educational model is not recognized by the official educational system does not appear to be a major problem or obstacle for these Mayan peasant families.

Autonomous education efforts, while challenging patriarchal and colonial knowledge, attempt to address the structural issues of limited access to dominant knowledge. As noted in Janks' 'access paradox', granting students access to dominant forms of knowledge can reinforce their dominance, while denying access can perpetuate their marginalization in a society that values and prioritizes these forms (Janks 2000). Nevertheless, young mothers and fathers place great value on the efficient development of Spanish literacy, numeracy, as well as history, science, and arts skills in their children. Everyday requirements of political resistance clearly limit the ideal conditions for autonomous experiences to assure that students gain these skills through their education in all the rebel villages of Chiapas.

In summary, autonomous education engenders a CEIE '*that which is*', referring to the defense of life with dignity deriving from the integral articulation of knowledge for the defense of land, territory, and culture. A political-pedagogical project critical of the neoliberalism, racism, and ecocide of the Capitalocene, based on a decolonial perspective of critical intercultural education built from the epistemologies of the South. This experience allows a reflective examination of cultural realities based on the practices of social subjects who should not be idealized or essentialized, but rather recognized as agents of pluriversal and revolutionary changes into a global struggle in defense of life. (*nuestra lucha es por la vida*).

## Final considerations

Within a GDA in which 'sustainable development' is just an *empty signifier* (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022), ESD represents an education in (and for) the void. The hegemonic 'development' model consolidates an unjust and neocolonial world-system, ignorant of '*other*' ways of thinking, and fully integrated into contemporary capitalism and its dysfunctionalities. The EDS embedded in this model inevitably becomes a discursive artifact and a neoliberal educational device that multiplies deficiencies. The 2030A claim of 'leaving no one behind' is fictitious, and its commitment to an ESD is imposed, prescriptive, unidirectional and utilitarian. Within this hegemonic model, an 'education' that fails to consider pluriversal alternatives becomes a generator of infrastructures to support the prevailing colonial model of power-knowledge, domination, and exploitation (also ecological) endemic to the Capitalocene.

We have shown that it is both possible and desirable to build an autonomous CEIE that is informed by '*other*' epistemologies, and respectfully aware of '*other*' knowledge(s). That is, pluriversal and decolonial alternatives are 'real utopias' (Wright 2010). Furthermore, such an autonomous education must be intercultural and critical, and connected with pluriversal alternatives to 'development' that place life, equity, environmental justice, and collective well-being at the very center.

We have analyzed two alternatives that provide clues regarding where to start in the movement toward a pluriversal CEIE. The qom IBE schools for the qom offer indications of '*that which is not*' interculturality when built *from outside* and *from above*. A critical interculturality *for all* will require not merely rethinking schooling, but going beyond them: it implies intercultural policies aimed at all areas of life, and a new kind of society. A pluriversal and critical approach calls for educational systems to move from the *functional interculturality* of a 'school for indigenous peoples' to a school where *critical interculturality* is transversal, and reaches everyone (Baronnet and Stahler-Sholk 2019). This 'crossing of the abyssal line' (Santos 2014) would imply recognition of the intrinsic colonialism that continues to inform educational systems.

If the decoloniality of human relationships does not constitute part of the pedagogy of an IBE, then much less will that pedagogy promote the exercise of decolonizing ways of thinking and of inhabiting the ecosystems that host us. Considered as a mere provider of resources and energy, and a sink for waste, (neoliberal) *nature* is a colonial tool, specifically in the South(s). However, nature should represent the educational space *par excellence*, around whose pedagogical and epistemological core revolve the rights to territory of Afro-descendants, peasants and indigenous peoples, along with the standards of care that these communities confer upon it. Yet, qom's IBE for the qom tends to be a 'modality' uncritical of all coloniality relations, observing a fundamentally white-creole curriculum, and taught by a mainly non-indigenous staff. The qom's IBE for the qom designed by creoles offers a model of education functional to *white* monoculturalism. The 'waste of experience' (Santos 2006) – of indigenous epistemology and ontology – is reflected in the absence of indigenous knowledges and the omission of an ethic of care for Earth, silencing the Qom historical memory – long afflicted by *ethnocides* and *ecocides*.

In contrast with the Qoms' IBE, Zapatista's education is designed and managed as part of an autonomous and harmonious life project, which (re)produces insurgent peoples as political subjects. These schools are an example of *'that which is'* critical interculturality (*from within and from below*), and of 'true education' and pluriversal CEIE. Arising from prefigurative autonomist Zapatismo, education expresses a political/pedagogical praxis.

Based on endogenous socialization and collective co-learning, zapatista's *'educación verdadera'* claims the defense of life, territory, and ecology, through the knowledge(s) associated with traditional crops focused on agro-biodiversity, sustenance, and seeds, as well as through justice, housing, health, and scientific and artistic knowledge. It is a CEIE that favors the strengthening of conviviality, reciprocity, and cooperative capacities for economic (re)production and circulation of knowledge.

Zapatistas are fighting for something different from the 'interculturalist' discourses in vogue, as they defend an education that is 'conscientized, conciliatory and liberating, that is, an education in accordance with our life, our culture and our history' (quoted in Baronnet 2015, 716). Decolonial education praxes can only be transformative if they are designed *from within* the indigenous movements, and with the horizontal and harmonious participation (*from below*) of the same.

Furthermore, they must be inscribed in a framework of political autonomy and dissense with the status quo: without breaking the relations of social domination associated with the power of 'bad government', neoliberal capitalism and the hegemonic and neo-colonial development model, a critical education, by and for indigenous peoples, is not possible. The Zapatista's autonomous education belongs to a range of initiatives and policies that the Zapatista communities and municipalities carry out to build a convivial project of life, and to form new generations of citizens who exercise democratic control over the political process.

In settlements where autonomous education is not fully functional, there is a risk of marginalization for those who lack access to it. Autonomous education aims to involve the communities in decision-making and to generate political and educational plans tailored to their specific sociocultural needs and linguistic contexts. However, if it is not implemented appropriately or lacks the necessary resources, it can exacerbate inequalities in education access and lead to social or cultural exclusion. Therefore, for the last two decades and a half, educational programs in Zapatista communities have focused on decolonizing the school,

with original teacher training and the development of didactic materials that align with the rural community's values and needs. The struggle to manage grassroots education has been accompanied by various disparities and obstacles, but where successful, it has facilitated the emergence of a new generation of critical young leaders born after the insurrection.

The (re)appropriation of autonomy serves as an anti-racist, self-defense strategy against the threats of epistemicidal dispossession. Therefore, autonomous education constitutes a basis that supports political autonomy, itself based on the emancipatory appropriation of collective rights for territorial defense. It generates a pluriversal (re)invention of schooling through the election by assembly of community educators, and by designing alternative curricula that imbues subjects with a sense of insubordination, springing from an intercultural ethic of political and ecological action for the integral defense of life.

These endogenous modes of communal production of a curriculum lead to the self-generation of critical and decolonizing pedagogical praxes around local socio-political, cultural, and inter-ethnic context. Outside of neocolonial logic, the emancipatory horizon of 'true education' brings together the autonomous resistance of the environmental struggles of those who, without waiting for outside assistance, defend their own knowing/doing, and aim to build *utopia here and now*, in the South(s).

In summary, in an autonomous CEIE, the epistemologies of the South, the territories, and the indigenous and peasant communities all intersect, feeding back and converging. Through the 'other' epistemologies and ontologies embodied in Abya Yala, indigenous peoples claim a plur(ivers)ality made explicit in their ways of inhabiting, producing knowledge(s), and inter-relating.

Consubstantial to the very essence of pluriversal alternatives and to the epistemologies of the South, is the fact that each indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities must seek their own alternatives for building a *Buen Vivir*. Along this autonomous path, education plays a key role; but it must be the sovereign community's productive modes and the feeling-thinking of people that guide the construction and implementation of an autonomous path to a CEIE that allows 'a world' within which many 'other worlds' may fit. The conclusions drawn from our case analysis of the Qom and Zapatista schools should be interpreted in this framework, as concrete learnings from specific educational models, without a 'universalist' vocation, but as opposing experiences of *functional* ('from outside and from above') and *critical* ('from inside and from below') intercultural education.

In the process of construction of a pluriverse, that aims to overcome predatory capitalism, one difficulty in pursuing this civilizational debate lies in how to forge a CEIE, both citizen-based and communitarian, that would be suitable to the creation of a new intercultural commons that implies alternative mentalities and subjectivities. Zapatista's '*educación verdadera*' offers clues on how to contribute to forging and strengthening a collective identity and an activist culture with an emancipatory sense that is also part of a community political project to transform the role of *Education*. Only in that context would we dare write the term with a capital E – in relation to the expectations, interests, and plural strategies of Afro-descendants, peasants and indigenous peoples. This would encompass the environmental *South-versions* of Education, founded on principles beyond 'development' and beyond schooling; creating a space where life is an interweaving between pluriversal ecosystems and cultures that inhabit (and are inhabited by) them.

In these *South-versions* lie the keys to other epistemologies capable of nurturing other pedagogical thinking, other social relations where the veil of anthropocentrism is lifted to

make room for a pluriversal way of conceiving the world and other routes to Education. These other sociologies of education would allow for the analysis of experiences and subjectivities that are not new, but were hidden by the sociologies of absences.

## Notes

1. For Latin American environmental thought, education is either environmental or it is not. Augusto Angel Maya often stated that “*if education is not environmental, it is bad education*” (Noguera, 2012).
2. These are variously referred to as “*educación propia*” (“*own education*”) (Colombia), “*educación verdadera*” (“*true education*”) (Chiapas, Mexico), “*educación indígena/campesina/palenquera*” (“*indigenous/peasant/palenquera education*”) (Brazil), or “*educación maya*” (“*Mayan education*”) (Guatemala).
3. In Argentina, educational competencies are in the hands of the provinces, represented in a Federal Council of Education, with a role of concertation, agreement, and coordination of educational policy to ensure the unity and articulation of the national educational system. The State, through the National Ministry of Education, is in charge of generating framework policies to which the provinces generally adhere.

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## Disclosure statement

The authors of this article are aware that it cites authors who, central to decolonial thought for decades, have recently been subjected to public scrutiny and academic procedures in their own Institutions, related to serious allegations of harassment and abuse. We express our deep solidarity with those who suffer or have suffered any form of harassment (including, but not limited to, moral, sexual, power, academic, or psychological), also -and specifically- in the Academia where our responsibility is greatest, as well as our repudiation of such practices. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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