Um único mundo que não é o mesmo:
ontologia como uma questão de compromisso[1]

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One topic that has recently received increasing attention in the field called environmental humanities is what we could call an inquiry into the ontological status of the Earth, or even of its modes of existence. In plural, because the Earth may as well be the only one we have, but it has not been the same throughout History, nor in the relationship that the beings that compose and inhabit it establish with it. This is one of the most striking findings of the new geological epoch – which, despite being called the Anthropocene, is perhaps better understood as the epoch of the Earth. That is, the epoch in which the Earth ceases to be a mere scenario and becomes the center of concern for all its inhabitants. And such acknowledgment imposes a series of struggles and demands.

One of these struggles concerns new problems posed by the relationship between the one and the multiple, which can be synthesized as follows: on the one hand, we need to recognize the legitimacy of the worlds lived and conceived by extra-modern peoples, worlds which diverge on important aspects of the Western one. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that such peoples are also, like all other terrestrial living beings, facing the "same" ecological collapse of global dimension[2].

The question matters because, right when the ideal of universalism seemed to have lost prestige in the human sciences (due to the accumulation of atrocities committed in its name), the Anthropocene threatens to bring it back into the scene. Would the global character of the ecological catastrophe imply the epistemic indestructibility of the universal? What becomes of political ontology – understood, as we shall see, as the need to establish "a world in which many worlds fit", as the Zapatistas would say (EZLN 1996) – in the face of the omnipresent evidence of this catastrophe? Along with the struggle for

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[2] In this statement, I mainly follow Stengers 2018, Tsing et al. 2019 and Maniglier 2020; 2021.

grasping the outlines of this global – which many have considered a "negative universal" (Chakrabarty 2009, Latour 2020) – comes, therefore, a requirement. Such an investigation must be *committed* to the defense of the ontological self-determination of extra-modern collectives, which covers everything from their struggles for political autonomy to their own ways of conceiving and interacting with other-than-human beings.

Before going into this in depth, it might be important to devote a few words to this ontological pluralism that conditions my investigation of the "global". Over the last 30 years, the notion of "ontology," which has a long and respected tradition in philosophy, has been mobilized in theories originated in fields of knowledge other than philosophy (although often in close dialogue with it). The field that led this movement was anthropology, whose "ontological turn" is linked to the work of authors such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner, Philippe Descola, and Bruno Latour. Historically speaking, anthropological studies have revolved around the concept of "culture" - a concept that relies a lot on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who established an unbridgeable gap between world and representation (Kohn 2015). Conversely, the ontological turn in anthropology expresses the *commitment* to take as legitimate realities, and not as mere cultural representations, the assemblage of beings, temporalities, spaces and relations that shapes non-modern ways of life.

In this movement, the parameters through which many used to qualify the beings that compose reality – parameters which, in the eyes of the so-called Westerners, seemed to be universal – appear as regionalized. That is, as specificities of a way of life that does not possess ontological privilege in relation to others. There is, as we can see, a strong political component in this ontological turn of anthropology. For example, Viveiros de Castro (2014) claims to mobilize ontology as "a philosophical war machine both anti-epistemological and countercultural (in both senses of 'counterculture')." On top of that, for Marisol de la Cadena (2014) an anthropology guided by an ontological opening allows us to situate modern politics, fighting its hegemony by denouncing its universalist pretensions. Still, according to authors such as Eduardo Kohn (2015), Elizabeth Povinelli (2016), Bjørn Bertelsen and Synnøve Bendixsen (2016), the ontological turn consists of a response to conceptual problems and contradictions that emerge when the humanistic foundations of anthropology are challenged by the ecological crisis that marks the Anthropocene.

The definitions and claims just mentioned help clarify what philosopher Isabelle Stengers regards as the challenge imposed by ontological politics: the need to "take a stand for some of the meanings of both politics and ontology, and not for others" (Stengers 2018:83). The sense of politics to which she refers points to a concept familiar to those who follow her work: cosmopolitics. I will characterize it here, risking not expressing all its nuances, as a speculative bet that politics can proceed so as to take seriously the objections of those who will suffer the consequences of the decisions, even if those who object are not part of the deliberation. This implies that participants may be able to give up certainties that assure them that the concerns of others "don't matter so much" in the face of both the gravity of the issue and the urgency of the decision that needs to be taken (Stengers 2007, 2011).

But when it comes to political ontology, Stengers sees cosmopolitics as "badly limited." This concept was designed for situations where different people are engaged with a cause. But when only others are concerned with a cause that involves more-than-human subjects to whom they feel bound (for example when the Yanomami xaman Davi Kopenawa urges the Whites to stop mining the Amazon so as not to scare away the spirits that ensure the fertility of the forest), what generally enters the scene is tolerance: we may even accept that such a cause is important to them, but we remain free from any attachment. This is what leads Stengers to say that, when it comes to political ontology, ontology needs to be a matter of *commitment* – that is, an engagement for a world where many worlds fit.

Digging deeper on this topic of commitment, it may be interesting to recall the etymological root of the word: from the Latin *compromittere* – a junction of the prefix *com* (together) with *primotterre* (to promise), it means "to adjust or resolve by mutual concessions".[3] This *promise of mutuality* is perhaps the greatest challenge of ontological politics, since without it, the claim of pluralism can slip into a "simple goodwill" (Stengers 2020) manifested in the abstract demand for "respect" for other ways of life – Malcom Ferdinand (2019) calls this inoffensive demonstration of solidarity "sympathy-without-bond". By this of course I do not mean that we should renounce respect. But if there is only respect, these divergences can be treated as incommensurable, and this would

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[3] Online Etymology Dictionary. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=compromittere>

make us lose the opportunity to think in face of them, and thus to make room for other peoples' vital struggles to become ours too.

It is important to emphasize, however, that it wouldn't be the case of "adopting" the cosmology of the other, understanding mutuality as the suppression of differences. As Viveiros de Castro states, that would just mean "inverting [our] irrepressible missionary drive": "if it is no longer a matter of making others think like us, then we must think like them." Instead, what we should do is to "think with them", "to take the difference of their thinking seriously", he says. "It is only by fully embracing this difference and these singularities that we can imagine (build) the *common*" (2012:164, my emphasis).

Thus, ontology truly becomes a matter of commitment when we turn it into a tool to build this common – understood as a possible unity grounded in multiplicity, a common that is not a "same." To take up the Zapatista *slogan*, ontology as commitment concerns not only the multiplicity of worlds but *also the unity that encloses such multiplicity* – "for *a world* where many worlds fit,*" the emphasis indicating the common that emerges from the recognition of interdependence among diverse worlds. So, in the remainder of this text, I will try to precise a meaning of "world" capable of making room for interdependence. Then I will better specify the contours of this "global". At last, I will point to some "affective dispositions" (for lack of a better term) that may assist in making this commitment.

In a recent paper, researcher and artist Patricia Reed states that a world is "composed of contents, the identification of those contents, and by the content-relations within – semantically, operationally and axiologically" (Reed 2021:1). A world gains concreteness as ways of doing and saying affirm the coherence between these three elements, but not only: its increase in consistency is linked to the criteria of habitability, which means that a world is only "worldified" via processes of localization. Still according to Reed, "the endurance of a world depends on the degree to which its conditions of necessity [...] compel [...] its members to affirm its configuration in practice, despite whatever dissenting attitudes that may be held" (Reed 2021:1) – in the example she provides, it is possible to be strongly against capitalism and yet be unable to avoid paying bills –, so that worlds able to withstand and absorb such frictions are the most enduring. Such conditions of necessity produce a perception of the inalterability of that world: this is why

worlds seem complete, total, or natural. But all worlds can eventually come to an end, due to the inability of an existing configuration to absorb frictions.

When we recognize "the threshold of insuppressible frictions" (Reed 2021:2) that germinates within a world, we may glimpse its incompleteness and the possibility, if not of its end, at least of its reconfiguration. This is the point where we seem to be today, insofar we see the incongruence between Euro-modern practices of globalization and what many have called "planetary": a theoretical model that explains how Earth's habitability has been sculpted over millions of years through the interaction between physical, chemical, and biological processes, which needs to be taken into account in the modes of inhabitation of all terrestrials. We are all perplexed and stunned because we still don't know how to "world" the planetary.

But what I want to highlight here is the promise of mutuality and renewal carried in the perception of a world's incompleteness. Reed claims that globalized modes of inhabitation have mono-dimensional tendencies: a single metric for measuring value, the proliferation of agricultural monocultures, a single model of human behavior, a single "geography of reason". Directed toward the elimination of the diverse, the expansion of such modes of inhabitation is based on an effort to "make small." The elimination of diversity also disregards frictions as a means to produce "outside views" that would allow us to see our world as incomplete – a symptom of this is to think that we are completely submitted to capitalist logic. This leads the author to suggest that "struggles for otherworlds demand a minimum speculative commitment to the incompleteness of all worlds: that it is possible to configure coexistence differently" (Reed 2021:4).

For Reed, the planetary is a call to compose a "multidimensional spatial diagram" capable of accommodating the "exponential multiplication of relationships between diverse entities, temporalities, chemistries, and materials" (Reed 2021:4). So planetary dwelling must prioritize a structural "*thickness*": "the problem space shifts from questions of where things stand [...] to how things 'hang' together" (Reed 2021:4); the emphasis moves from the paradigm of existence to that of coexistence. This perspective, extrapolated from discussions of Earth-system sciences to metaphysics, invites us to consider Denise Ferreira da Silva's proposition that "differences are inseparable: they exist and cannot be flattened by a small-world imposition, but crucially, they coexist within a n-dimensional

planetary configuration, which means they hang together through some qualitative relationship" (Reed 2021:5).

It is in this very key that we can also read the "ontology of the Earth" that philosopher Patrice Maniglier has been developing.[4] Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is less a theory about the Earth "itself" or "in general" than about the Earth regarded as a global entity, that is, when the Earth shows itself capable of reconfiguring the spatial distribution of terrestrials – a mode of existence that was unknown to us before the advent of the Anthropocene. More than a collection of constituted ecosystems, today the Earth is better conceived as the set of parameters that condition the ecological diversity of the world. It is at the structural level of the global regulation of variations that the Earth best shows itself, at least in its scientific version, which many call Gaia.

However, the global reality of the Earth is not only found in the image of Gaia: science offers a very important version of this entity, but it needs to be composed with other versions. Giving science the privilege in defining the global would mean to repeat the colonial structure; the global would imply exclusion rather than composition. Applying comparative anthropology to bring more complexity to this conception of the Earth as a structure of variation, Maniglier proposes that the worlds of the various cosmologies constitute divergent realities; accordingly, the Earth would be the structure in which these realities relate to each other through their very divergences. Taking interdependence and ontological pluralism seriously implies thinking of the Earth as the result of the composition between the different versions that the world assumes in the various ontologies; only this way can the Earth express a totality open enough to constitute one, but not the same world. Finding the Earth amid its ontological variations would thus become the political commitment of our time.

Finally, what affective dispositions might favor this commitment? Stengers and Didier Debaise (2022) associate the effort for making a small world – they speak of *thinning* the world – with the "horror of becoming a dupe" that characterizes the experience of modernity. This horror is generally expressed by the opposition between knowledge/truth and belief/falsity. Such horror would have given rise to a culture of distrust that makes moderns suspect everything and subject everything to testing – what coincides with the

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[4] See Maniglier 2020, 2021.

disqualification of knowledges that do not measure their efficacy according to the same tests. Quoting William James, for whom "philosophies are intimate parts of the universe: they express something of the universe's own thought of itself" (James apud Debaise and Stengers 2022:404), the authors wonder: "What universe is being created with and through our distrust?" (Debaise and Stengers 2022:405). For them, the modern association of truth to disenchantment has a performative power which produces, as its ontological consequences, the thinning of the world.

In this sense, Debaise and Stengers suggest that we should subject our ideas to a more relevant test than merely trying to distinguish true from false: we should check whether our ideas favor the thinning or thickening of our conditions of existence and thought. An idea such as "dependence" operates the first movement: capitalism is expert in creating dependence. It does so by tying chains one to the other and by making negligence irreversible, creating the "infernal alternatives" that make us feel divided and powerless. Conversely, an idea that favors the thickening of the world is that of *interdependence*. Stengers states elsewhere that, "if the Earth is not only inhabitable but teeming with life, [...] this is owed to the creation of relationships of interdependence. Relationships that do not arouse the imagination of liberation because the beings who participate in them become capable of what they wouldn't be capable of by themselves" (2020). The authors conclude: interdependence, like dependance, is an abstraction, but an abstraction that thickens the world.

Consenting to interdependence thinking, then, can be a means of *reclaiming*,[5] in societies formatted in the logic of the "small-world," confidence in the generative power of relationships, in producing a collective power which makes us to become capable, along with others, of what we could not do alone. Through the perspective of political ontology, interdependence relates to a speculative bet that we may learn not to "believe" the other-than-human subjects to which non-modern peoples address, but to be affected by the way these peoples honor their obligations to those other-than-humans. Making ontology a matter of commitment, therefore, would imply "[suspending] ontologies and epistemologies, 'holding them lightly', in favor of more venturesome, experimental histories" (Haraway quoted in Debaise and Stengers, 2021:412) in which divergences do not lead to oppositions, but rather to solidarities capable of producing unexpected modes

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[5] See Pignarre and Stengers 2005; Stengers 2012, 2018.

of *response-ability* (Haraway 2016). This is an essential attitude for the composition of the common that Stengers and Debaise call *pluriverse* (another good term for our global).

In conclusion, all these propositions help to outline the silhouette of the global/common that we are dealing with here. The sense of "global" that emerges from them functions as a means to keep the difference between worlds active and to resist the temptation of imposing a single world – temptation which can arise with the acknowledgement of the planetary character of the ecological crisis. Examining the paths which build (and destroy) the interdependence between different ontologies allows us to realize the possibilities that these ontologies have to keep on becoming others – which is crucial to glimpse new ways of occupying this Earth undergoing such a huge transformation.

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