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THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF
DEVELOPMENTALISM

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Abstract: Depending on the dissemination of discursive forms through linguistic practices as well as a particular change in our contemporary *doxa*, the development language of collective social improvement has been based upon a particular mode of ontological naturalism. In a renewed version of the ontological mode that Descola termed “naturalism”, international development has set social expectations in terms of a progressive future framed by violent ruptures, crises, perils and a threat actual of human annihilation. This paper investigates how this developmental enterprise and the consequent ideology of “developmentalism” have further expanded a bi-polar ontology. Since its inception, it articulates two radical sets of possibilities: one of infinite progress for humankind and one of its total annihilation according to the well-known metaphysics of possibilism. First, I will show how the institutionalization of development goes hand in hand with the emergence of a new form of naturalism that accentuates extreme possibilities as results of human action. My main claim here is that, after World War II, science and technology radicalized naturalism through the institutionalization of a new ideology. By presupposing a new transformational capability of science and technology, developmentalism furthers the naturalistic ontology.

Key Words: Development, Death, possibilism, American Ideology, Pilgrims and Puritans, Ontology.

“Everybody wants to own the end of the world”

- Don DeLillo, *Zero K*, 2016

According to the ontology named “naturalism”, despite sharing atoms, molecules, chemical components and thermodynamic principles with non-living entities, human beings are the only living creatures that are distributed in collectives “distinguished from one another by their respective languages and customs” (Descola 2013, 256). In this cosmological ontology, all living beings participate in the same physical world but only people have the intentionality, self-awareness, individuation and discontinuity necessary to deal with ideas, interiorities and cultures. Leaving aside the few exceptional cases in which nature operates on its own among persons, or as the medieval saying goes “*natura naturans*”, in naturalism the subject is almost always human, the verb is transitive and the object of the predicate is nature.

When Hegel turned to the idea of development, he did so to understand how an evolutionary process could be imagined as the accumulative unfolding of the world spirit at large. He defined this “World-Spirit” as a consciousness “whose nature is always one and the same, but which unfolds this, its one nature, in the phenomena of the World’s existence” (Hegel 2001, 24). Congruently with Hegel, Phillipe Descola has noted that “nature” makes little sense to anyone except the Moderns. According to Descola, the concept “appeared only at a late date in the course of the development of Western thought itself, in which its consequences made a singularly forceful impact on the manner in which anthropology has envisaged both its object and its methods.” (Descola 2013, xvii).

These two influential thinkers, then, conceptualize the course of Western thought, i.e. its own development, as a process that defines, among other things, its own nature. When Descola defines “naturalism” as a dual cosmology that asserts physical commonality and spiritual individualization, he highlights the prioritization of the western spiritual experience of the world over the necessary production of empty signs or noumena. In other words, in the cosmology called “naturalism”, understanding nature takes for granted a developmental process of consciousness. This process, in its own functioning, necessarily projects an unknown dimension to be known, deciphered and objectified (most of the times, on nature).

The process of “development”, even though it remains a highly contested term (Lewis 2005, 474), should be characterized, therefore, by the continuity of the changes it entails. Simply put, any sort of

development requires at least two different temporalities, one quicker than the other. The modern idea of nature provides qualities of continuity and stability to the “cumulative world-spirit”, allowing one to easily situate the first as the background temporality within which the second performs its own “development”. Hence, talking about development requires a contrastive discipline. In this case, I am positing that Anthropology is capable of imagining diverse adequacies between the two stances; one of thought, one of nature; one of change, one of continuity. Such an appropriateness in the ontological mode of western naturalism takes for granted that understanding nature requires a permanent process of inquiry. Querying nature, thinking about it, and later, transforming it, should be considered actions that shape the human subject as well as the natural object.

Long ago, Frank Kermode (2000 [1966]) signaled that the paradigmatic modern state of affairs entailed a “permanent transition” which he called “presentism”. A similar emphasis on this permanent transition can be found in the *Proposals for Action* of the First UN Development Decade (1960-70), which suggested that the problem of underdeveloped countries was not limited to their lack of economic growth. Rather, it explicitly held that “[d]evelopment is growth plus change” (in Sachs 2012). Therefore, every transitional or developmental imperative fueled by modern knowledge should be understood in reference to a natural residue, or a former obstacle, left behind during the process of the modern scientific enterprise. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing today, untimely societies diagnosed with backwardness and traditionalism were encouraged to adjust themselves to the passage of history by scholars preoccupied by human synchronicity (Rostow 1962; Fukuyama 1989). Development as presentism, as recommended by Kant (2003) and anticipated by Hegel (2001, 17 and 1998) and Tylor (1871), has been based on a narrative of the constant improvement of humanity. However, its own rhythms would be better sought in the timing of the scientific experience more than in the application of its technological results. Development, then, does not solely depend on liberal and progressive historicism. Developmental tropes, commonly used to express expectations across many discursive domains (“economic development”, “social development”, “human development”, for instance) are mainly thought to produce certainty as an incremental knowing instance *per se*.

In short, it is to be expected that the knowing spirit will develop itself. However, and as a result, it cannot remain in its present state for long. Whether the modes of knowing are continuous, progressive and accumulative, or agonistic and revolutionary, no naturalist subject of knowledge today would suggest that, for instance, Physics entails only describing natural phenomena. As Physics has also been involved in producing phenomena (Bachelard 2006, 79), it has also been considered an important part of the self-changing Euro-American subjectivities.

In this sense, when I address the contemporary American-produced phenomena I call “developmentalism”, I aim to explore particular ontological and theological underpinnings of a relatively recent political enterprise. Based on a radical stem of possibilism, developmentalism seeks a global and permanent disambiguation between good and evil as a means of infusing vitality to the enterprise of improving the human self—one of the most important developmental undertaking.

1. Nuclear disambiguation

First Hiroshima, then Nagasaki. The United States’ atomic attack was said to end the Second World War and, for many, also represented the end of an era. At the time, however, Admiral William D. Leahy and Generals MacArthur and Eisenhower considered the bombings to be “unnecessary”. By their accounts, Japan was already defeated. Documents show that these three strategists, tasked with orchestrating the war, tried to dissuade President Harry Truman from dropping the bombs (see Alperovitz 1995). Rather than interpreting these nuclear attacks as acts of closure, be it of the war or of an era, President Harry Truman’s decision would be better analyzed as an inaugural act.

Truman had a sort of Pax Americana in mind when, on June 26, 1945, he made his first public appearance as the president of the United States. Firebombs had already destroyed Berlin and Tokyo when Truman addressed international delegates at the official signing of the United Nations Charter. With plans to use atomic weapon power already in motion (Kelly and Kaplan 2001, 9), Truman professed the United Nations’ commitment to keeping the world at peace and “free from the fear of war”. To emphasize this point, he accentuated the words “free”, “fear”, and “war” with hand motions that sliced through the air, lending his words power and finality (McCullough 1992, 401 quoted in Kelly and Kaplan 2001, 9). Four years after he made his atomic decision, Truman would again strategically rely on this phrase—“fear of war”—in his Four Point discourse in 1949. In his inaugural speech as elected president, Truman asserted that his presidency, the United States, and humanity all met at an exceptional moment or “a major turning point in the long history of the human race” (Truman 1949).

Always speaking of possibilities, Truman suggested that an armed attack against the U.S. and its allies could be deterred by the menace of a devastating retaliation. Truman paradoxically proposed that the “fear of war” could be overcome, however, for “[i]f we can make it sufficiently clear, in advance, that any armed attack affecting our national security would be met with overwhelming force, the armed attack might never occur” (Truman 1949).

By envisioning the world’s future unfolding solely in response to or as a consequence of the U.S.’s actions, Harry Truman set in motion the

automatic mechanism of revenge latterly called Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). In a faulty logic that refused to foresee any actual effect of the other's prior attack, Truman not only ignored any consequences of an attack on U.S. soil but verbally anticipated the enemy's annihilation. Reducing to absurdity the Latin adage translated as, "if you wish for peace, prepare for war", Truman assumed that the enemy would be paralyzed by its fear of ensured annihilation. However, such atomic prefigurations failed to stop Fidel Castro in 1962 when he asked Khrushchev to immolate the Cuban people in the name of socialism, also adducing, of course, a better future for humanity.

2. Pax Americana or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Today World War II may be recognized as a watershed moment in world history, but the bombs are still not frequently linked to the Truman Doctrine, the international decolonization it advocated, or the ideology of international development. Truman's devastating display of nuclear power and the Marshall Plan of development together gave birth to a common understanding of radical possibilities in the second half of the Twentieth century. The real possibility that the U.S. president could use atomic power or development initiatives to determine the fate of future U.S. enemies and allies, for good or evil, remains, even today, embedded in the imaginations of many (Masco 2017). However, the two possibilities—of total atomic destruction or the full attainment of development—condition and partially contradict the sort of open future Kosselleck (2004) described as the typical horizon for modernists. Working in tandem, development and nuclear destruction constitute a sort of dialectic that empowers each of these terms. Anticipating a world of full-fledged development or one of total annihilation might have been considered naïve before the bombs exploded but, since then, these two possibilities are at the core of many of our current futurities.

Atomic bombs and development shape very powerful futures: one of total annihilation, the other of prosperous peace. They also make a trans-human view of the future possible. Whether we think of a future world solely inhabited by roaches that survived a nuclear apocalypse or of the progression of human, economic and social development for the entire world (i.e. sustainable development for everyone), these two possible futures are based on the same popular understanding of a bi-polar set of possibilities conceived by science and technology in the second half of the twentieth century. Optimistic or apocalyptic millenarians, since Truman, remind us of the inexhaustible possibilities of our present.

According to Masco, "In this light, the nuclear bomb is literally an explosive and an explosive cosmological practice, a world-making enterprise that can reorganize how people experience everyday life... what is

unique about the bomb is drawn less from its destructiveness than from the acceleration of time and contraction of space it produces" (Masco 2006, 11).

However, before the atomic acceleration of time and contraction of space offered imaginations of planet Earth as a lowly cockroach's fantasy or a sustainable paradise, there were other indications that the world has already shrunk. Considering their current naturalization, it is difficult to look back and describe international organizations and their ideologies in terms of their first strategic expectations or purposes. According to Kelly and Kaplan, even the producers of the development ideology and the American plan instituted in 1945 could not fully comprehend the extent of their creation. When they created a "network of global institutions that now thrives in a multicentered global linkage largely beyond the ken of its inventors" they also invented "lived and contested realities" (Kelly and Kaplan 2001, 25).

International institutions responded to the U.S.'s new way of managing the world through "a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing", which would avail "to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life" (Truman 1949). At the core of these developmental plans, of decolonizing and reshaping international relations through "self-determined" nation-states, was a new conception of an incredibly powerful but fragile humanity. Once one addresses their purposiveness, the entire discourse is tainted by a tone of a universal history driven by an actor's intentionality: the development of the human race.

3. If it's not love, then it's the bomb, the bomb that will bring us together

Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish's commissioned pamphlet, "The Races of Mankind" (1946), may have helped craft the new fragility for humankind. The Public Affairs Committee published and distributed millions of copies of this propaganda booklet following WWII. However, the text has not yet been adequately studied as part of American Anthropology's fundamental influence on the UN ideology and, more importantly, on the delicate world we have inhabited since the end of WWII. One of the pamphlet's enduring effects has been its refutation of racism through a reflexive objectification of (human) nature. Making the category of race totally outdated, Benedict and Weltfish, both Professors of Anthropology at Columbia University, universalized a Boasian historical anthropology, at that time named "culture and personality". Highly efficient in abolishing scientific and popular racist claims that asserted stable and definitive discontinuities among human bodies, the text was as a rhetorical destabilizing device that put an end to some misleading

inquiries on (human) nature. After informing its readers that, as globalization studies would soon make common knowledge, “the world is shrinking”, the pamphlet does not offer a clear understanding of what kind of nature constitutes human nature.

As in much naturalist discourse, the text treats “nature” as an unknown common substrate. Along with many other so-called “culturalists”, Benedict and Weltfish established human nature as a physical commonality upon which cultural discontinuity has been crafted. Better called “culture as personality”, this cultural turn predicates the idiosyncratic nature of the human spirit through historical contingencies. The great arc of human potentialities from which a culture, like an individual, is constructed as “a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action” (Benedict 1934: 46) may have been boosted by the splitting of atoms. “Cultures” emerged as the most fragile entities that the detonations demarcated, whether or not humanity recognized their spiritual potential against the background of a new and most powerful nuclear form of death. As personalities do for people, cultures individuate a common physicality. After the blasts decomposed such a common physical substrate, science showed that it was capable of recomposition and further control.

In this sense, the scientific certainty of progress orientated individuated cultures towards the positive signs of their own development. Culturalist progress, though it de-naturalized (i.e. going far beyond nature and reaffirming the incognita of the natural unknown), also set a common future for all. In this common future, the developmental horizon arises as a possibility for all “humankind”. While a messianic eschatology used the Second World War to animate its revolutions, the American theses on the philosophy of history remained simple and austere: develop or die. So simple that the dichotomy constitutes an example of the “possibilism” that annihilates determinism by always accentuating the capacity of choice that humans cannot alienate.

In other words, economic development and atomic death cannot be definitively disentangled without transforming one of the terms into mere cliché. These potentials are not results determined by human actions but rather possibilities that remain within subjects to animate their agency *ex ante*. At the core of the developmentalist experience stand science and technology, but also the very situated experience that makes definitive sense of it. The experienceable operation of the terms “development” and “nuclear annihilation” cannot be treated merely as historical facts but, overall, as actual possibilities. Therefore, it is necessary to abandon *ex post* explanations of its historical uses if we are to understand their power in the light of popular imagination and, above all, through the perspective of their potentialities. To get a glimpse of these, one should situate oneself within a brand new arena of possibilism. More than a philosophy of time, possibilism refers to a way of understanding Pragmatism and the experience it implies. Davis Kellogg Lewis (1986) took Leibniz’s theory that

multiple and possible worlds as real as our own exist to a new, contemporary stage with modal realism. However, William James was perhaps one of the first to define possibilism when he synthetically asked if “god or no god” could be translated as “promise or no promise”: “My treatment of ‘God,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘design’ was similar. Reducing, by the pragmatic test, the meaning of each of these concepts to its positive experienceable operation, I showed them all to mean the same thing, viz., the presence of ‘promise’ in the world. ‘God or no God?’ means ‘promise or no promise?’” (James 1987, 78).

Such an elegant formulation, “the presence of promise in the world”, sublates any accusations of simple deliverance or millenarianism. The sole possibility of the emergence of a new aspect of phenomena refers to a “positive experienceable operation” more than to a discrete concept. In this light, American Possibilism and its developmental cause are not merely theoretical. Rather, they constitute a stubborn attitude towards the promissory experience of the world. As American Possibilism inaugurates actual multiplicity, it also disentangles dichotomic progress. If this process—of overcoming deterministic nature through an assortment of cultures—liberates, it does so by the Manichean opposition of nature and culture.

4. A fragile humanity with new radical hopes and fears

The “fear of communism” may have been “one of the most compelling arguments for development” (Escobar 1995, 34) but, after the “zero year” marked by the nuclear blasts, novel expectations also stimulated the rise of “development” as a moral drive. Immediately after the Pax Americana was atomically sealed, new international organizations started their work of redefining humanity, development, modernity, and modernization for the future. For better or for worse, the promise of science and technology (Escobar 1995, 35) helped to stabilize a cumulative temporality for humans in the developmental narrative. According to Escobar, “[t]echnology, it was believed, would not only amplify material progress, it would also confer upon it a sense of direction and significance. In the vast literature on the sociology of modernization, technology was theorized as a sort of moral force that would operate by creating an ethic of innovation, yield and result. Technology thus contributed to the planetary extension of modernist ideals” (Escobar 1995, 35).

The prospection of nature’s possibilities, what Escobar called the “promise of science and technology” (Escobar 1995, 35), started to stand at the core of the entire “age of development”. However, it does not so much induce a new historicist narrative to compete with historical materialism as seek to ontologically inquire into human destiny in nature. While in his inaugural address on January 20, 1949, President Truman started to wage the cold war against soviet communism he also advocated for overcoming

poverty, primitiveness and disease. For the first time in history, he suggested, humanity possesses the knowledge required to relieve human suffering definitively, “More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate, they are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people” (Truman 1949).

A growing faith in the kind of expert knowledge that made nuclear power possible, hegemonically represented by theoretical Physics, pushed forward the idea that poverty could be addressed by technology. Technologically solvable in the mid- or long-term, development constituted poverty as a subject matter of a true “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1994). Truman and new international organizations signaled the distribution of “capital, knowledge and fair dealing” as tools for the development of “peace-loving peoples”. The “UN ideology”, as Kelly and Kaplan described it (Kelly and Kaplan 2001, 26), gave rise to an unprecedented enhancement of human agency. While development may have had some moral purchase for a community of nations in the past, after Truman’s speech it increased exponentially, almost reaching tones of millennialism.

Development, therefore, started to articulate possibilism through religious ideals as well as modernist ones. The moral drive to approach nature through science and technology, to question whether humanity will end in nuclear damnation or prosper through developmental salvation, did not depend solely on a subjective form of anxiety but also on the highly unstable characteristics of an ontology in the making. According to the logic of Truman’s presidential discourse, if underdeveloped peoples could rid themselves of poverty, misery and illness through “capital, knowledge and fair dealing”, then military action would no longer be necessary. Once the narrative of modernity has been redrafted into one of the moral progress of fragile humans, the ecumenical mission of development crystallized.

The creation of institutions like the United Nations, the international ideology that followed World War II, and a new philosophical anthropology were all consistent with what Keane has called the “moral narrative of modernity” (Keane 2007, 6). According to Keane, “in this narrative, progress is not only a matter of improvements in technology, economic well-being, or health but is also, and perhaps above all, about human emancipation and self mastery” (Keane 2007, 6). Keane also suggested that this protestant moral narrative of modernity entails a purposeful redemption from materiality, or that “[a]t the heart of this vision of modernity is the work of purification that aims to abstract the self from material and social entanglements.” (Keane 2007, 201). Evaluated retrospectively, and over a long temporality, the protestant moral narrative of modernity could look like an autonomous process of ascetic eman-

cipation and self-control. However, modernity's purposeful project of "redemption from materiality" does not imply a final abandonment of the material. Paraphrasing Keane (2007) and Latour (1993), the "work of purification," aiming to abstract the self from both material and social entanglements, proposes, instead, an ongoing moral process of permanent reevaluation of materiality. There is, then, no dereliction of the material aimed towards privileging the ideal or the incorporeal. Instead, the modern engages in a work of purification that diverts possibilities into the actual and the material.

5. Fair trade, Weber's moral development of capitalism and exchange as an actual set of possibilities

Wolfgang Sachs' (1992) claim that the development industry has secularized the narrative of Christian Salvationism also shows that Christianity may fall short in expressing a more plural soteriology. In short, by stating that development's main aim is human redemption, one may also be accusing development of its own backwardness. However, this accusation depends upon a consideration of redemption as an anachronism. Otherwise, "development" must also be currently understood as an ontological process of permanent redemption. This process pushes for a progressive but possibilistic modernization of social practices world-wide. Implying an individual dimension of time in which the self is both redefined and inflicted on others' selves with a particular anxiety about redemption from material nature, wealth may signal a salvation that is not material *per se*.

According to some readings of Weber's works, Protestantism may have developed itself into capitalisms through a possibilist interpretation of wealth as an indication of salvation. Moreover, moving away from the ineffectual renunciation of "this world riches", "millennial capitalism" instead may have praised "wealth and health" as indexes of a renewed, proper ethical engagement (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). In "The Protestant Sects and The Spirit of Capitalism", Max Weber hypothesizes that success in economic life is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the Protestant to count herself among the elect. While wealth may sanction, it did not guarantee salvation. Those who might redeem themselves should have attained their riches through particular conduct and this conduct should be, above all, honest. Old religious views maintain that "the gods bless with riches the man who pleases them, through sacrifice or through his kind of conduct" but only the "Protestant sects consciously brought this idea into connection with this kind of religious conduct, according to the principle of early capitalism: 'Honesty is the best policy.'" (Weber 1946, 312). Honesty, among other concrete conducts in line with a "rational way of life," was the actual behavior sanctioned by wealth, not direct salvation.

The particularity of economic success among American Sects depends on what Truman, himself a Baptist, called “fair dealing”. Within American Baptist and Quaker documents, Weber finds “jubilation over the fact that the sinful 'children of the world' distrust one another in business but that they [American Baptists and Quakers, among others Protestant sects] have confidence in the religiously determined righteousness of the pious” (Weber 1946, 312). Righteous conduct that was then sanctioned by wealth, rewards, and premiums as salvation goods included honest trade, self-discipline, methodological effort, responsible stewardship, and sober devotion to a calling and to a rational organization of life. According to Weber, “The *premiums* were placed upon 'proving' oneself before God in the sense of attaining salvation – which is found in all Puritan denominations – and 'proving' oneself before men in the sense of socially holding one's own within the Puritan sects. Both aspects were mutually supplementary and operated in the same direction: they helped to deliver the 'spirit' of modern capitalism, its specific ethos: the ethos of the modern citizenry middle classes” (1946, 321).

Leaving aside the result of this ethos, i.e. capitalism, we should understand better its causes. While Pilgrims, Puritans, Baptists and Quakers had radically different views on predestination, the first three basically being Calvinist and the latter gnostic, all four sects enthusiastically practiced trade, as it provided a clear method with clear, truthful rules by which they might prove themselves to be redeemed. Trade success was not only a non-conclusive economic proof of self-redemption (commercial success in this world) pursued by individual Christians, but the index of an actual possibility of being among the elects.

Trade rules also honed inner tools of sincere contention, crisis, conversion and proof of momentary success. In other words, the moral force behind American Protestantism, first, and, later, American capitalism based possibilities of self-redemption on the new grounds of honest trade. Put another way, the elect-signaling theory does not emphasize actual redemption as much as it does possibilities. Wealth, therefore, does not conclusively and retrospectively refer to human self-emancipation but rather the possibility of its attainment.

6. Developmentalism as the sustainable redemption of selves

For Weber, “in the past, it was the work of intellectuals to sublimate the possession of sacred values into a belief in ‘redemption’. The conception of the idea of redemption, as such, is very old, if one understands by it a liberation from distress, hunger, drought, sickness, and ultimately from suffering and death”. (Weber 1946, 280).

Weber continues his argument by urging the contextualization of any general ideas of redemption according to a particular worldview. He

makes clear that this contextualization should not focus on ideas but rather the specific material and ideal *interests* that should be further identified, “Yet redemption attained a specific significance only where it expressed a systematic and rationalized ‘image of the world’ and represented a stand in the face of the world. For the meaning as well as the intended and actual psychological quality of redemption has depended upon such a world image and such a stand. Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct.” (Weber 1946, 280).

Redemption, meaning “re-purchase”, is a fundamental notion in many religious ideologies and practices. One of the word’s most important meanings is rooted in the solemn act of “buying” back a group or individual’s freedom from slavery or servitude. It also applied to old legal and transactional practices that informed rituals, such as sacrifices, when actual redemption was metaphorically tied to one’s name. Leaving aside bail-bonding practices in the United States, current ideas of redemption may seem old-fashioned when applied to modern-day commercial or developmental practices. Taking development as an enterprise of redemption, for instance, might be considered a cynical critique fueled by the obvious contrast between an ancient interest and the current practice it is said to animate. These ancient legal and transactional meanings of redemption, however, cannot be easily isolated from the current religious performances of redemption.

Traditionally, for many religious ascetics, poverty indicates a renunciation of the world that might lead to more agency. The developmentalist’s enterprise targets “the poor”—whether they be individuals, countries or groups—in an attempt to help or compel them to become the protagonists of their own lives or their own development. If *developmentalism* perfects Protestantism, it does so by addressing problems that faith alone could not solve. International organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, principally attack the poor’s lack of agency and propose “missions” that mirror their own anxieties concerning redemption. The new era of developmentalism, however, proposes a work of purification that challenges this understanding of ascetics. Conceptualizations of poverty and its causes have altered radically, “from the biologically informed basic needs approach of the 1970s to today’s more sophisticated understanding of poverty as multi-dimensional deprivation, not merely of income, but of capabilities, entitlements and rights...” (Green 2006, 7).

Hence, emancipation and self-mastery are now commonly defined in opposition to poverty, misery and illness. Speaking of a contagious anxiety for economic wellness, the developmental enterprise constantly redefines poverty as an untenable lack of agency of the poor. Nowadays being poor is far more complicated, not least because it has been understood to imply a cultural, attitudinal and even spiritual lack of agency. Today’s poor lacks human capital (Becker 1995), the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013 after

Sen 1985), and other “capacities” (Sen 1985) besides some material wealth and gainful employment. These types of agency deficits cannot be ameliorated by merely providing the poor with money or regular employment. From an ample religious perspective, the spiritual poverty of the poor seems to refer to an inner lack of agency for self-redemption that has been mostly thematized by Calvinism. Leaving economic structural causes aside, the developmentalist usually finds the causes of poverty rooted in the depths of the poor self. Therefore, it takes an immersion into such a self to comprehend poverty. Self-knowledge has been a common topic across many disciplines since Socrates, or even earlier, but when people began to expect to find god within themselves, social relationships were also recrafted. Referring to this search and the complex inner state of affairs it implies, Jean Calvin warns us, “Indeed, if there is no need to go outside ourselves to comprehend God, what pardon will the indolence of that man deserve who is loath to descend within himself to find God?” (Calvin 1960: I v. 3)

For Calvin, “indolence”, or one could also say the traditional Mediterranean affective state of *ataraxia*, serves as an obstacle to the Christian “descending” into herself. But how are these theological disquisitions related to poverty? An uncanny resemblance of the American conservatives’ treatment of poverty to that of the first puritans, according to Graeber, has nothing to do with real wages but with a supposed lack in the poor: the poor’s own lack of self-control and their unwillingness to create proper families (2007, 47). Unfortunately, while Weber explores economic success in America in sociological terms, he is almost silent concerning its failure. According to him, “the capitalist success of a sect brother, if legally attained, was proof of his worth and of his state of grace, and it raised the prestige and propaganda chances of the sect” (Weber 1946, 322). Nevertheless, one can ask, that if newly attained wealth is considered an index of righteousness, in what religious terms might the American developer refer to poverty? If one agrees with Harold Bloom regarding the gnostic nature of the American self (1993), if its uncreated and godly essence can only be attained through choice, then the existence of no-god is also essential to it. The attainment of god, promise, or god in one’s self is made possible by the complimentary potential of no-god, no-promise, and evil in one’s self. The dual possibility reaffirms, then, the capacity of the self to choose. In other terms, for the American developer the ultimate poverty will be the lack of choice. It also reaffirms that the developmental subject needs poverty in order to choose. Nevertheless, a closer look at exactly what kind of self was intended to be developed is necessary before continuing.

8. Concluding remarks

It took me almost seven years of living in the United States, and many readings, before I could begin to understand a common Hollywood trope of death. The scene involves two characters, one holding the other in her arms. Despite her clearly imminent death, the first tries to assure the second, pleading with her not to worry, promising her that she will “get better”. The dying person, then, simply smiles and, *natura naturans*, dies. Having been raised in a Catholic country like Argentina, I could not understand why the first character would say such nonsense to a dying person. My current hypothesis is that this scene shows the attempt of the surviving person to imbue the dying subject with possibilities until the last second of life. The existence of possibility reminds him of their shared human condition and, by maintaining the possibility of life or of “getting better”, she helps retain what makes her human. What I first interpreted as a denegation of death, I have begun to recognize as yet another example of American possibilism. Being human, American Possibilism tells us, means always having an alternative.

Nowadays some scholars dedicate themselves to differentiating between ideologies of hope and despair in a very protestant mood. While revealing the current moral reconfiguration of Socio-cultural Anthropology, they craft a clear-cut disambiguation of a “dark anthropology” from an “anthropology of the good” (Ortner 2016 *pace* Robbins 2013). Building up such static dualities, American selves seem to look for a reorientation towards overcoming obstacles and finding new ways out of darkness mainly through reference to Anthropology itself. However, many other Anthropological texts have also defined themselves in contrast to development. If we consider Anthropology and Development to be twins (Ferguson 1997)—one good, the other evil, depending on the point of view—we may be bypassing another more important doppelgänger of humanity since 1945: its nuclear destruction. While one can easily see puritans and pilgrims desperately needing to differentiate themselves from a big other (to put it in Žižek’s terms, 2003), in order to disambiguate the good from the uncanny, and leave the later behind, the new faith in development, with all its forces, may have sprung forth, instead, on an at least dual set of possibilities. In short, good and evil, development and bomb, cannot work but together. Anguish and hope seem to have articulated developmentalism well before any rational choices would be attainable.

Nevertheless, American Possibilism, well beyond the hegemonic ecclesiastic mode in which Catholicism tries to rearrange pairs into a new more complex reunion (*à la* Karl Schmitt; i.e. *complexio oppositorum*), has been always attentive to the disruptive power of a new possibility. In conversion like processes, or better put, in redemptory missions, development discovers new potential by facing its own extinction.

“Development” should, then, be firstly contextualized in the inner landscape of the American self if we are to understand it. To understand development, and its popular ideology of “developmentalism”, we must understand self-development. Despite the importance of onto-theological sanctions foreshadowed by honest trade and nuclear war, the ontological mode of naturalism, which I have called American Possibilism, allows international developmentalism to function. In other words, developmentalism thrives only through the experience of possibilities.

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