How to supersede developmental politics
About the necessity and difficulties to leave normative imaginaries
an interview with Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti

Timo Kiesel: Which topics should Global Citizenship Education work on?

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: I come from a family of mixed heritage of German and Latin American Indigenous ancestry that represents the transcultural conflicts I perceive as part of global education. I saw the historical colonial conflict being produced on a daily basis in terms of hierarchies of culture and ways of doing things, ways of being, ways of seeing and all the complexities that come with that. That's why I became interested in historical trauma and historical processes. I was very much interested in how we understand ourselves in relation to the world, how we come to think about things in certain ways, and how these patterns of narratives that we inherit end up affecting the ways or the possibilities we have to exist together on the planet facing unprecedented challenges. I have critiqued labels like development countries, development aid or volunteering services because they are based on a single story of progress, development and human evolution. I've been trying to question the idea of international development in terms of thinking about alternative forms of development and about alternatives to development. This distinction makes Boaventura Sousa Santos, critical social scientist and one of the founders of the world social forum, I find it really useful.

Timo Kiesel: What do you mean by saying "inherit patterns"?

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: We often forget that our thinking and our practices are coming from a specific imaginary. An imaginary is something that has become naturalized, and normalized, it is our invisible framework for thinking about the world, about things we do not question. My objective has been so far to make this imaginary visible, to question patterns of political economy and knowledge production. When we are thinking about the Other, both the Other here and there, it involves constructing ourselves in these relationships. When we think about ourselves as in a position of dispensing rights or money or aid or education or development, we're creating and acting upon an imaginary where the other is perceived as backwards or in deficit. I've been creating different tools to get people to think about this mindset and their imaginaries for change. I think it's extremely harmful to have one single story of something, like the single story of development I mentioned earlier. We need more stories, more possibilities for living, especially if the one that is dominant right now is unsustainable and inherently violent. At the moment, we prescribe more modernity for the problems that modernity has created, and in that sense we are creating a false promise and a false expectation of having securities, stability and prosperity, when exactly those things depend precisely on exploitation, extraction and violent practices elsewhere. We can't have everybody in the middle class, the planet cannot sustain it. What my work tries to do then is to ask the question: Why is it that we have been led to desire things like consumerist based prosperity, when we already know that these things are harmful? Why are we led to desire things that will harm the planet; that will harm one another? How can we open up our desires and our imaginaries to other possibilities of wanting to be together and living together in ways that promote healthier relations and livelihoods?

Timo Kiesel: Could you illustrate this with an example of your educational work?

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: I created a story to show that just doing what an emergency situation demands you to do is not enough to tackle the problem. I used the metaphor of a river where children are drowning, and when you're watching this happening of course you're going to go to the river and save as many children as possible. But if you look up the river, there are boats, where the crews are throwing the children in the river. So there is not just one task to be done. We need multiple strategies; we need people to do the swimming, we need people to rescue the bodies of the people who have drowned and to mourn and to tell the story. We need people to stop the boats, but we also need people to go to the places where the crew members are coming from and figure out why the children are being thrown into the river in the first place. So generally we don't think about this spectrum of tasks, when we just keep trying to save the children with swimming only. And sometimes the swimming is even not the correct swimming for

that kind of river, or sometimes we are in the boat throwing children with one hand and trying to save them with another. It's important to have a bigger picture of what's happening. We need to connect the dots, basically of what we're doing, and face the contradictions and the paradoxes of the work of the NGOs.

Sometimes it is argued that there is no time to do that, because you have one project after another and you are generally motivated by this imperative to make a difference, so you don't want to really look at the difficulties and the challenges and the paradoxes and contradictions of what you're doing. But we have to add that we would also need to go to the villages of the children and understand the historical relationships between different groups and how they're already fighting against this

I believe that the dominant imaginary, the single story, also prevents us from even being able to fathom what resistances and alternatives to the imaginary could exist. We translate what we see back to what we have always been socialized to see. Sometimes we'll ask the local communities what they want, and they want exactly what they have been told to want by the dominant single story, or they will say what they perceive we would like to hear – this is a strategy of survival when power relations are uneven. So how do we educate people to understand that? Sometimes we go to a community expecting them to have a dissenting perspective, and even if of course every community is also heterogeneous, often the biggest voices, the loudest voices are just going to demand that they want the help, that they want the single story of development, because they have lost faith in other alternatives as well.

Timo Kiesel: You have published an article and a checklist under the name of "HEADS-UP"[1]. The list helps to analyze educational and fundraising material from a postcolonial perspective. What was the idea of it?

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: "HEADS-UP" means Hegemony, Ethnocentrism, Ahistoricism, Depolitization, Salvationism and Self-Serving, Un-complicated Solutions and Paternalism. The idea was to communicate the most common problems in terms of representations and engagements within the dominant global imaginary. The idea was to put up something easy to remember. A lot of people in the beginning just wanted to use that as a checklist, like "okay, we don't want to be hegemonic, then we're going to do something else", but very quickly it is very difficult to challenge these things without reproducing other problems, because this is how our imaginary operates. Our global imaginary operates in these terms, in this hierarchy of developed – underdeveloped. f you're challenging any of these, especially if you're trying to challenge all of them at the same time, you're going to become unintelligible. When you're trying not to be hegemonic, you might create another hegemony to substitute the previous one. When you're trying to be non-ethnocentric you may start to defend absolute relativism, where everything goes, and that's not good neither. It's neither about ahistoricism nor is it about hijacking history in favor of one single perspective of history. It's more complicated than that. We fight the content of our thinking, but we don't fight the framework. We want to be in a position beyond critique and this desire motivates a lot of people to do things. It is the desire for innocence that prompts people to use heads-up as a checklist only.

We still want knowledge to mediate everything. I'm not putting myself outside of these desires and they creep in, even when I don't want them to be there. For example, embracing the colonial critiques of modernity as the new totalizing knowledge to hold on to, to solve the problem, is, I think, an attempt to transcend modernity within modernity itself. Every time we try something, it returns to the same patterns and probably we need to do that in order to be able to learn from the recurring mistakes and then interrupt our satisfaction with the security that modernity gives us. Then we'll be able to do something different. But if we don't learn from our mistakes and the crises that come with it, we will probably just reconstruct the same system again. We are too attached to it; we can't interrupt our satisfaction with the security that the system grants us. That's very difficult, especially for people in the north. That's different in the south, because the security isn't necessarily for everybody there. So the communities that have learned to live without these modern securities have something to teach us, but they don't have the answers for everything either. It's important to not put on other people the responsibilities that we all have in learning to live differently in a more sustainable and less systemically violent way. Nobody has the answers, but some might

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[1] http://www.mangoes-and-bullets.org/heads-up-checkliste/

have aspects they have experimented with that are going to be extremely useful.

Timo Kiesel: What do you think about the approach of decolonization of development politics?

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: I see three approaches for change. The first approach of change is keeping the status quo and just changing a little bit. It's still based on global capitalism and modern institutions, we just adjust them to be a little bit fairer and the world will be okay. Most governments are nowadays operating in that imaginary. The second, slightly different approach for change perceives global capitalism and modern institutions as inherently problematic and in need of a radical reform at a core level. In this imaginary, the belief is that if we empower local communities, they will come up with better ideas about how to radically transform or reform the existing system. So the first imaginary empowers individuals just to live better in the system, the second imaginary empowers marginalized communities to participate more in the system. And there's a third approach, where the system is beyond reform, meaning that fixing the system couldn't make it better because it necessarily needs violence to survive: violence against the planet, against each other, overexploitation of labor and so on. It basically says that we need a different system. The first option in this imaginary is to try to create a different system today, as for example degrowth, permaculture, transition movements try, and here we have a lot of people saying: indigenous communities would have a lot to contribute to alternative systems.

When you operate in the interface between the first and the second approach, you're operating only with epistemological dominance, meaning the dominance in ways of knowing. You're just tackling the single story of development. It's important that most institutions that do radical work operate in this interface between the first approach which I call "soft reform" and the second which is "radical reform". Because that's what is intelligible to most people, just to move people from just a little bit of change to a lot of change. But then the next interface between the second approach and the third approach deals with ontological dominance or ontological hegemony, meaning it's hegemony in ways of being. Coming back to decolonization, decolonization in the second imaginary is very different from decolonization in the third imaginary. If we believe that reform is possible or radical reform is possible, we will look for a kind of decolonization that is very concrete, but still based on the same old systems of thinking, of being, of operating. We want the system to change, but also to remain the same, in order that we keep our securities. In the third imaginary, there's no security like that. Decolonization of aid would mean we wouldn't need aid in the first place. The third approach attempts to learn from, but move beyond modern institutions and modern ways of being. It would say: this kind of decolonization is possible, but currently, in the time frame that we have, and through the institutions that we have, it is impossible to achieve. In the second approach, you would say: Okay, if we create a checklist of things that people can do, things can be better. And I believe this is true, too. If we say, okay, let's look at decolonization from the second approach, let's do things better, do less harm to the communities, but also keep an eye on the contradictions of the process and the paradoxes, I think a transition to the third approach would be inevitable. We need to do both at the same time; we need to operate with decolonization on one level, which is to do things better right now and radically reform, what we have, but also decolonization on another level, which is to establish a system in a way of being, where aid is not necessary.

Timo Kiesel: What do you advise organizations which want to work on decolonization?

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: Checklists like heads-up help. Anti-colonial and anti-racist training can also help a lot. But you should be checking on how much the investment in changing is not just mobilized in service of keeping your sense of innocence and avoiding or denying looking at the real problem. I would say: a very high level of self-reflexivity is necessary, of compassion, too - looking at our systemic complicity in harm and at the bigger picture is also extremely important. At the end of the day, we need to interrupt the satisfaction we have with the harmful system that sustains our sense of importance, our sovereignty, our futurity and our security. It is the disenchantment and disillusion with the promises of modernity that can create the possibilities for us to genuinely desire something new, from the core of our being. Maybe you can tell your organizations it's not either / or. If they have a distinction in their mind of when they are just fixing the little problems and when they are moving towards a transition to a different system, sociocracy actually can help a lot with that. They can do both, and they have a space to talk about the contradictions and paradoxes they are going to face, that are all part of the process. It is with these failures that

we learn how do to it in a different way. We can't just expect that the answer will come from a book or from a theorist. We have to keep experimenting and trying, because the conviction that more knowledge will help us engineer something better is also part of modernity, the idea that we can predict and plan the path and control the process towards what we want to achieve. But those answers are constructed. The teachers I have worked with once said this thing to me, which encapsulates what I am trying to say, and though they didn't know who the author was, it stuck with me that "the pathway towards the future is not found, but made, and the making of the pathway changes both the makers and the destination".

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