

About the Transnational Network of Other Knowledges  
***La Red Trasnacional Otros Saberes (RETOS)***  
Between Crises and Other Possible Worlds  
Working Paper<sup>1</sup>

## **What is RETOS?**

We are a space under construction, a collective effort articulated within a network of academic-activists and activists involved in various movements, organizations and groups that exist throughout the Americas / Abya Yala. We started the articulation we today call the Transnational Network of Other Knowledges (RETOS for its acronym in Spanish) between 2008 and 2009 with four working groups, to which we added one more in 2010. These groups are called nodes in the network. The five nodes are based in Peru, Chiapas, Chapel Hill, Puerto Rico, and Colombia. What united us was not a conventional research agenda but instead critical observations and common questions that emerged from the experiences of collaboration lived in our bodies, minds and hearts. These experiences led us to want to build a collective effort rather than a conventional or classic "research project."

## **The beginnings of RETOS**

In April 2008, several of us met at an academic gathering and realized we had much in common, including that the various movements and initiatives with which we collaborated, worked or participated were not only fighting development projects or problems of capitalism, but were also creating imaginaries, practices, knowledges and world views with their own distinct logics as part of and a condition for their political work. In other words, they were also developing other ways of knowing reality, of living sexuality, of sharing and building knowledges, interacting with nature, and so on.

Another thing we had in common was a shared challenge to the separation between research and action, between researcher and activist, between scientific knowledge and practical or popular knowledge. None of these dichotomies convinced us nor did we practice them in our lives, given that we are researchers, but also educators, activists, militants, artists and communicators, primarily through alternative free media. Hence, we place value in "walking together" in / with movements, and from there building awareness and knowledge in a different and collective way. Knowledge that has, above all, practical and political value.

One aspect that at that time we could not fully verbalize but that emerged through a series of conversations and RETOS meetings was the fact that the movements creating these "new" political practices are also generating new knowledges and other forms of

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knowing/doing. Ways that are not based on the certainty and dominance of a "single truth" but instead aim to find ways of knowing with a more experimental character, putting feeling, spirit and heart toward the center and thereby perhaps providing a space for multiple rationalities. We say "perhaps" because this is something we are exploring and wondering about collectively.

Through RETOS we want to develop new epistemologies / methodologies / ethical practices and languages of radical social transformation, those which to us seem relevant to the actual conjuncture of the current crises of modern civilization / western capitalism in which we live.

Without doubt, one of the most visible characteristics of the present space-time is the centrality of **uncertainty**. But in contrast to the dominant epistemologies of the social sciences, for us uncertainty is not necessarily something negative. It can be a moment of opportunity to re-evaluate, develop, and create other concepts and perspectives on the relationship between theory and practice. Without doubt, these uncertainties are manifest in fundamental questions about how we think and understand what is happening now and furthermore, how this leads us to develop/construct/propel other futures.

For these reasons, one of the urgent tasks for activists and activist-researchers in RETOS is to reconsider: 1) categories, 2) theories of social change and 3) the methodology / epistemology / ethics used to analyze and promote social transformation. This process challenges the conventional divisions between academia and social movements, between South and North, between practice and theory.

We believe in the importance of embarking on transnational articulations with local roots, weaving networks that not only "investigate" social and political movements but that do so for, with and from these movements, not only as a corrective to the traditional ways and means but also as part of a radical political practice itself. We believe that only through this kind of systematization, analysis and reflection we will be able to contribute to the construction of new tools to act and resist today. We believe these tools include the creation of new political and social vocabularies that will permit new imaginaries and new ways of acting within current processes, opening the potential for radical social transformation.

### **Crisis, movements and alternatives**

These days it is common to argue that the world stage at the beginning of the 21st century is defined by multiple crises. These crises tend to be classified and named as the "ecological crisis," the "economic crisis," and the "political crisis," and now often include the "food crisis" and the "energy crisis." Without doubt, RETOS was born in and of this context and we recognize the multiple interrelated crises in which we live. However, for us it is essential to understand that naming "the crisis" in this way does not allow us to visualize others that are less recognized, but are also important, such as the "cultural crisis" and "epistemic crisis." All of these are not conjunctural crises but rather the result

of a long history of the organization of the modern / colonial capitalist system and the relationship that it promotes between humanity and nature.

Faced with these crises, the social movements of the last decades of the twentieth century have developed deeply cultural demands and practices that foreground other conceptions and practices of democracy, autonomy, body, nature, and territory. While a number of them can be understood as movements with pre-figurative practices, others have practices that are more creative / experimental. But both invite us to think / propel profound changes in the organization of human life and relationships with nature.

Disputes over the meaning and practice of concepts such as democracy, development and politics that the movements have opened, involve a questioning of the way we see and interpret reality. These disputes invite us to wonder about the role of movements in building alternatives to the crisis of Western modernity as a pattern of power and knowledge.

Because knowledge practices are forged in fields of power, to defend social movements as creators of knowledge has a high political significance. The theoretical practices of social movements are generated in relation to historical regimes (epistemological and ontological) that they are struggling to transform. Therein, the importance of *knowledge-making practices* from movements emerges, on the one hand, from their situations and their unique places of enunciation and, on the other, from their struggle against the ruling (even repressive) regimes of truth or hegemony.

We believe that social movements are fighting in the field of knowledge in several ways: by offering specific alternatives and meanings, for example, the concept and practice of "buen vivir" (the good life, or living well) and / or sexual diversity that proposes different ethics or another frame of reference in which people can live their lives beyond competition and money. Through their practices, discourses and imaginaries, other movements deny the monopoly of truth assumed by the ruling regimes, for example, refuting that money is the most important determinant of value either directly - by explicitly opposing "expert" discourses - or through the proliferation of a variety of alternative ways of knowing and being.

In the face of the multiple and multifaceted crises confronting us today, we affirm that epistemological / ethical / methodological changes in knowledge are part of broader and deeper cultural changes happening in different parts of the world, especially (but not only) in societies with colonial baggage.

The path that RETOS is trying to build implies changing our understanding of what we are opposing, and what we are promoting. We face the challenge of thinking differently from the ways that Cartesian logic articulates with Western colonial power to impose a certain type of knowledge or way of knowing, setting goals and truths rather than opening resonant spaces and more processual and non-permanent connections.

## **The five basic premises of our work**

### *First premise*

In RETOS, we depart from a non-conventional premise that has become our guiding idea: those social movements and political actors which have been politically, culturally and epistemically marginalized by the dominant systems, today are the historical forces which are developing and experimenting with practices, knowledges and wisdom with great potential to offer possible solutions to the multiple crises. That is, in their practices of resistance, these movements are creating and articulating alternative paths for the future.

That is why we look toward and work with / from / for subaltern actors, to systematize, to reflect and analyze together with them these new practices, ideas and imaginaries. We work “from below” not because we romanticize these actors, or because we feel sorry for them, but because we believe that a view from below offers a perspective that cannot be seen by those on “top,” nor by those in the middle or those looking “from nowhere” which have been legitimized by calling themselves “neutral.” We think the perspectives / practices / imaginaries of the subalternized / marginalized are important to act on in the present because they have been denied through repression, forgetting, and disappearing.

### *Second Premise*

We work from movements to develop better epistemologies / methodologies / ethics / politics for understanding and at the same time for intervention in the present. From the beginning, RETOS has worked through shared affinities and common sensibilities, not from an idea of intellectual work supported by rational and instrumental questions.

In the different nodes that are linked through RETOS, we have developed less orthodox methods not based on defining the “object of study” as a set of questions and method of analysis whose unique starting point or center are those debates and academic authorities. Instead we have entered a process of reflection and sharing of experiences born from the various places where we work, from the different movements that we accompany or in which we take part. It is from here that concepts, tools, problems, challenges and ideas for working together are born.

In this process, we have actively worked to make visible, problematize and deconstruct the Cartesian “subject-object” divide which is the basis of most research approaches, even many that claim to be critical and progressive. It has been necessary to stop assuming that there is a clear and simple distinction between the world of action / activism and the world of knowledge-production / academy. We have come to realize and understand that in today's world, both academics and activists inhabit common problem-spaces characterized by an uncountable number of crises and uncertainties.

The question of the Cartesian divide is complicated because many of us have multiple identities all moving at the same time: we are activists, leaders, communicators, educators, and much more. In acknowledging this, we do not ignore or erase by decree the differences and tensions between activism and academia, but rather we are working to identify the strengths of both worlds and what we have in common. Mostly we want to go

beyond the prisons of identities and for that we are seeking, questioning, exploring, trying, creating, and inventing how to act, live and respond from our various locations and sites, as historical subjects submerged in the multiple crises.

#### *Third premise*

The question or problem of the forms of organization appropriate to the present is common to all movements and activists with whom we work. This is directly related to questions about the nature and location of the political, including non-capitalist economies. In each of the spaces where we work, the traditional forms of organization, particularly political parties, but also the notion of "a movement" with a single identity or problematic has proven to be limited and, in some cases, deeply inadequate. Therefore, we try to experiment and work with various organizational forms that challenge hierarchy, privilege, the accumulation of power, and the institutionalization of political entities. We value diversity and difference, but we are also aware that they can or are being co-opted and / or institutionalized for power. For this reason, we are trying to act from our bodies, minds, practices, hearts, and imagination. Without question, many of us have learned from and been inspired by the political work of women, indigenous men in struggle and practice, and feminist theories. But we also recognize contradictions and limitations in these realms. Moreover, several of us are increasingly combining our perspective as woman with gender struggles, thus further fertilizing our daily work, doing, and knowing.

#### *Fourth premise*

In some of the nodes of RETOS we have seen the need to visualize, systematize and analyze the limitations, contradictions and tensions that live within our own movements, networks and organizations. This is not to discredit or destroy them, but to start from the inside to recognize these processes and from there to build real alternatives, stronger and more effective against systems of oppression. Many of us believe that in this way we can avoid simplistic, triumphalist or romantic visions that add little to the construction of other worlds. A number of us are interested in building a self-critical, reflexive approach that allows us to see both the contributions and limitations, the progress but also the internal contradictions within movements, networks and organizations. With this we are trying not to fall into new or neo-colonial dichotomies, but instead to explore other ways of being and doing in the world.

#### *Fifth premise*

We believe that our searching requires not only new solutions within the spectrum of what we think and define the parameters of "real" and "possible". Our searches also require new ways of naming problems and of thinking and organizing our societies, struggles and proposals. We believe that the parameters of the current system need to be rethought, and movements need to rethink themselves. It would be arrogant to think that they are not already doing so--they are doing it--so then we must ask: What challenges are these movements living in terms of the organizational / epistemic / ethical / political? How are these challenges being faced or resolved? Can we share and learn from them in a more articulated way? Can we get a better understanding of the contemporary scene as well as develop (in network, collectively) new tools and strategies to intervene in it? Can

we create / promote / build / produce (in network, collectively) new insights into the kinds and forms of knowledge and knowledge-making practices necessary for radical transformation, liberation, emancipation not only of peoples, but of all humanity