

## A padkos note about Gustavo Esteva

In the lovely piece called “*A Path to Freedom*” that we’re sharing with this padkos mailing, Gustavo takes an autobiographical retrospective tour through his own life story of engagement, learning, critique and action.

“...beyond the nation-state, capitalism, formal democracy and patriarchy”

From a young rising star in the administration of multi-national companies (where he learned that “I could not lead a decent life in the corporate world”); to dreams of armed revolution inspired by Che Guevara (which ended “when one of our leaders killed another contender for leadership”); to bureaucratic power in the progressive state delivering big, leftist developmental projects (where he discovered that “development could be very damaging and the State ... was a very violent tool of domination and control”); and to the NGO sector and grassroots organisations into the period of neoliberal globalization and the domestication of environmentalism into ‘sustainable development’. In many ways this period saw significant demobilization, accommodation, and disillusion for some established left and activist traditions – and indeed a smug triumphalism from many proponents of the status quo and capital declaring ‘the end of history’. “The most unique and dynamic response came in the shape of the Zapatista uprising, on January 1st 1994”. Although the “development discourse still dominates today”, the Zapatistas have “fashioned an alternative society”.

Esteva remained closely connected with the Zapatistas, but he also supported and linked together many other spaces of rebellion and life – what he describes as “other horizons; beyond the nation-state, capitalism, formal democracy and patriarchy”. Indeed, as Ashish Kothari recounts (in a personal tribute to Gustavo here: <https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/hola-gustavo-a-personal-tribute-to-gustavo-esteva/>), Esteva continued to be active and connected to the end of his 86 years.

One space he actively nurtured and supported most recently, was the emergent Global Tapestry of Alternatives (or GTA - see <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/>). The GTA is a loosely knit structure to create spaces of collaboration and exchange "in order to learn about and from each other, critically but constructively challenge each other, offer active solidarity to each other whenever needed, interweave the initiatives in common actions, and give them visibility to inspire other people to create their own initiatives". GTA founds its work on the conviction that:

[t]he world is going through a crisis of unprecedented global scale engendered by a dominant regime that has resulted in deepening inequalities, increasing deprivation in old and new forms, the destruction of ecosystems, catastrophic climate change, ruptures in socio-cultural fabrics, and the violent dispossession of living beings. However, there is an increasing emergence and visibility of an immense variety of radical alternatives to this dominant regime, contesting its roots in capitalist, patriarchal, racist, statist, and anthropocentric forces.

Ashish Kothari (*ibid*) comments on Esteva's role in the GTA saying that "[h]e would vehemently defend his views, for instance on the absolute need to abolish the nation-state, and to move beyond western ‘human rights’ discourses; but he would also be willing to listen to those who had a somewhat different viewpoint."

## NOTES

### 1. *A quick note about Trade School*

Trade School (<https://tradeschool.coop/>) was a non-traditional learning space where students bartered with teachers to join self-initiated classes. Anyone can teach a class, and students sign up by agreeing to meet the barter requests of teachers. On the day of class, students and teachers gather in a space that is made available by Trade School organizers. It grew to operate in thirty cities around the world with more than 22,000 learners and teachers. Please take a look at the lovely book about the global experience of Trade School at this link: <https://protect-za.mimecast.com/s/y9u-C1j735f4WgQiATb28?domain=emails.kickstarter.com> or [https://tradeschool.coop/assets/tradeschool\\_2009\\_2019.pdf](https://tradeschool.coop/assets/tradeschool_2009_2019.pdf). The book is a gold-mine of inspiring and practical stuff! And it includes a couple of essays from participants in the Pietermaritzburg edition. It also outlines the basic principles and approach behind Trade School – for example:

1. Everyone has something to offer.
2. We run on a system of mutual aid: the voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit.
3. Sharing personal experience is as important as sharing book knowledge.
4. We celebrate techniques, traditions, and tactics.
5. We are learning collectively to take responsibility.

### 2. *Esteva on 'development*

For those interested in further reading, we've also attached Gustavo Esteva's important contribution to ***The Development Dictionary***, originally published in 1992 (Gustavo Esteva, "Development" Chapter 1 in Wolfgang Sachs, ***The Development Dictionary" A Guide to Knowledge as Power*** , Zed Books (London) and Witwatersrand University Press (Johannesburg)).