

How many worlds are there? One, but also many: Decolonial theory, comparison, ‘reality’

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ept**Didier Zúñiga** 

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Abstract

Contemporary political theory (CPT) has approached questions of plurality and diversity by drawing rather implicitly on anthropological accounts of difference. This was the case with the ‘cultural turn’, which significantly shaped theories of multiculturalism. Similarly, the current ‘ontological turn’ is gaining influence and leaving a marked impact on CPT. I examine the recent turn and assess both the possibilities it offers and the challenges it poses for decentering CPT and opening radical, decolonial avenues for thinking difference otherwise. I take Paul Nadasdy’s critique of the ontological turn as an invitation to reflect on the methodological precepts that inform how the field frames the scope and limits of comparison. In pursuit of this, I examine the Zapatistas’ notion of a ‘world of many worlds’, which provides a way of approaching difference that captures the generative aspects of the ontological turn while avoiding the pitfalls of relativism and political inertia. I argue that the Zapatistas’ insights offer ethical guidance towards social and ecological thriving. Ultimately, my goal is to move CPT towards a more capacious form of making sense of what is out there in the world, and thus make room for better ways of inhabiting the Earth.

Keywords

decolonial theory, comparative political theory, ontological turn, deparochialization, ecological ethics & politics, pluriversal politics

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Contemporary political theory has approached questions of diversity and plurality by drawing rather implicitly on anthropological accounts of difference. This was brought to political theorists' attention in the early 2000s by David Scott, who reminded the field that claims about 'the West's Others' largely relied on a taken for granted understanding of difference as 'cultural difference'—which in turn was based on a conception of culture as 'constructed meaning' (2003: 92). This notion was popularized by what was then referred to as the 'cultural turn' in anthropology, which was inaugurated and benchmarked by Clifford Geertz' seminal work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Scott, 2003: 107. See also Geertz, 2017). Geertz' contribution constitutes the conceptual bedrock on which the multicultural and deep diversity literature started operating, including the influential work of Charles Taylor, James Tully, and Will Kymlicka. Scott's claim is that political theorists were inattentive to the ongoing discussions and disagreements in anthropology about 'culture', and especially about the genealogy of the notion and its role in shaping the field, thereby foreclosing the possibility of thinking difference otherwise.

It is interesting to notice echoes of this earlier debate about difference and culture in the current contention over what is discussed under the reminiscent label of the 'ontological turn' (Bessire and Bond, 2014; Blaser, 2013; de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2020; FitzGerald, 2022, 2023; Fúnez-Flores, 2022; Goh, 2019; Hutchings, 2019; Jaeger, 2018; Kohn, 2015; Kramm, 2021; Matallana-Peláez, 2020; Mignolo, 2021; Orellana Matute, 2021; Paipais, 2017; Reiter, 2018; Savranski, 2021; Todd, 2016, 2020; Turner, 2021; Zanotti, 2021; among others). Although now denoting a broad area of study that has become inherently interdisciplinary, the 'turn to ontology', just like the previous 'turn', finds its roots in anthropological theory. The point of departure of this second 'turn' is a dissatisfaction with the colonial gaze that remains prevalent in ethnographic research—despite the discipline's recent effort towards 'decolonization'—as well as with prevailing methods of meaning translation from the studied subjects' vernacular to the vocabularies of western theory. What this strand of anthropology seeks to do is to take the dissonances and disjunctures that arise from encounters with radical alterity 'as far as they will go, making full virtue of their capacity to stop thinking in its tracks, unsettling what we think we know in favour of what we may not even have imagined' (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). And as scholars associated with the second turn have argued, doing this entails taking a deep dive into ontology, which involves studying the underlying assumptions about existence that shape the way living beings—human and nonhuman—relate to one another and to the Earth.

At the most general level, the turn to ontology developed as a response to the drawbacks of the focus on culture, which hinges on presumptions about human exceptionalism and attendant logics of mastery over differently human and nonhuman others. In this sense, paying attention to ontology, rather than culture, provides the groundwork for decentering the concepts, categories, and classifications through which social, political, and anthropological theory filters difference. Hence the decolonial potential that has been promised by its proponents within and increasingly beyond the discipline of anthropology.¹ However, just like David Scott did with the preceding turn, Paul Nadasdy has recently provided a powerful critique of some of the most influential developments in

social and political theory that have embraced a strong version of the ontological turn for its purported capacity to open up radical, decolonial avenues for thinking otherwise (2021). The most important pitfall that Nadasdy identifies is the positing of the literal existence of a multiplicity of worlds, which is not only empirically incoherent, but also ethically and politically problematic (2021: 365).

This is so because, first, the assertion of multiple worlds reduces ethnographic insight by overlooking historical context and flattening the nuance and complexity of the studied phenomena (2021: 357, 361, 363). And second, by positing the existence of multiple worlds, it follows that there is no necessary relationship between what goes on in one world and what takes place in another. This implies that those living within their own distinct world have little reason to explore and gain knowledge about other worlds (2021: 365). Part of what Nadasdy aims to show is that what he calls the ‘multiple-worlds’ thesis leads to ethical relativism and political inertia. One significant implication of this is that what appears to be *only* a forest may in fact be a sentient being—that is, a self that has ‘a point of view’ (Kohn, 2013: 97)—in one world, and a stock of resources to be managed and exploited by humans in another (Nadasdy, 2021: 366). The problem that arises, then, is the question of how to reconcile or even address the seemingly incongruous implications of this thesis: if both statements are true, does it mean that both forms of understanding and of relating to the Earth are equally legitimate and justified? What is there to be done for the one planet that is under dire threat of destruction? And what are the conditions for intelligibility and communication between and across worlds?

This essay takes Nadasdy’s contribution as an invitation to examine significant questions that have been brought to the forefront by both proponents and critics of the ontological turn. There is a pressing need for political theory to reflect critically on the methodological precepts that inform how the field frames the possibilities and limits of comparison, the conditions for understanding across realms of existence, and the question of how to approach the ways in which different sentient beings relate to ‘reality’—among other issues that have received significant attention in anthropology, but less so in political theory. To do this, the essay engages with Nadasdy’s proposal by first laying out the shortcomings that he and some other critics associate with the turn, and with ontological thinking more generally. These problems reverberate beyond the scholarship on ‘multiple-worlds’ and into political theory’s foundational assumptions about how to study otherness, as well as about who or what constitutes this ‘other’.

The goal of the essay is thus to contribute to political theory debates regarding the methods, scope, and objectives of comparison and meaning translation across radical difference. It does so by delving into the shared interest of political theorists and anthropologists in learning from radically different knowledges and systems of thought. Yet, this form of studying otherness poses important methodological problems, especially when using western-centric concepts and categories to engage with worldviews that exceed the west. These problems involve essentialist identification processes, purification mechanisms, and parochial classification schemes, all of which result in forms of epistemological reductionism. In response to this, the article draws from the insights shared by the Zapatistas on the creation of ‘a world of many worlds’ to retrieve a softer version of the ontological turn. This interpretation places emphasis on the

Zapatistas' eco-political purposes, which are aimed at fostering alternative modes of thinking with and acting in the world. Moreover, the essay argues that the Zapatistas' teachings elucidate an approach to difference that captures the generative aspects of the ontological turn while avoiding the challenges of relativism and political inertia. The article shows that these insights offer ethical guidance towards social and ecological thriving, thereby steering political theorizing in the direction of better ways of inhabiting the Earth.

'A world of many worlds': Political theory and the turn to ontology

References to a world of 'many worlds' or the 'pluriverse' were introduced in political theory by decolonial and postcolonial scholars. Among the earliest and most prominent advocates of the idea are Walter Dignolo in anglophone academia and Enrique Dussel in the hispanophone world (see e.g., Dignolo, 2007; Dussel, 2015). The Zapatistas' writings and practices to construct a 'world in which many worlds fit' were the main source of inspiration for the pluriversal politics framework in the decolonial literature (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 1996. My translation). But as the debates evolved, the Zapatistas' influence gradually receded, making way for an increased emphasis on anthropological scholarship, which introduced a new version of the idea and brought it to the forefront.² There are various iterations of the concept, but they all share the common goal of challenging the predominance of the ontological and epistemological foundations of western theory and practice. In opposition to the constraining hold of the latter, their aim is to pluralize both ontology—paying attention to the diverse realities or worlds inhabited by multiple beings and ecosystems—and epistemology—taking heed of the various 'arts of noticing' (Tsing 2015) through which different beings come to understand their world (see Todd, 2020: 22). The 'many worlds' approach also entails challenging the dualism of ontology and epistemology, which, despite being imposed as a universal characteristic of the nature of being and understanding, is, in fact, a parochial Enlightenment view of the world (Todd, 2020: 26). As Vanessa Watts has taught us, the epistemology-ontology divide is not applicable to understanding the Anishinaabe cosmology, as well as many other Indigenous forms of making sense of reality (Watts, 2013). This is why proponents of the 'many worlds' approach align with Watts in asserting that being in the world and knowing such a world are inherently interconnected. Moreover, they argue that doing justice to radically different knowledges and systems of thought requires opening up conventional understandings of 'ontology' to the plural and radically different ways in which reality is experienced, felt, and perceived.

In the following pages, I want to focus on a set of issues that have been recently raised by Paul Nadasdy (2021) and that echo broader concerns about the decolonial potential of the turn to ontology and its role in shaping debates in political theory.³ The main problem that Nadasdy identifies within the 'many worlds' scholarship is that its political commitments are undergirded by flawed assumptions about what constitutes 'reality'. This, he argues, leads its proponents towards significant theoretical pitfalls, which in turn cast

doubt on the practical relevance of the project. In what follows, I will closely examine Nadasdy's argument and provide a tentative and provisional answer to the worries that he expresses.

My purpose is to strengthen the integration of ontological inquiries into political theory, bridging the gap between its explicit and implicit engagement with questions that have received extensive attention in anthropology but remain underexplored within the field. Indeed, political theory has seen limited discussion regarding anthropology's debates about the nature, scope, and limitations of the ontological turn. Some notable exceptions include recent work in contemporary political theory (Turner, 2021; Kramm, 2021), and certain branches of international political theory that use 'the pluriverse' as a foundational premise for their world-building and world-repairing projects (FitzGerald, 2022, 2023; Hutchings, 2019; Paipais, 2017; Rojas, 2016, among others).⁴ And while there is much to praise about this turn to ontology in these two areas of political theory, a deeper engagement with anthropology's debates about the possibilities and challenges of the turn is warranted to refine and strengthen its use in non-anthropological contexts.

Similar considerations apply to scholarship in comparative political theory, where explicit engagement with debates about the turn to ontology remains lacking, despite the field's reliance on ontological assumptions concerning the basis and scope of comparison.⁵ Comparative political theory aims to ponder the conditions of possibility for both 'decentering Europe' (Getachew, 2016) and 'cross-cultural engagement' (Jenco et al., 2019: 2). This involves forging paths towards genuine and fruitful dialogues across radical difference, while also identifying the inherent dangers of doing so. These efforts closely align with the long-standing pursuits of ontological debates in anthropology, constituting the core objectives of the political ontology literature, along with the emerging field of anthropology beyond the human. This is why this essay contends that delving into anthropology's latest and most contentious discussions about the turn to ontology holds significant potential for advancing political theory's aspiration to decolonize and decenter the field from its western foundations.

Radical difference, essentialism, purification

In line with Eve Tuck's and K. Wayne Yang's ground-breaking critique of the metaphorization of decolonization, the ethical and political proposal of the turn to ontology literature consists in taking what interlocutors do, say, think, and feel as literally as possible (2012). This resonates with recent calls to deparochialize political theory by engaging in practices of openness, receptivity, and deep listening across radical forms of difference (Tully, 2016; Beausoleil, 2020). As James Tully has put it, the aim of this exercise is to strive to 'understand and appreciate the concerns of others as they experience and articulate them in the terms of their own traditions without inclusion, assimilation, or subordination' (Tully, 2016: 52). And taking this commitment seriously involves a foray into systems of thought and knowledge-making practices. This requires grasping the meaning of specific relations among beings, things, and entities that form a particular environment, thereby gaining insight into the knowledge that is produced within

that context. But aiming to do this sort of epistemic wandering requires the disposition to disrupt 'our' schemas of thought and action in order to open 'ourselves' to more expansive forms of seeing, feeling, knowing, and communicating in and with the world (see e.g., Kohn, 2013, 2020). And yet, the idea that it is possible to travel beyond the bounds of 'our' understandings of the world and how 'we' act in it based on such interpretations is fraught with difficulties.

Perhaps the most obvious difficulty concerns the issue of essentialism (see Williams, 2020b; Marín-Aguilera, 2021: 135; Chandler and Reid, 2020 488–499; among others),⁶ which refers to the oversimplification of histories, events, systems of thought, and traditions, and more specifically to their reduction to some supposedly intrinsic characteristics or distinctive features that are said to define them. These are usually identified because 'we' are already familiar with certain aspects that make them particularly suitable for incorporation within 'our' own frameworks. The problems associated with this have been widely discussed in the pluralism and multiculturalism literature (Song, 2007; Tully, 1995; Young, 1990; Phillips, 2007; Benhabib, 2002; Eisenberg, 2009; among others), and especially in the work of Sarah Song, which has been important for understanding the dynamics between the normative standards and assumptions of majority and minority groups in so-called liberal democratic societies (Song, 2005, 2007).

Song's contribution examines the interrelations of the dominant norms of host societies and the gender hierarchies of minority communities to illustrate how the former aligns with and offers support for the latter. She calls attention to how mainstream patriarchal norms 'shape the frameworks within which minority claims are evaluated and granted or denied', which is why 'cultural arguments seem to be most successful when they resonate with such norms' (2005: 480). Despite the enduring controversies surrounding the politics of cultural and religious accommodations in liberal societies, Song argues that there is a striking congruence between these practices and the frameworks through which they are evaluated (2005: esp. 474 & 480; 2007: esp. 5 & 113). Her conclusion is that contrary to what some liberals might claim, the dominant groups' own unjust norms end up shaping multicultural processes of integration, which in many instances result in the 'affirmation of patriarchal traditions' within minority groups (2007: 6).

As Song's work illustrates, the construction of otherness in essentialized terms is a direct reflection of the reference points, assumptions, and biases of the dominant discourses through which difference is approached. The examples Song focuses on are easily recognizable as problematic, given that she addresses issues of masculinism and gender and sexual inequality, but it is also often the case that this essentialist identification process occurs when 'we' search for characteristics or features that 'we' already agree with and/or find remarkable or good. One example of this is the recent identification of the 'lost republic' of Tlaxcala by certain archaeologists, anthropologists, and comparative political theorists (see e.g., Dean et al., 2019: xi; Fargher et al., 2011b; Graeber and Wengrow, 2020, 2021; among others).

These scholars argue that archaeological evidence found within the remnants of the *altepetl* constitutes 'the material manifestation of a republican model of governance in Late Postclassic Tlaxcallan' (Fargher et al., 2011b: 183). The reason why this is so,

they claim, is that such evidence points to the fact that Tlaxcala's system of governance appears to have been characterized by a 'highly decentralised' and 'horizontally organised' model of political power (Fargher et al., 2011b: 183). To sustain this, the authors point out that archaeological survey of the site of Tlaxcala indicates a lack of monumental architecture, such as conspicuous pyramids, temples, or palaces, the main function of which was to house dynastic rulers and associated political officials (Fargher et al., 2011b: 175–178). In contrast, they found that the city was divided into at least 20 'unranked' plazas that appear to have functioned as 'nodes for administration and political activities' (Fargher et al., 2011b: 183).⁷ They also draw attention to the fact that its domestic and residential areas 'display considerable uniformity', which seems to suggest that Tlaxcala was characterized by 'a minimal degree of social differentiation' (Fargher et al., 2011b: 175).

While it is possible to argue that there are structural similarities between the description of Tlaxcala's political organization mentioned above and that of European republics, to label the altepetl as an 'ancient republic in the New World' (Fargher et al., 2011b) or an 'Indigenous republic' (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 346) is to approach it from a paradigm laden with pre-judgments and preconceptions. This is so because subsuming the altepetl under the category of 'republic' involves a considerable stretch of connotation.⁸ It also reinforces the assumption that the concepts and categories of western European thought are the pivotal standpoint for making sense of difference. Recall that the first comparisons between Tlaxcala and European republics were made by the colonists themselves, such as Hernán Cortés, who claimed that the altepetl reminded him of 'the states of Venice or Genoa or Pisa' (Cortés, 1986: 68). It was subsequently referred to as an 'Indian Republic' by 'postconquest' Tlaxcalteca, most famously by Diego Muñoz Camargo (see e.g., Wake, 2009), a mestizo chronicler who oversaw the production of a pictorial account of the people of Tlaxcala's history, which emphasized their 'role as primary allies to the Spanish' (Carballo, 2020: 142). Muñoz Camargo's intention was to present the document to King Phillip II as a petition for Spain's recognition of the invaluable aid that the Tlaxcalteca provided during the war against the Mexica and other Mesoamerican groups, as well as to show 'their full embrace of Christianity and their fidelity as colonial subjects' (Carballo, 2020: 142).

What I aim to illustrate here is that alongside the essentialization of difference that arises from the identification process discussed above, there is a simultaneous mechanism of purification that occurs when engaging in exercises of comparison. This means that prior to identifying distinguishing features that could serve as focal points for comparative analysis, the object of inquiry is filtered to make it legible to 'our' own categories of thought. This is clearly the case, for instance, when scholars assume that because Tlaxcala's archaeological remains appear to reveal the absence of monumental architecture, it follows that its social organization was 'egalitarian' in a manner that resembles that of the so-called free states of northern Italy (Fargher et al., 2010). This move is problematic because even though the urban pattern of Tlaxcala does seem to indicate that its political organization was not as centralized as that of neighbouring altepeme, to conclude that it is consistent with an 'egalitarian system of governance and ideology' (Fargher et al., 2010: 230), one that is 'reminiscent of republican Venice' (Fargher

et al., 2011a: 316), is to describe it using parochial criteria of classification and discrimination. To ascribe meaning to something by imposing such radically extraneous information not only results in misdescription, but also attempts to make the unfamiliar familiar through a process of ontological foreshortening,⁹ which declutters and distorts the subject under examination.

A related problem with this move is the contrast scholars are often tempted to draw between the purported republic of Tlaxcala, portrayed as an Indigenous ‘free state’, and alleged despotic regimes like that of Tenochtitlan, depicted as a ‘predatory empire’ (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 358).¹⁰ To proceed in this way is to reduce the task of explicating that which is different to that of finding counterparts in ‘our’ own conceptual vocabularies for terms that could possibly express such difference (see e.g., Skinner 2002: 47). Such an approach presupposes that it is not only possible to translate unequivocally, but that it also constitutes a condition of intelligibility (see e.g., Skinner 2002: 46). And yet, this assumption of translatability as commensurability inflicts harm upon the subject matter under consideration, given that the translator rids difference of that which is cumbersome, equivocal, and/or elusive, and supplies it with their own concepts and categories. This form of purification is misguided because the effort to understand is replaced by the drive to infuse whatever it is that ‘we’ are studying with ‘our’ own terms, criteria, and interests. In this particular case where Tlaxcala is characterized as a republic and the Triple Alliance as a tyrannical empire, interpreters are also imbuing these political organizations with value: in other words, they are ranking them according to their own judgments and evaluations.

To address this, I will introduce an approach that helps us sidestep the pitfalls of essentialism, purification, and parochialism. This approach aims to momentarily suspend our preconceptions and judgements about the world and the significance we attach to them. I will propose a version of ontological thinking that prompts the field to move away from the tendency to force-fit difference into pre-existing (western) concepts and categories. This framework opens up more capacious avenues for engaging and thinking with knowledges and social and political systems that extend beyond prevailing frameworks of analysis in political theory. However, as cautioned by Nadasdy, certain interpretations of the ontological turn give rise to another set of challenges, including relativism, subjectivism, solipsism, and political inertia. My objective is to retrieve a version of ontological plurality that can navigate political theory away from these potential issues.

The ‘multiple-worlds’ thesis and the question of ‘our’ relation to ‘reality’

As I hope is clear from the discussion above, critically examining the ontological underpinnings that inform political theory’s methods of comparison is indispensable (see e.g., Jenco et al. 2019; Sherwin, 2022; Rollo, 2021; Tully 2016; Williams 2020a; among others). This is especially so in light of the increasing interest in Indigenous, ‘non-western’, and comparative political thought and the potential of decolonizing political theory to drive transformative change within the field. While most comparative political theorists do not directly

address ontological concerns, their work implicitly grapples with the sorts of issues that are at the center of ontological thinking. Both approaches converge in their aim of challenging disciplinary boundaries through engagement with marginalized and neglected systems of thought (Sherwin 2022: 49; Tully 2016), while also subjecting the very principles of comparison to comparative analysis (Turner, 2021: 255. See also Jenco et al. 2019: 1). Moreover, they both express concerns about the dangers of tokenizing and sanitizing difference, and share a commitment to disrupting established frames of reference by interrogating and contextualizing the presuppositions and preconceptions that inform ‘our’ attempts to make sense of others. This is why work addressing radical difference stands to gain significantly from scrutinizing questions of ontology in conversation with the burgeoning scholarship in comparative political theory.

Let’s return to the turn to ontology debate and Nadasdy’s critique. Scholars engaged in the study of how human and more-than-human forms of life relate to reality strive to take the meaning of unfamiliar systems of thought and knowledge as literally as possible (Nadasdy, 2021: 358. See also: Blaser, 2010; de la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2020; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017; Nadasdy, 2007; Savranski, 2021; Scott 2011; among others). This not only requires seeking to understand how these beings see, feel, and perceive the world, and therefore how they organize their modes of co-existence; it also, more contentiously, involves learning about ‘the nature of reality itself’ (Nadasdy, 2021: 358). And this, according to Nadasdy, is where a series of thorny theoretical and political problems arise for ontological approaches that uphold what he calls the ‘multiple-worlds thesis’ (2021: 358). The latter refers to the notion of ontological plurality, which has been endorsed in different ways and to different degrees by various scholars associated with the turn to ontology (see e.g., Blaser, 2018; de la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2020; Kohn, 2015; among others). In the most general sense, it denotes the existence of a plurality of interconnected ‘realities’, and hence of multiple worlds that are inhabited by a variety of beings and ecologies of beings, all of whom relate to their worlds in significantly different ways.

Taking issue with the widespread presumption that there exists a plurality of cultures but that there is a single, universal, and fixed nature—which remains the same across cultures, even though it can be apprehended in various ways—ontological theorists have stressed the need to contextualize and historicize the ways in which beings relate to their environments. This has led some of these scholars to reverse the presumption above and posit the existence of a multiplicity of natures, all of which are perceived from the same perspectival stance—that is, from the subjective *I* through which beings grasp their different worlds (Viveiros de Castro, 1998).¹¹ The main goal of this approach is to disrupt ingrained binaries of nature/culture and to unsettle received understandings of what each of these categories might refer to. This, in turn, forces political theory to rethink what human animality and attendant notions of agency, representation, and communication are usually taken to mean, and to extend these—as well as beingness, selfhood, and intentionality—beyond the confines of rationalist explanations of animacy. The result is the inclusion of the differently human and the more-than-human into the category of ‘selves’ whose points of view should be paid attention to.

But what worries Nadasdy about this theoretical destabilization of the ontological dimensions of reality is the ‘multiplicity of natures’ contention, which implies that reality is in fact plural and that there are, quite literally, multiple worlds out there. Part of what drives his argument is the concern that if there are indeed multiple worlds, each of which is governed by different laws (2021: 358), there is little hope that political struggles can enact change for the better on the ground (2011: 366). This is so because if we contend that certain worlds operate according to their own specific principles and norms, then actions and relations that are considered ethically and environmentally harmful in one world may be deemed acceptable in another. For instance, the destruction of a ‘mountain’—one that is regarded as a sentient being in some worlds—could be ‘completely justified’ in the world of capitalist modernity (Nadasdy 2021: 366).

There is no doubt that these quandaries pose a serious challenge to the sort of ontological theorizing that posits the literal existence of a plurality of partially connected yet separate worlds. And Nadasdy is right to warn us that this view of ‘worlds’ as emanating from ‘our interlocutors’ particular understandings and practices’—that is, as ‘something’ that is generated through ethnography—dangerously resembles the conception of ‘cultures’ as bounded, internally homogeneous, and separate entities that was long ago rejected by anthropologists, and subsequently by certain political theorists (2021: 367, note 10. See also Tully, 1995: 10; Scott, 2003). A related problem about this way of understanding ontology and difference is what Nadasdy calls ‘the proliferation of worlds’: if worlds are produced whenever there is a constellation of knowledge, value, and practice, then there is a potentially infinite number of alternate realities. This is what prompts Nadasdy to ask whether it is not the case that the ‘multiple-worlds thesis’ simply amounts to saying that we all live in our own private world (Nadasdy, 2021: 361).

Furthermore, this perpetual proliferation of reified private practices leads to the highly questionable premise that whatever makes up a world constitutes a ‘thing’. And the problem with this interpretation of worlds is that once generated, these ‘things’ exist independently of the knowledges and relations that produced them. What we end up with is a multiplicity of isolated ‘objects with inherent properties’ that are dissociated from the specific contexts within which they came to make sense in the first place (Nadasdy, 2021: 362). This is misleading because it steers analysis away from the webs of meaning that constitute these ‘worlds’, and reinforces instead a version of the essentialist identification process that I described above. Nadasdy’s main criticism here is that focusing on ‘things’ rather than on the phenomena that compose them steamrolls the various knowledges and practices that exist in a given time and space, thereby elevating these compressed entities into the ‘worlds’ that are now being studied by ontological theorists.

Nadasdy’s argument is powerful, and his intervention is timely and important, especially in the context of recent critique that has advanced similar albeit less substantial objections (see Chandler and Reid, 2020; Marín-Aguilera, 2021). These critics are right to be wary of the risks of exoticizing the Indigenous other and concomitant dangers of epistemic extraction, such as the expropriation, classification, and re-signification of Indigenous systems of thought for the theoretical purposes of western academics (Marín-Aguilera, 2021; Chandler and Reid, 2020: 486).

What worries them in particular is that rather than striving to open up genuine and respectful channels of communication across difference, so they argue, part of what drives the work associated with the ‘turn’ seems to come from the ontological theorists’ very own political and philosophical speculations (Marín-Aguilera, 2021; Chandler and Reid, 2020). According to their argument, it is as if following the exhaustion of western frameworks of radical politics and critique, scholars were now looking outside of ‘their’ own traditions for inspiration, finding an especially fruitful guiding light in Indigenous thought and action.

My intention is not to deny the reality and severity of this problem—on the contrary, as I hope is evident from the sections above. That said, I aim to address some of these concerns without attempting to defend or redeem the views of specific ontological theorists. Instead, I will present my own interpretation of ontological plurality, drawing on the Zapatistas’ framing. This perspective incorporates various iterations of the turn to ontology, but stands apart from the conventional interpretation of the ‘multiple-worlds thesis’.

The idea of multiple worlds in connection with Indigenous struggles gained prominence through the Zapatistas’ *Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona*, wherein they articulated their struggle for ‘a world in which many worlds fit’ (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 1996. My translation). They have ever since repeatedly referred to this notion of ‘worlds’, in plural, always in relationship to a singular world that encompasses all others—such as when they wrote, more recently, that ‘all the worlds that make up the world found, and continue to find, an ear in our hearts’ (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 2020. My translation). Although current theoretical debates about ontological multiplicity seldom make reference to them,¹² the Indigenous and peasant communities of the Tojolabal canyons have been advancing the idea in theory and enacting it on the ground since at least the first half of the twentieth century.¹³ In its simplest form, the idea refers to the multiplicity of ways of being-in-the-world that resist processes of dispossession, erasure, and assimilation by and into the ‘world of the powerful’, as the Zapatistas have put it (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 1996). And just like the many scholars that took up the idea, they associate this world with modernity and its ‘machinery of death’ (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 1996), which has been arrayed against Indigenous forms of life ‘over the long night of the five hundred years’ (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 1996).

This is particularly noteworthy in the light of Nadasdy’s point about the positing of an actual multiplicity of atomistic worlds that arise and co-occur without intersecting with each other. Taking heed of how the Zapatistas framed the question of ‘worlds’ makes manifest the metaphoric dimension underlying the relationship between the ‘world’ of modernity and the many ‘worlds’ that persist at its margins. This is not to say that the Zapatista understanding of worlds does not have a grip on reality as such, but rather that what they are struggling for is a world—‘the (one) world in which we all live’, as Nadasdy puts it (2021: 366)—where radically different ways of relating to, understanding, and sustaining the Earth can coexist in harmony and peace.

Recognizing the function of metaphors in making sense of ‘reality’ does not imply reducing the latter to a mere cultural construction, nor does it entail setting them in

opposition to what is ‘truly’ out there in the world. Creating and extending metaphors can serve to shape and structure the way ‘we’ understand what exists and how it comes to exist (see e.g., Scott, 2011). In this regard, Indigenous and other ‘non-western’ systems of thought are no different than western science, which has typically sought to comprehend the world by using ‘metaphors of mechanical nature’ (Scott, 2011: 184. See also Merchant, 1983). What I mean by this is that the use of metaphors should not be conceived of as nothing but the figurative representation of actual experiences and contexts. Metaphors organize ‘our’ empirical experience and inform specific ways of conceiving of beings, entities, and matter, more generally. These interpretations, in turn, guide the particular kinds of relations ‘we’ form among them.

Towards better ways of knowing and caring for the earth

The framing of ‘worlds versus world’ should not result in the complete relativization of reality. While there is a risk of overextending the metaphor, and therefore of advocating for a sort of metaphysical solipsism (see Boulot and Sterlin, 2022: 33-34), such an interpretation does not capture the more robust understandings and defenses of the idea.

That being said, Nadasdy’s caution is warranted when considering certain ways in which the ‘multiple-worlds thesis’ has been promoted. The focal point of his concerns is directed towards the strong version of the thesis, which asserts that specific rules and concepts hold true solely within particular worlds (Nadasdy 2021: 358). This presumption follows from the hypothesis that what takes place in one world is only partially—rather than fully and directly—connected to what could potentially occur in another one (de la Cadena, 2015). From this, some scholars have drawn the inference that each of these worlds holds ‘different ethical and political implications’ (Hutchings, 2019: 117). This is a consequence of the effort to fracture the epistemological basis of ‘our’ understanding and knowledge of the world, leading to the contentious proposition that radically distinct beings not only hold contrasting viewpoints on the same world but literally inhabit different realities (see e.g., de la Cadena, 2015; Pedersen, 2011; among others). And as Nadasdy’s text highlights, this stance is problematic for two main reasons: First, because pluralizing ontologies in this manner poses significant obstacles to the development of a nuanced critique of established scientific knowledge and discourse (Nadasdy, 2021: 365)—which, as Nadasdy puts it, ‘is, after all, of a different world’ (2021: 366, note 2). A second, related problem is that it fails to provide any meaningful guidance in tackling political challenges that affect all worlds, such as anthropogenic climate change.

Yet, I want to argue in favour of a softer version of the thesis, one that is inspired by the Zapatistas’ framing of the notion of ‘a world in which many worlds fit’. The purpose of the approach I am advocating for is to navigate between the two ends of the dilemma: on the one hand, a lack of engagement with ontological thinking results in essentialism and conceptual parochialism. On the other hand, an acritical and all-encompassing embrace of the ontological turn leads to relativism, subjectivism, and solipsism. With this in mind, the function of the notion of ‘a world in which many worlds fit’ is to draw attention to the various modes in which animate life inhabits, knows, and organizes

the environment it encounters. This environment is not to be understood as a private and self-contained reality, operating under idiosyncratic laws and rules; rather, it is a partial reality that is constitutive of and constituted by other realities, which taken together form whatever it is that we commonly mean by ‘reality’ in the definite form. Moreover, this ‘reality’ is not constituted by ‘worlds’ conceived of in a way that allows for the possibility of the simultaneous existence of anthropogenic climate change and its ‘objective’ disavowal.¹⁴ In other words, and to take Nadasdy’s example—where he discusses de la Cadena’s view—the idea is not to prove the existence of separate worlds in which mountains are revered as ‘sentient beings’ while in others, they are reduced to mere ‘dirt and rocks’ (Nadasdy 2021: 365). The aim is precisely to disclose the fact that mountains are selves—that is, they are ‘beings that have a point of view’ (Kohn, 2013: 132)—and therefore that they are sentient beings in all possible worlds.¹⁵

Now, this is a strong assertion that warrants further thought and attention. As I explained in the previous section, one of the pitfalls identified by critics of the turn to ontology concerns the growing call to ‘indigenize’ social and political theory—and even the entire university. And they are right to worry about these kinds of practices, which often correspond to the cynical and unreflective promotion of box-ticking that is being increasingly promoted in western academia as a form of predatory knowledge extraction in disguise. However, the point I want to make here is that there is a significant difference between striving to listen to, understand, and learn from ways of living with the Earth radically other than our own, and the deeply problematic prospect of ‘going native’. In fact, one does not need to engage directly with Indigenous systems of knowledge to become aware that the Earth is alive, and thereby that human animals have differentiated responsibilities to care for it (see e.g., Abram, 1996; Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Pope Francis, 2015; Latour, 2017; Merchant, 1983, 2013; Simard, 2021; among others). Within western traditions of thought and practice, these teachings have long been marginalized by modern science and technology, as well as by humanistic and liberal discourses and their objectifying gaze towards the differently human—including those humans who are not white, ‘civilized’, and/or men—and the more-than-human. Hence the significance of the contributions of feminist new materialisms and posthumanism, care ethics, disability studies, and other currents of thought that have been challenging this dominant orientation to the world, as well as offering an alternative to it.

But as Zoe Todd has argued (2016),¹⁶ these western perspectives about vital materiality, agency, animacy, nature, and so on, should not be understood as flowing out of a silo. Indeed, many rest upon an implicit and unacknowledged reliance on Indigenous and other ‘non-western’ cosmologies, which is why their elision contributes to the reproduction of colonial and imperialist processes of extraction and erasure. This is not to deny efforts to produce perspectives that are both immanently grounded in and highly critical of western thought; but it does not follow from this that it is therefore irrelevant, even in their cases, to open channels of communication towards other traditions of thought and practice. On the contrary, the argument I am defending here is that there is something inherently valuable in openness and receptivity to unfamiliar modes of thought and action. Such a disposition constitutes the precondition for engaging in what Enrique Leff calls ‘dialogues of knowledges’ (Leff, 2004, 2014) among and across ways of

understanding, relating to, and being-in the world. And these are the sorts of dialogues that are most needed for building livable futures, and hence for mobilizing resistance to the hegemony of globalized power and its machinery of destruction (Leff, 2014: 126).

I would like to elaborate on some of the reasons underlying the importance of and necessity for entering into ‘dialogues of knowledges’ that extend not merely across cultural perspectives but across ‘worlds’ in the ontological sense. My goal is to demonstrate how political theory—and comparative political theory in particular—can substantially gain from the ongoing discussions in anthropology. Consider Beng-Lan Goh’s contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, where she discusses her method of comparison as ‘a *politics* of ontological difference, that is, a political assertion of distinctively different kinds of existential and perspectival realities’ (2019: 112. Emphasis in original). While I commend her call for the field to focus on ontology, political theorists need to be cautious not to conflate ‘existential’ assertions—ontological claims about the world—with perspectives on how different subjects perceive and experience the world they inhabit.

The first thing to mention is that I am using the notion of worlds to refer not to the atomistic, private, and idiosyncratic ‘worlds’ that Nadasdy takes issue with, but instead to the Zapatista’s construal of ‘worlds’ as forms of inhabiting the Earth that are radically distinct and divergent from the ‘world of power’, as they put it (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, 1996). As such, these worlds enact spaces where those who inhabit them—human and more-than-human beings and ecologies of beings—work towards the proliferation of life on Earth—that is, in the world that is everywhere under dire threat of anthropogenic destruction. This is why ‘worlds’ in this sense constitute counter-modernities, given that they embody alternative modes of organizing production and consumption, and that they are sustained by social and ecological processes that withstand the imposition of progress and its underlying impetus towards mastery and domination.

This is something that is not properly accounted for in the critiques of the ‘multiple-world thesis’ that I have been examining. I think this is apparent in Nadasdy’s account of western nationalism and its relationship to the idea of ‘worlds’ that stand outside of the dominant configuration of the ‘real’. In his text, Nadasdy argues that contrary to what ‘multiple-worlds thesis’ defenders hold, the western conception of the ‘national homeland’ is not too distant from Indigenous and other understandings of nonhuman animacy and agency: ‘For nationalists’, he writes, ‘land is neither inert nor separable from humans’: it is imbued with events, histories, memories, and so on, all of which ‘animate the landscape’ (2021: 361). Just like Indigenous peoples who treat the Earth as a person, nationalists ‘enact’ the homeland as ‘a sentient earth being’, one that is not owned by its people, but rather the other way around (2021: 361). This is what leads him to assert that either western nationalists inhabit similar kinds of worlds as Indigenous land and water protectors, or the idea of multiple worlds is simply wrong.

Nadasdy’s analogy between nationalist ideologies and Indigenous ontologies serves to challenge the binary distinction between western notions of land as lifeless and Indigenous ones as sentient. Nevertheless, I think the analogy can be subjected to scrutiny as it conceals the presence of an underlying anthropocentrism within dominant

manifestations of western nationalism. While it is true that nationalism does foster emotions and affections for a ‘homeland’, the relationship between the land and the people rests on foundations that imbue land with value only to the extent that it gives meaning to human lives. It is a narrowly instrumental way of conceiving of and relating to a ‘nature’ that is mediated and constructed by human animals to serve a particular purpose: that of providing the basis for the development of the categorical identity of a certain ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 2016). Despite the fact that nationalism does enact the ‘homeland’ as an entity that *can* inspire ‘a willingness to die in its defence’ (Nadasdy, 2021: 361), there is nevertheless a radical difference between this conception, on the one hand, and, say, the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg understanding (among many other Indigenous understandings) of ‘deep relationality to the land, the water, the plants, the animals, and the people’, on the other (Simpson, 2021: 3). What warrants protection in the latter case is the land as a ‘*system of reciprocal relations and obligations*’, which teaches us about ‘living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms’ (Coulthard, 2014: 13. *Emphasis in original*). In the former, even if we bracket the question of how this ‘willingness to die’ is actually produced by nationalist ideological apparatuses, the impetus to defend remains bound to a people’s sense of belonging.

This is to say that while the land itself is also of great importance for most forms of nationalisms, it is only—or at least primarily—so insofar as it serves specific human purposes. These purposes are shaped by the imperatives of national progress and development, which presuppose the objectification and commodification of the lands, waters, and more-than-human inhabitants of the territories that make up the ‘homeland’. Nationalism is thus driven by a logic of mastery that prescribes dominating and subjugating relations to nature as a means to achieve communal betterment and social and economic uplift. This is why nationalisms have historically relied on extractivist projects like mining, drilling, fracking, transgenic agroindustry, forest plantations, agro-fuel production, and many other economic activities that rest on the over-exploitation of nature for the pursuit of unlimited economic growth. The latter is presented as necessary because nations’ economic expansion, political ascendancy, cultural power, influence, and so on, are contingent upon the expropriation of natural resources and the exploitation of human and nonhuman labor. Nationalisms are thus inextricably intertwined with modernization processes that promulgate a masterful and domineering view of that which lies beyond the realm of ‘peoplehood’ and its accompanying assumptions about who gets to be included within the category of citizens.

Another reason why the analogy with nationalism is misguided is that it does not take account of representational modalities that extend beyond symbolic realms of meaning and signification.¹⁷ Consequently, this way of approaching context looks at phenomena through lenses that are unsuitable for considering what falls outside the confines of distinctively human realities—that is, beyond sociocultural constructions such as ‘the nation’. This is not to suggest that there is a clear and direct mode of apprehending what is ‘objectively’ out there in the world, one through which ‘we’ could bypass ‘our’ own meaning-bestowing properties. That said, what I would like to put forward—following Kohn’s initiative—is that there are multiple ways of perceiving and of

relating to the world, and that how one approaches otherness enacts contrasting configurations of ‘the human’, ‘the natural’, and the relation between the two.

This implies that different knowledges about the world give rise to distinctive features and characteristics of ‘the real’. There are thus no multiple reals in the strict sense of the term. However, where and how one is embedded within ‘the real’ will have a significant bearing on the relation between oneself and whatever is under study. It is for this reason that a mountain, for instance, can be enacted as an object—that is, as a national resource to be subdued and overexploited by humans—in the capitalist (post)colonial world of modernity, while simultaneously being enacted as a sentient being—that is, as a person who has ‘a point of view’ (Kohn, 2014: 96)—in worlds that persist out of the grasp of the former. But this does not imply the relativistic thesis that treating a mountain as inanimate matter and relating to it as a vulnerable self are both ethically defensible standpoints from which to judge an act.

The lesson to be drawn from ontological and decolonial debates, then, is not that if one happens to inhabit the world of modernity, it is therefore permissible to destroy a mountain for purposes of mineral extraction. On the contrary, the point is to challenge the alleged validity of views that enable the productivist exploitation of nature, regardless of their origin or how they are generated. What I want to suggest is that phenomena become determinate within a particular system of classification and categorization, such as within nationalist ontological schemas that enact land as a specific kind of property: one that pertains to the state and that serves the interests of the nation. To the extent that a particular interpretive context gives distinct meaning to phenomena, it is possible to say that the latter is part of a ‘real’—in this case, of nationalism’s ‘reality’, whereby landscapes become sites for asset production. But this way of seeing, feeling, and perceiving the world emanates from a gaze that ‘alienates’ the more-than-human—that is, as Anna Tsing uses the term, it ‘obviates living-space entanglement[s]’ and ‘inspires [the sort of] landscape modification’ through which more-than-humans become either assets or waste (2015: 5–6). And this alienating gaze is not complementary to the reciprocal and sustainable relations that are fostered and maintained by those who know and inhabit the Earth differently: it is incompatible with it.

In essence, the intervention I am making seeks to build on established commitments to openness and receptivity in political theory. It underscores that recognizing and respecting Indigenous struggles for freedom entails recognizing and respecting the lands and waters of the Earth as sentient beings. Within the framework of ontological thinking inspired by the Zapatistas, this involves shifting away from an outlook in which mountains, rivers, and forests are perceived from an anthropocentric viewpoint, valuing them solely for their utility to human societies. Instead, it entails learning to regard them as fellow Earth beings, to whom we have responsibilities for their care, sustenance, and well-being.

Ontological thinking and possible paths towards better ways of living here on earth

I have been arguing that despite the important criticisms that have been brought against it, there is something worth attending to and retrieving in the turn to ontology.

The implication of such a retrieval, when done correctly, is the destabilization of the assumptions that inform ingrained methodological precepts for the study of radical difference. This is so because focusing on ‘ontology’—understood as the particular configuration of the world of whoever ‘we’ are studying, wherever ‘we’ are situated in time and space—allows for the kind of self-reflection that is needed for nurturing awareness of both the conditions for and the limits of transliteration and other ‘transfers of meaning’ between worlds.¹⁸ The first necessary condition for the sort of interpretive ethos that I am sketching is to cast critical attention to the normative foundations of Eurocentric conceptions of how to understand that which is different from oneself. This is no easy task, especially when taken seriously and implemented to unsettle the colonial bases of thinking-across-cultures that prevail in western social sciences and humanities—that is, in contrast to the ‘too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse’ as a mere ‘move to innocence’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 3).

This calls for political theory to decenter dominant schemes and categories by exposing their socially, politically, and historically situated character. Engaging in exercises of comparison and evaluation from a standpoint that is explicitly grounded in its own contextual specificity makes possible the kind of attunement that is needed to think, feel, perceive, and come to know what exists and how it exists in ways that allow for ongoing criticism and revision. It also opens space for considering *other* forms of making sense of the world, such as ones that do not classify and map in order to tame and commodify the Earth and its multiplicity of human and more-than-human inhabitants.

As a result, the scope of ethical reflection widens considerably, taking significant steps towards ‘ecologizing’ (Kohn, 2022) the deeply anthropocentric foundations of ethics and politics that underlie political theory. This is the primary insight I draw from the set of approaches that frame the question of difference in terms of ontology. The manner in which living beings (human and more-than-human) represent and think the world informs how they act in it and why—in other words, it informs their ethical practice. Processes of meaning interpretation and attribution are world-creating: it is in and through representing and thinking that selves (including ecologies of selves, such as forests¹⁹) enact specific configurations of ‘the real’, which in turn structure the webs of relations among the different beings that coexist in a given space and time.

Nadasdy is right to be wary of a reading of the turn to ontology that implies the existence of separate, self-contained worlds, as it carries a high risk of essentializing and reifying differences. One of his main worries is that taking theoretical reconstructions of radical alterity too literally can lead not only to exoticization and concomitant processes of extraction and erasure, but also to relativism, subjectivism, and solipsism. This is so because the strong conception of the ‘multiple-worlds thesis’ fractures ‘reality’ in the singular, thereby generating various versions of it and allowing for the possibility of simultaneous yet separate realms of existence. A significant problem posed by such an ontological stance is that what happens in one world may not be correlated with what takes place in another. And this gives rise to the incongruous and inappropriate view that a forest can both be an ecology of selves *and* a stock of resources for humans, depending on which world one stands on while approaching or gazing at the forest.

However, to claim that different ways of relating to and coming to know reality enacts multiple worlds does not entail the production and proliferation of a series of juxtaposed ‘realities’, each with its own laws, regularities, and conditions of existence. Instead, it means that there is a direct relationship between the lived experience of animate forms of existence and the various ways in which they respond to and inhabit the environments in which they are enmeshed. Taking how ‘our’ interlocutors sense and make sense of their worlds as literally as possible is not the same as positing multiple realities (see Nadasdy, 2007). But attending to, comparing, and assessing ways of understanding reality is a precondition for the disruption of prevailing schemas of thinking and knowing the one world that we all live in. And this opens up avenues for envisioning better ways of caring for the Earth, thus providing sources of ethical guidance towards social and ecological thriving.

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Notes

1. The anthropology-inspired ‘turn to ontology’ has been especially pronounced in political theory debates that center on radical forms of difference, diversity, and plurality. By ‘radical’ I mean forms of difference that reach beyond the traditional concern with multiculturalism and deep diversity as exemplified by the works of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, in particular. In this sense, radical difference refers to that which lies beyond conventional understandings of ‘the human’, which includes more-than-human living beings and ecologies of beings as well as their entanglements with one another and with the Earth as a whole. This turn has evolved in conjunction with a focus on decolonial and Indigenous politics as well

- as ‘non-modern’ knowledges and systems of thought. In the broad field of political theory (including comparative political theory and international political theory), FitzGerald, 2022, 2023; Goh, 2019; Hutchings, 2019; Jaeger, 2018; Kramm 2021; Orellana Matute, 2021; Paipais, 2017; Turner, 2021; and Zanotti, 2021; among others, are key figures in this conversation. See also e.g. the *Review of International Studies*’ recent special issue on ‘Pluriversal Relationality’ (Trowsell, Chadha Behera, and Shani 2022), among others. Note that comparative political theorists do not often use the term ‘ontology’ or ‘the pluriverse’; in this regard, Goh is one of the few to do so explicitly (2019). However, despite this absence, comparative political theory relies on underlying ontological premises that are not always explicitly stated. I hope this will become clearer as the essay unfolds.
2. For a more in-depth contextualization of anthropology’s turn to ontology in relation to political theory, see Turner (2021).
 3. For another set of powerful critiques of the ‘turn to ontology’ from an anthropological perspective, see Bessire and Bond (2014) as well as David Graeber (2015). I am also thinking here of some of the arguments that have been recently advanced by David Chandler, Julian Reid, and Beatriz Marín-Aguilera, among others. See esp. Chandler and Reid (2020); Marín-Aguilera (2021).
 4. As FitzGerald puts it, ‘[t]he pluriverse is a normative call to envision and build a world in which multiple worlds are possible as worlds’ (2023: 2).
 5. To my knowledge, Goh is the only comparative political theorist who talks about ‘pluriversality’ (2019: 119), and she is one of the few to talk about ontology in direct reference to anthropology.
 6. Nadasdy raises this point as well (2021: 367, note 7).
 7. See also Fargher et al. (2011a: 316), where they argue that ‘[r]ather than vertical integration focused on a site epicenter, integration of the urban landscape was achieved through horizontal and collective links such as the road and plaza network’.
 8. This is something that even some of the scholars who use the term ‘republic’ in this context concede. See e.g. López Corral et al. (2016: 42–53): ‘[To use the term “republic”] is perhaps inadequate to describe the complexity of the pre-Hispanic Indigenous organization, but, for the moment we will refer to it as such’. My translation.
 9. In this regard, see e.g. Quentin Skinner (2002: 74).
 10. This is done, more or less explicitly, by the following scholars: Fargher et al. (2011a); Sanders and Price (1968); Carrasco (1976); Florescano (2017); Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; among others. See also Offner, (1981).
 11. See Eduardo Kohn’s discussion of ‘multinaturalism’ and ‘perspectivism’ (2013: 71–102).
 12. Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser, and Arturo Escobar are an exception. See de la Cadena and Blaser (2018); as well as Escobar (2020). Martin Holbraad and Morten A. Pedersen, who are considered among the initiators of the ‘ontological turn’ within anthropology, do not mention the Zapatistas in their influential book. See Holbraad and Pedersen (2017). The same is true of John Law, another influential ‘ontological turn’ theorist (2015).
 13. For a full study of the Zapatistas, see Marco Estrada Saavedra (2007). Note that Indigenous resistance has existed as long as there have been threats and attempts to invade and colonize. I am here referring specifically to the emergence of an EZLN alliance and struggle.
 14. This is something that critics of the ontological turn imply when they argue that it transposes the studied phenomena ‘into a different ontological realm, where things can be true without having to be true to the rest of us’ (Laidlaw, 2012).

15. It is crucial to underscore here that my main theoretical objective aligns with Nadasdy's. I fully endorse his emphasis on the necessity of questioning one's own knowledge as an inherent requirement for intelligibility. And I agree with him that this is something that the strong version of the 'multiple worlds thesis' precludes, given that it suggests that one's 'views and practices are perfectly valid within the world [one] inhabit[s]' (Nadasdy, 2021: 365).
16. In this regard, see also Ravenscroft (2018); as well as Rosiek et al. (2020); among others.
17. Here I draw extensively on Kohn (2013).
18. I am here referring to what Miguel León Portilla coins as 'transvase' in his *El Destino de la Palabra* (2018). My loose translation.
19. See Kohn (2013).

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