

# Indigenous Oral Traditions From The Huasteca, Mexico



This paper deals with indigenous oral traditions in Mexico. It addresses issues of indigenous languages and how they can be documented, preserved and revitalized through projects about oral traditions in a national context in which there is a renewed discussion on multiculturalism and cross-cultural understanding.

In Mexico, the discussion of multiculturalism centers on 'indigenous issues', specifically on how indigenous peoples should integrate into the so-called modern, more westerly-orientated rest of the nation. In Mexico, indigenous cultures and languages are still systematically discriminated, as they are often seen as irrelevant remnants of a past that have, at most, mere folkloristic value. Since the 1990's, public policies regarding indigenous issues underwent a change and now focus on concepts of multiculturalism in order to favor a more equal position for indigenous languages and cultures.

The new policies were adopted after national pressures like the 1994 Zapatista uprising, and followed up on international interests in the situation of indigenous peoples, such as shown through the festivities around the 500th Anniversary of the Discovery of America by Columbus in 1992, or in the declaration of the UN's First and Second Decade of the Indigenous Peoples (1995-2014). They enhance a novel discourse that includes concepts like cultural diversity, interculturalism, intangible heritage, and other terms that are in accordance with the terminology of international conventions on indigenous issues.

Of course, discourse is tacit, and the mentality that instigated centuries of discrimination, assimilation and exclusion of the indigenous segment of Mexico's society has not yet vanished. One of the many areas in which indigenous communities will have to demand the fulfillment of their rights and contribute actively to the foundation of a more equal interaction regards their languages.

This paper presents the situation of the indigenous languages in Mexico, which will serve as a context to two projects that have been carried out in the Huasteca

area on indigenous oral traditions. The projects triggered a discussion on the role of oral resources in the documentation, preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages. This discussion includes thoughts on Mexico's linguistic politics, the issue of how to deal with the existing linguistic variants, the well-known problem of fixation of oral material when recorded, and the role of modern technology in the documentation, preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures.

### *Indigenous languages in Mexico*

*Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity.*

( Language, Vitality and Endangerment, UNESCO Document, 2002)

Language and culture are two phenomena that are intricately entwined. Each language contains unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge of the group and its vigor is closely related to the strength of the group's ethnic identity. In Mexico, policies on cultural diversity are directly linked to the existence of the indigenous languages that are spoken in its territory today, as language constitutes the main criterion to confirm the existence of a culturally diverse society. In this respect, the reasoning is that because of the fact that there are many languages spoken, there must be as many cultures in the country.

### *One language, one culture*

This criterion 'one language, one culture' is merely operational as it allows the Mexican government to quantify and make a first inventory of the country's many cultures. Academics have criticized the simplistic, rigid, and a-historic procedure: within the same people there may be various languages spoken, and not all Indians still speak their mother tongue. Indeed, the relationship between language and ethnic affiliation is less and less obvious in a world in which indigenous languages are endangered. Mending this erroneous procedure is especially important because of its far-reaching consequences, as it is the starting-point for policies concerning indigenous rights, bilingual and intercultural education, as well as the implementation of all kinds of cultural programs, among others. The pressures have led to a reconsideration of the government position, and now several of its institutions are in charge of designing

new methods of measuring the presence of indigenous languages and indigenous peoples.

It is true, however, that Mexico is an especially rich country as far as languages are concerned. Though estimates vary according to the source and its particular way of defining the means of distinguishing variants from languages, I would like to list a few figures. First of all, the country counts eleven linguistic families - almost 10% of the total number of existing linguistic families in the world -, with sixty-eight linguistic groups that count 364 living languages (INALI 2008).

Regarding the number of speakers, the rather low percentage of speakers of an indigenous tongue - 8% according to *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005) - is compensated by the rather large number of individuals: in 2005, official figures say, Mexico counted 6 million speakers of indigenous languages from the age of five onward (INEGI 2005), which represents the highest number of people per country in Latin America.<sup>30</sup> The indigenous population is mostly concentrated in the center and southern part of the country.

### *Linguistic diversity*

A good example of Mexico's linguistic diversity can be found in the Huasteca area, where our projects were carried out. This rural area, characterized by its multilingual setting in which six different indigenous peoples live among non-indigenous persons called Mestizos, is the scene of six linguistic groups that stem from four different indigenous language families and which contain at least ten different languages. Though not each indigenous people has contact with others, all languages somehow interact, and several cultural features are shared among the inhabitants.

Mexico is not the exception when it comes to the subordinate position of indigenous languages: they are not recognized as official languages, have little speakers in comparison to the dominant language, generally lack standardization, are oral more than written, and have no prestige at the national level, where only Spanish connotes social and economical success. Most of the indigenous languages are endangered and in different stages of a disappearing process. In each particular case, the situation of language loss has specific historical and political origins, yet the result is nearly always the same: speakers change to Spanish as vernacular, i.e. the language of day-to-day interaction, and do not transmit their mother tongue to their children anymore. Some of the factors that contribute to this process are linguistic politics -both within the speaker communities as well as at the national level-, contact with a dominant Mestizo

culture, economic forces, ideology and identity issues.

### *Language and oral tradition*

Not only in order to find a lending ear in the national funding institutions, but also because I am seriously concerned with expressions that enable me to study the relationships between language and culture (or language *in* culture, as several scholars propose), my projects are usually justified in terms of interculturalism, cultural diversity, and preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

One of the ways of working with these language expressions is through the study of indigenous oral traditions and, more specifically, oral tales. While at first I was interested in what kind of cultural knowledge is transmitted through tale telling and how this cultural knowledge is valorized by both the narrator and his or her audience, now my interest lies more in the better understanding of the language itself as a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge. I want to illustrate this by presenting the experiences of two group projects that I have coordinated about oral tales from traditions of Tenek and Nahua Indians from the Huasteca area.

In 2000-2001 we developed a project on Tenek and Nahua oral traditions in the Huasteca area. In this area, the Tenek Indians, who are the original inhabitants, have been living together with Nahua Indians for almost six hundred years. Just before the Spanish Conquest, this last people - then called Aztecs - came to the region during their last expansion period. Close and constant cross-cultural contact followed, and quite a few Tenek people even became Nahuatl-speaking citizens under Aztec rule.

This process of close contact influenced cultural processes, among these the oral traditions of both peoples. When we saw that many Tenek and Nahua tales drew upon the same themes (like the origin of fire, the origin of corn, or the coming of floods) and followed nearly the same sequence of episodes, we wanted to collect a sample of these tales in order to have a register of the existing production and be able to study the current dynamics of tale telling as a living tradition. This would give us an idea of the existing literary genres, themes, the narration context, valorization, and mutual influences.

### *Tale telling as a living tradition*

Apart from these academic aims, the project pretended to contribute to the strengthening and revalorization of tale telling as a living tradition within the indigenous communities. This more applied part of the project carried out through the organization and implementation of a series of workshops for

children, and was justified as a contribution to revitalize oral traditions. In this context, revitalization was defined as *'the process of favoring the continuity of indigenous traditions, assuring its transmission through the generations within the intimate spaces and extending its use to more and other spaces in order to secure an integral development of its speakers'*. With the term integral development is meant a process that includes economical security, ecological integrity, life quality, and a responsible management of resources.

It was the aspect of inter-generational transmission that determined our choice to work with children; the workshops took place at elementary schools and in other public spaces within the community, such as the communal house, which means that at times we coordinated the activities with schoolteachers and at others with the local authorities. During the workshops the children drew pictures regarding local tales we had previously told them, narrated to us and to each other, and wrote down tales they had heard from family members.

Sometimes we invited elderly persons from the village to join us during the workshop and tell locally known tales to the children. We did not analyze the products of the workshops, and thought that our mere interest and collaborative work with the children would somehow transmit the idea that these tales were appealing and valuable.



### *Circulation of indigenous oral tradition*

When these first two parts of the project - a reasonable compilation and an incipient contribution to revitalization - were covered, we still had to fulfill the third part, concerning the circulation of indigenous oral tradition. We thought it

fundamental to make the tales known, both within and outside the indigenous communities. The work with the children in the workshops were very labor-intensive and time-consuming, and we wanted to be able to give something back to the communities that was more tangible and durable. In the same way, we wanted to address the non-indigenous segment in Mexico, for we think that it is important that this part of the population - the great and dominant majority learns about indigenous traditions, for knowledge is a foundation on which mutual respect might be gained. When talking about Mexico's multicultural society, the subject of interculturalism is always mentioned, and I think that in this respect non-indigenous Mexicans should interculturalize as much as indigenous Mexicans do.

So we published a popular science book with a selection of tales in Nahuatl and Tenek languages, with a translation into Spanish (Van 't Hooft & Cerda 2003). Each chapter of the book dealt with a different theme, which was accordingly introduced so as to further a better comprehension of the tales for non-specialist readers. We hoped the book would contribute to the understanding and positive valuation of indigenous oral traditions, both within and outside indigenous communities. The publisher would take care of its distribution to every public library in the Huasteca, and we did our share through the presentation and distribution of the book in several Mexican States. We considered the third goal of our project to be accomplished.

### *Oral traditions as a written text*

In several ways the mentioned publication can be regarded as a contribution. Academically speaking, the selected tales are singular for their themes, narrative structure, and creativity, and we trust the book to reflect these characteristics. For non-indigenous persons, the book might represent a refreshing change to already known tales. For the indigenous communities, the publication concerns a register of tales that are considered to be important. Their register is relevant in itself, because they constitute a written testimony of a part of the oral tradition of a group 'so it will not be lost'. This way, people have access to material that represents a part of their cultural heritage. Access to one's oral tradition provides a means to get to know and discuss this cultural expression, which is -people say- less and less popular among young people.

Though aware of the disadvantages that exist when turning a verbal source into a written one - in the 1970s Goody (1977) already mentions the transformations in contents, structure and language suffered by an oral tale when transcribed - the

availability of written material permits a discussion about indigenous languages that now can be revised, studied, reinterpreted and reflected on. Despite official discourse about the richness of indigenous languages and its fundamental role in Mexico's multicultural society, the current position of these languages is one of great disadvantage in relation to the dominant one. Mexico's situation of asymmetrical bilingualism stands for a vigorous, prestigious Spanish language, which has a normative alphabet and a solid written tradition. The dominated languages are commonly characterized by their lack of a standardized alphabet and an unfortunate obstruction of the process of standardization e.g. due to multiple dialectal variants, divergent ideologies of their promoters, and their condition of being frequently more oral than written. In this context, written material constitutes a new way to transmit these traditions, which means that the use of both language and the cultural expressions it beholds is extended to more spaces of interaction.

### *Huasteca area*

When we presented the book in indigenous communities in the Huasteca, people were happily surprised by the fact that we had published their tales, and also because we had done so in the indigenous languages. They believe it is important to have this material in a written form, and repeatedly say that this kind of publications prevents their traditions from becoming lost. At the same time, the existence of their tales as a written text makes them 'important', as it places their tales next to the content to be found in other published material in Mexico. From time to time, the tales are taken up as teaching materials during workshops with indigenous children as a part of the program of health brigades or anthropological fieldwork in the Huasteca area, much in the same way as we did during the revitalization-phase of our project.

However, it is a fact that the book as such is not read: indigenous people in Mexico generally do not have a habit of reading, and they do even less so in their mother tongue. The use of the book is found in terms of the material being a symbolical reference to the relevance of the tales depicted in it and of the indigenous language in which it is written. It is usually stowed away as a kind of trophy and is perhaps taken out solely to show it to strangers who arrive and want to know about the local culture. I do not qualify this use as being irrelevant: the existence of published materials about indigenous cultures written in indigenous languages as symbols for the dignifying of indigenous expressions in Mexican society is very important indeed. Due to a series of reasons, indigenous

languages are still greatly underrepresented in Mexican written culture (Montemayor 2001). If our publication contributed to this process of dignifying, we will have, in part, succeeded in our goal.

Yet, the other part of our goal was that people would really use this material in the ways they deemed fit as a means to discuss and thus revitalize and revitalize their oral tradition. Published books were definitely not the indicated means to do so, at least not under the current local circumstances in which reading in the mother tongue is not a common practice.

### *Orality and the oral traditions*

Like any other oral tradition, in the indigenous communities in the Huasteca tales are transmitted as part of an always changing living tradition, in which all tales are adapted to the audience's expectations, the motives for narrating, and the linguistic competence of the narrator, as well as other local circumstances.

Regardless of the general structure of the tale, which generally does not change, and the fact that the narrator cannot deviate from the literary canon of his or her tradition (Jason 1977), oral traditions are characterized by their heterogeneity in representations, versions and possible interpretations, in which every tale telling session is unique and unrepeatable. The tales express and discuss current issues that a community has to deal with, often through tales set in the past. At the same time, the representation (i.e. the act of narrating) is a verbal art, in which elements such as creativity, style and rhetoric become relevant.

In coming to terms with the oral character of this material, we considered that the means of getting this material 'back to the field' in a more fruitful way would have to correspond with the dynamics of these oral expressions. It would have to be something close to the natural setting of telling and based on local habits of representing orality. The thought came up to make an Audio CD with the tales in its original audio recordings in the indigenous languages. This approach would give the indigenous communities a material that was not only familiar to them but also popular-people often listen to the radio and commonly play tapes or CDs with music. Perhaps they would be more inclined to listen to a CD with tales than to read them in a book.

### *Recreating the verbal representation*

A second consideration of creating material in an audio format concerned the advantage of recreating the verbal representation itself, as one would now be able to listen to the oral forms and conventions of the tales, and thus hear ways of



expression, emotions, rhythm, and other characteristics. This might make the material more attractive to both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences, and would perhaps make them more sensitive towards the existence and value of indigenous languages as a way of oral expression.

We set out to achieve this goal in a second project. We wanted the audio material to offer a varied sample, so we selected the most representative tales, as far as we were able to observe during fieldwork. According to the length of an Audio CD, 74 minutes, only the shorter versions of three tales in the Nahuatl language and another three in the Tenek language were chosen, together with presentations of the Spanish translations that had been published in the already mentioned book. The details of the production process of this Audio CD were already discussed elsewhere (Van 't Hooft 2004).

It is relevant to stress that it was not only necessary to record the Spanish translations of the tales, but also to re-record the original indigenous versions because of their poor technical quality. These new recordings or re-recordings were made by professional radio-people who work at an indigenous radio station in the Huasteca, and permitted the audio to accompany the written text literally.

#### *Variants in indigenous languages*

The recorded material expresses only one of the existing variants of the two indigenous languages in which they are transmitted. Even though the Huasteca is a relatively compact and interconnected area, both Tenek and Nahuatl languages have several variants. In the western part of the Huasteca (in the State of San Luis Potosi), the Tenek language is spoken differently from the variant known in the eastern part (in the State of Veracruz). Huastecan Nahuatl knows three variants, and even though they are part of a language continuum, linguists enlist them as being not variants but rather different languages (Gordon 2005; INALI 2008).

In this respect it is important to take into account that the defining of a particular way of speaking as either a variant of a certain language or a proper language in itself is often a socio-political matter, and does not rest upon linguistic features only. People say not to understand persons who they consider to be different, even though linguistically speaking their variants might be mutually intelligible. Also, there might be political reasons to distinguish variants as separate languages instead of variants of the same language, as is for instance the case with Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, which, linguistically speaking, are variants of one sole language that are more or less mutually intelligible.

In the Mexican context, the lack of standardization of indigenous languages through available written or oral material is one of the factors that stimulates linguistic diversity. People write the language 'the way they speak it', and the available publications, little as there is, use different orthographies and, at times, even different alphabets. Oral sources, such as the programs transmitted by three indigenous radio stations in the Huasteca, each make use of a specific local variant, mostly the one of the presenters. These programs have little presence outside the micro-regional level, and do not generate a standard way of speaking the indigenous tongue.

### *The Tenek Tales*

In the case of our audio production, the Tenek tales were recorded in the western variant, and the tales in the Nahuatl language were from the eastern part of the Huasteca. In both instances, people from villages where a different variant is spoken say to have trouble with the understanding of the recorded tales. This narrows down the target public that will be enjoying their way of tale telling. On the other hand, the distribution of the CD in the whole Huasteca area also gives the opportunity to demonstrate the richness of both languages and their oral expression to everybody involved.

To get involved in the standardization process of the indigenous languages - in speaking or writing - was not part of the aims of our project. Yet, inevitably we had to take into account the existence of language varieties and make decisions regarding which variants to use and which alphabet to write in. Every publication, in oral or written format, is a contribution to existence of materials in the indigenous languages and, as such, has an impact on the representation of a specific variant or of a particular way of writing over others. The limited production of materials in indigenous languages makes this situation even more noticeable. Standardization processes have symbolic importance and convey ideological interests, and by taping tales that belong to a particular variant and then writing them down in a particular alphabet we had to take a stand.

### *Orality and fixation*

We thought that the audio CD would constitute a means to better represent orality than a written text could do. Yet, during its production we learnt about particular conflicts that exist between orality and its reproduction in an oral format. I want to discuss this point briefly.

As attractive as an audio production may have seemed to our purposes, this

means of transmission of oral tradition suffers the same problem as written sources do: it tends towards fixation of oral tales. Both written and recorded versions, though oral-derived, lose their flexibility, i.e. their faculty to adapt to the circumstances of the moment. While the natural tale telling context is a place of discussion in which all actors may participate to reconstruct a particular tale, the tales on the audio CD are mono-directed tales. Even though they still might be a starting point for the discussion of oral traditions in society, this discussion cannot develop during the narration but has to be held afterwards, without the original narrator being present and in a different setting. Also, recordings that stem from a particular narrating context might not be able to address the interests of an audience different than the one that was present during recording, the variant in which a tale is recorded might not be the one its later audience knows, and this variant might not reflect their particular tradition.

### *The printed word is the truth*

On the other hand, the transmission of a particular tale in an inflexible, published format enhances the idea of 'officialization' of the narrated events. In a society where publications are thought of highly - 'the printed word is the truth' - a recording of a tale that can be reproduced over and over again on CD might make that version an authoritative one. This means that a specific version of a tale, told in a particular context and for particular motives but recorded and distributed on CD, could be considered as *the* tale and taken as a model for its future telling.

The problem of 'officialization' is indeed present in the Huasteca area, where the tradition of publishing materials in the indigenous languages is just beginning. On the other hand, the current situation in Mexico regarding the severe disadvantages of indigenous languages in relation to the dominant Spanish tongue calls for strong actions in order to demonstrate the linguistic and cultural value of these languages. Publications in these languages are an important way of letting indigenous people feel their language is important and making these languages known to a general public. In answer to this possible process of officialization it is necessary to continue producing Audio CD's so as to create materials that contain different versions of a tale, from various narrators, in all language variants. Only when people have access to a diversity of tales can they see that tale telling is a dynamic activity and value this tradition as such. And only then they might want to add their own versions, telling them to family members and friends, and thus preserve their tales as a living tradition.

### *Orality and the new technologies*

These days, new technologies have made it more affordable to carry out projects aimed at language documentation, preservation and revitalization. We can now go into the field, make near-professional recordings and produce materials like written publications or audio CDs without much effort. Technology has also paved the way for the creation of interactive materials on indigenous languages and cultures, like DVD-ROMs or websites with information that is accessible worldwide. At San Luis Potosi State University we are exploring all these technological options and the ways they might be of assistance to further the documentation, preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

The production of materials about indigenous oral traditions with the help of these technologies is part of this effort, as tale telling concerns one of the oral expressions that is highly valued within the indigenous communities. It should be noted, however, that written and audio publications are not the only materials we have been aiming to create about indigenous oral traditions. Also, we are making a series of radio programs in which we talk about indigenous oral traditions, transmit recorded tales, and invite people to discuss related themes such as how to recover the youth's interest in tale telling, the importance of the indigenous language as a means of transmitting oral tales, the desired qualities of narrators, and the significance of certain tales, among others. This way, we try to contribute with materials in indigenous languages that stimulate the process of reflection on indigenous languages and cultures, especially in the communities in the Huasteca area but also among other people in Mexico, and thus display part of the cultural and linguistic richness of Mexico's indigenous population.

However, because of the fact that these tales - as well as the languages in which they are transmitted - are primarily oral, the presentation and use of these materials should promote a discussion about orality as an integral part of transmitting knowledge, next to writing. This discussion must part from the linguistic policies of every community, which involves a continuous dialogue among representatives of the communities in order to work on themes such as the valuation of the spoken word and its most adequate ways of transmission.

The joint existence and circulation of all kinds of materials in oral languages - live oral transmissions, published texts, radio programs, video productions, DVD-ROMs, audio CDs, websites, and so on - may contribute to the preservation and revitalization of oral traditions. These materials should be diverse, include different versions of a tale, and represent different linguistic variants, so as to

serve as a basis for the reflexion on and narration of tales within the indigenous communities and thus stimulate the continuity of this cultural expression. The production of materials from oral traditions is a viable contribution to the process of revitalization of both these traditions and the languages through which they are transmitted.

### *Conclusions*

Strategies to document, preserve and revitalize indigenous languages are not neutral, for they interfere in the situation of a particular linguistic variant. The ones to develop these strategies are usually researchers, who consider that there are academic reasons to justify their interference. Yet, indigenous communities are not always interested in the linguistic or cultural bearing of their languages, they might not necessarily welcome the good-will of academics to empower their communities through projects about language, or they might have moral objections to the ways in which the research-aims will be achieved. Also, when they do feel this interest and share the aims of the project, it is not always clear which is the best way to document, preserve and revitalize this heritage (Linguapax 2004).

However, it is crucial to carry out these kinds of projects if we want to contribute to the protection and strengthening of our linguistic diversity. A key factor in their effectiveness lies in the direct involvement of the local people. Each project should be participative in all respects, from the very early stages of its design on until the distribution and employment part of its final products, and should part from an intensive exchange of views between local people and scientific researchers about issues that are important to all participants in the project, and not only to those of scientists. Together with academics, the community should participate in working on language documentation, preservation and revitalization. This can be done through the training of local researchers, whose expertise on their language and culture engage all participants in a process of mutual learning and understanding, which generates results that are beneficial to both actors. A community-based project that includes collective action guarantees a more profound study by focusing on something that is of real interest for the community and, therefore, a better quality of its products (Herlihy & Knapp 2003).

### *Dialogue*

I want to stress again the relevance of the fact that these products do not only

seek an indigenous audience, but also a non-indigenous one, for interculturalism should work both ways. Non-indigenous people will have to learn about indigenous languages and cultures: only when our partner in the dialogue respects us can we start an exchange based on equality and mutual understanding. Our contribution to this process of interculturalism is through the production of bilingual materials, in indigenous languages and in Spanish, which may serve to both population groups. Furthermore, the materials pretend to reinforce ties between distinct indigenous peoples, in this particular case between Tenek and Nahua Indians in the Huasteca area. By joining the two traditions in one publication, the two indigenous peoples involved will know about a different but similar tradition of persons that live nearby. The written format and the options provided by the new technologies (DVD-ROMs, websites) constitute new ways of transmitting these traditions. This situation expands the spaces in which these languages and cultures develop, which is one of the aims of language revitalization. The existence of these materials increases the presence of indigenous languages and contributes to the assessment of their merits. Together with appropriate public politics on linguistic matters and corresponding educational programs to carry them out, revitalization projects that work with local communities create the foundation of the preservation of the linguistic diversity that characterizes Mexico today.

—

Published in: [Traditions on the Move - Essays in honour of Jarich Oosten](#)

Edited by Jan Jansen, Sabine Luning & Erik de Maaker

Rozenberg Publishers, 2009 - ISBN 978 90 3610 157 8

*About the author:*

Anuschka van 't Hooft is Professor of Anthropology at the Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, Mexico, since January 2003. She is a specialist on indigenous oral traditions, especially from Mexico. She studied Amerindian Languages and Cultures at Leiden University, the Netherlands, where she got her doctorate in 2003 on the topic of Huastecan Nahua tale telling under a combined mentorship of Prof. Dr. Mineke Schipper and Prof. Dr. Jarich Oosten. After having finished the research projects that are the topic of this paper, she started a multimedia project on Huastecan Nahua language and culture (2007-2010) that includes a vocabulary, photogalleries, videos, audios, articles and a commented bibliography, and which can be consulted at [www.avanthooft.net](http://www.avanthooft.net)

See also: Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indigenas: <http://www.inali.gob.mx/>

—

*Jarich Oosten* has been a major propagator of the influential Leiden school of anthropology. More than just being inspired by structuralism, this approach stresses the importance of extensive fieldwork, and of the comparison of research findings within a culturally relevant regional realm. Jarich stressed the importance to go beyond preconceived ideas. Essential to his approach was to proceed from the data that emerged in the course of the research. This ensured that the focus was not diverted, as so easily occurs, towards the existing body of academic literature, and remained with what anthropologists call 'the field.'

Traditions, and the way these are interpreted, play a crucial role in people's experience of who they are, what social groups they belong to, how they are connected to the place they live in, and what claims they can advance to their social and physical environment. Consequently, ideas about tradition, bodies of knowledge, not only serve to interpret the past, but have great significance for the relationships that people maintain in the present as well. The contributions to this volume explore various ways in which traditions are created and transmitted. 'Traditions on the Move' allows Jarich Oosten's former PhD students to celebrate his influence on their work

---

## **Is Greece On The Road To Recovery, Or Will It Remain Trapped By Debt? An Interview With Economist Costas Lapavitsas**



Professor Costas  
Lapavitsas BSc Photo:  
SOAS University of  
London

In early 2010, Greece became technically bankrupt as it was shut out from borrowing in the international credit markets because of skyrocketing deficits and huge public debt levels. Since then, the country has been under bailout programs created by the European Union (EU), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to keep it inside the eurozone. However, the bailout programs have been accompanied by brutal austerity measures that have had a catastrophic effect on Greek economy and society. Yet the current pseudo-leftist Syriza government — which has been enforcing the EU neoliberal agenda since coming to power in 2015, with greater dedication than any other Greek government since the outbreak of the crisis — declares today's economic situation a "success story." However, not everyone is buying the official story.

Costas Lapavitsas is a Marxist economist at the University of London. Since the outbreak of the eurozone crisis in 2010, he argued consistently in favor of Greek default and exit from the eurozone as the key to a left-wing strategy to confront the crisis. He produced much analytical work and his arguments had considerable influence within the left, but also more widely across Greek society. For several years, his name became widely associated with these policies and had influence within Syriza, even though its leadership was completely opposed to this strategy. In January 2015 he accepted an invitation by Syriza to join its electoral ticket as an independent, and was elected to the Hellenic Parliament with a great majority in his electoral region of Imathia.



Lapavitsas served as a member of parliament for seven months and was one of the leading voices in the country in favor of a radical course of action that would bring a political rupture with the lenders. The Syriza leadership, and especially the circle of Alexis Tsipras, tried systematically to marginalize him, keeping him away from positions of authority. When the Syriza leadership surrendered to the lenders in August, 2015, Lapavitsas left the party, together with more than 30 others. They were the true left of Syriza and tried to create an alternative left-wing party called Popular Unity. Unfortunately, their efforts have not been successful, partly because of their own organizational weaknesses, and partly because a disillusionment with the left prevailed in Greek society after the surrender of Syriza.

Is Greece on the road to economic recovery? In this interview, Lapavitsas suggests it is simply ludicrous on the part of a former left party to speak of a neoliberal success story for a country mired in poverty and debt.

*C.J. Polychroniou: We have been told that after eight years of harsh bailout programs that devastated economic activity and produced immense pain and suffering for the great majority of citizens, Greece is about to turn the corner, as recovery is now well under way and investor confidence is staging a huge comeback. This is, of course, the official version of the current condition of the Greek economy, so I am interested in your own reading of the state of economic affairs in Greece.*

*Costas Lapavitsas: The bailouts have indeed brought a kind of stability to the Greek economy, as the fiscal deficit and the current account deficit have been eliminated. This stability has been achieved in an extraordinarily clumsy and brutal way. In brief, domestic aggregate demand was crushed — both investment and consumption. Productive capacity was lost on a grand scale as industrial output fell by more than 30 percent and unemployment rocketed. The country was made dramatically poorer and weaker.*

This body blow to the economy was not accompanied by any significant structural change, despite the endless talk about “reforms.” Greece continues to have a disproportionately large service sector that is uncompetitive, a very weak industrial sector with a high propensity to import, and a weak agrarian sector with low productivity. The country also has negative net savings, very weak investment, poor productivity, a heavily concentrated banking system laden with non-performing equity reaching 45 percent of the aggregate balance sheet and

very limited spending on innovation. I could go on and on. Many of these weaknesses became worse through the stabilization program.

There is no evidence at all that the country has “turned the corner.” Practically all the macroeconomic data show an economy lodged in stagnation: GDP growth for 2017 will be barely above 1 percent. Investment is not rising with any vigor. Consumption is falling. Exports have risen a little, but imports have risen even more. Incomes are stagnant. Income inequality has greatly increased. There are strong indications that corruption and illegal economic activity have increased, and the rich now brazenly flaunt their wealth. Greece will continue down this path for the foreseeable future.

*Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his finance minister Euclid Tsakalotos are also alleging that Greece will no longer be under EU supervision when it exits the current bailout program. Is there any truth to this?*

In August 2018, when the third bailout program is due to end, Greece will have to meet its borrowing needs in the open markets. The sums are substantial. Merely to roll over principal in 2019, the country will need more than 12 billion euros. Conditions in the open markets are, at present, loose, and money is extremely cheap, but Greece remains a very special case. For this reason, the government is planning to accumulate a cushion of more than 15 billion euros to act as guarantee for foreign lenders.

This is a piece of extraordinary folly for a country that is desperately short of investment — keeping close to 10 percent of its GDP as a stock of dead money. Even so, international lenders will have to be further reassured that austerity will not be relaxed and that Greece would have access to official sources of support, if need be. This means that Greece would require implicit or explicit support by EU lenders before it goes to the markets, which of course, implies extra monitoring of Greece, beyond that of other indebted EU countries. Greece will remain effectively in a neocolonial status.

*Where do things stand with regard to the debt? And do you see any willingness on the part of EU authorities to proceed with a debt write-off any time soon?*

As incredible as it might sound, debt is currently rising again, both in absolute and relative terms. Thus, the general government debt was 312 billion euros in 2015 (177 percent of GDP) and 315 billion euros in 2016 (181 percent of GDP),

but in 2017, it headed toward 330 billion euros (perhaps 187 percent of GDP). The reason is that the country is borrowing to create the incredible cushion that the government and the lenders want it to have by the end of this year. There is no doubt, of course, that Greek debt is unsustainable, and the situation is not improving at all. The country will certainly require debt relief.

However, a large part of the debt, perhaps three-quarters, is not tradable, since it is in the hands of official lenders in the EU. I do not think that there is any prospect of a deep debt write-off because that would affect official lenders, who would then have to confront their own electorates. If there is to be any relief, it will probably take the form of extension of the maturity of the debt and low interest rates. To receive these marginal improvements, the country will have to apply austerity, deregulation and privatization policies as far as the eye can see. Greece is basically trapped by the debt.

*How do you explain the political and ideological turnaround of Alexis Tsipras and of Syriza in general?*

There are many levels on which one could approach this question, but in some respects, the answer is quite simple. Tsipras and his immediate circle were people who never had serious ideological commitments of any kind. They were primarily interested in power and never intended to change things structurally, not to mention putting the country on a socialist path. They played a political and electoral game very successfully, and in several respects, continue so to do.

During the first months in government, they were under the false impression that they could force the EU to make concessions — a folly that was made worse by the incoherent arguments of Yanis Varoufakis, then the minister of finance. Inevitably, they lost every single battle with the lenders, even the minor skirmishes. When they eventually realized the nature of reality, they surrendered completely to the lenders and embraced the bailout programs to remain in power. The Syriza government of the last two years is the most obedient government Greece has had since the start of its crisis, which plays old-style politics domestically and follows a thoroughly conservative foreign policy. It is a disgrace, a real blot on the face of the Greek and the international left.

*In the early years of the crisis, you advocated Greece's withdrawal from the euro. Does it make any sense for the country to leave the eurozone now?*

In 2010, Greece basically had two options. One was to comply with the demands of the bailout programs imposed by the EU lenders. The other was to follow an independent path by defaulting on the debt and exiting the eurozone. This would have been a difficult path to take, but it would have offered a real prospect of economic regeneration and deep social transformation in favor of working people. The ruling bloc of the country, sensing the risks that the second path implied for its rule, became fully committed to the bailouts and never wavered. The bailouts have gradually created a new reality in the country that is clear for all to see: a weak and stagnating economy with a harsh and more class-ridden society.

Exiting the eurozone is no longer a step of immediate and direct urgency for Greece — the disaster has already happened. The country now needs a broad program of economic transformation that can put it on a growth path while changing the balance of power in favor of labor and against capital. It also needs to recapture its sovereignty. Needless to say, these things are not feasible within the eurozone. This is how exit should be now posited, in my view.

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

---

## **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie ~ The Danger Of A Single Story**

Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice — and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding.

TEDTalks is a daily video podcast of the best talks and performances from the TED Conference, where the world's leading thinkers and doers give the talk of their lives in 18 minutes. Featured speakers have included Al Gore on climate

change, Philippe Starck on design, Jill Bolte Taylor on observing her own stroke, Nicholas Negroponte on One Laptop per Child, Jane Goodall on chimpanzees, Bill Gates on malaria and mosquitoes, Pattie Maes on the “Sixth Sense” wearable tech, and “Lost” producer JJ Abrams on the allure of mystery. TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design, and TEDTalks cover these topics as well as science, business, development and the arts. Closed captions and translated subtitles in a variety of languages are now available on TED.com, at <http://www.ted.com/translate>. Watch a highlight reel of the Top 10 TEDTalks at <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/top10>

---

## Op de vleugels van de draak - Globaliseringslezing 2013



In de lente van 2009 kocht ik een Emirates Airlines-ticket voor een reis van twee maanden naar Dubai en Guangzhou - de Chinese havenstad in de Pareldelta, bij ons beter bekend als Kanton. De jaren daarvoor had ik veel tijd doorgebracht in Congo en drie boeken over het land geschreven. Ik was blij iets nieuws te gaan zien, maar ook enigszins beschroomd: Dubai kende ik al, maar het was mijn eerste reis naar China. Kon ik er op dit moment in mijn geschiedenis zomaar een nieuw gebied bijnemen, zou ik mezelf naar binnen kunnen wurmen zoals ik in Congo had gedaan en me zo klein maken dat ik kon kijken in plaats van bekeken te

worden?

Viereneenhalf jaar later is er mijn nieuwe boek *Op de vleugels van de draak*, waarin ik beschrijf wat globalisering betekent in het leven van Afrikanen en Chinezen die heen en weer reizen tussen Afrika en China.

Ik hou altijd een lijst bij van de plaatsen die ik onderweg aandoe en de tijd die ik

er doorbreng. Zelden is de rij zo lang geweest, zelden figureerden er zoveel namen op. Changsha, Jinhua, Bagua Cun, Wuhan, Yiwu - ik had een duizelingwekkende vaart en kwam een grote hoeveelheid mensen tegen, die net als ik onderweg waren en vaak evenveel reden tot schroom hadden als ik, al leken ze daar aanmerkelijk minder last van te hebben.

De Congolese commerçant Henri, die in Dubai een container vollaadde met schoonheidsproducten, had Engels geleerd uit een zakwoordenboekje tijdens de vlucht van Kinshasa naar Addis Abeba. Hij begreep aanvankelijk niet waarom mensen in Dubai 'nee' antwoordden op alles. 'I no, I no' - pas na een tijdje snapte hij dat ze 'I know' zeiden. De Chinese Shudi had na twaalf jaar Zuid-Afrika weliswaar een aarzelende Engelse woordenschat opgebouwd, maar toen ik na onze ontmoeting zei: 'I hope to see you again one day', stond hij hulpeloos tegenover me en vroeg: 'One day? Which day: Monday, Tuesday?'

Ik kwam terecht in een wereld vol mythes en sterke verhalen. De Malinese commerçant Cheikhna vertelde me dat de Chinezen pas vis begonnen te eten nadat de Malinese president Modibo Keita in de jaren zestig tijdens een reis naar zijn geliefde China een aantal vissen meenam voor Mao, die ze dankbaar uitzette in een vijver. Shanshan, een Chinese studente Afrika Studies, bekende me dat haar moeder bang was haar naar Afrika te laten vertrekken: ze dacht dat haar dochter daar zwart zou worden en haar kansen op de Chinese huwelijksmarkt zou verspelen.

Soms voelde ik me als de Chinese migrant die op een luwe avond in Guangzhou neerzeeg op zijn geruite koffer en verward om zich heen keek naar het voorbijrazende verkeer op de Huanshi Zhongstraat - net een stripfiguur die uit het hemelruim was gevallen en zich in een halo van sterretjes afvroeg waar hij in godsnaam terecht was gekomen.

Wat zocht ik, wat hield me al die jaren in beweging? Het is soms goed achteraf stil te staan en na te gaan hoe het allemaal begon.

In het jaar 2000 ontmoette ik in Kisangani, de stad aan de bocht in de Congostroom, twee jonge Indiase broers die een winkel openden in het centrum. Ze hadden niets van de oude, vermoeide Indiërs die van generatie op generatie in Afrika hadden gewoond en zich in hun stoffige winkeltjes voortbewogen alsof het continent met hun ziel aan de haal was gegaan. Sachin en Vishal kwamen uit

Dubai, hadden elan en al gauw beschikten ze over een breed netwerk van contacten.

De stad was in handen van Ugandese, Rwandese en Congolese rebellen en een legertje van hulpverleners dat in jeeps door de straten sjeesde. Sachin en Vishal verplaatsten zich, net als de lokale goud- en diamanthandelaren, met brommers. Terwijl iedereen jammerde over de teloorgang van de stad en om opdrachten bedelde bij de kapitaalkrachtige hulporganisaties, exploreerden zij de markt en hadden het over *opportunities*. Ze zagen dat er op de slechte wegen in en buiten de stad behoefte was aan stevige, goedkope motoren. Inmiddels exporteren ze vanuit Dubai Chinese brommers naar het hele oosten van Afrika.

Maar wellicht werd mijn belangstelling al eerder gewekt, toen de Malinese zanger Boubacar Traoré, de held van een van mijn eerdere boeken, midden jaren negentig terugkwam van een tournee in Japan en vertelde wat er gebeurde nadat zijn trein uit Tokio gearriveerd was in Osaka. Alle stoelen, die tijdens de reis richting Osaka hadden gewezen, draaiden na een druk op de knop honderdtachtig graden om, klaar om de terugreis naar Tokio aan te vatten.

In zijn jonge jaren had Traoré opgekeken naar Europa, maar na zijn reis naar Japan zei hij: 'Europa loopt achter. Jullie praten een eind weg, maar jullie treinstoelen zijn vastgelijmd en kunnen geen kant op. Nee, dan Japan!'

Tegenwoordig worden er in Kayes geen Franse mousseline stoffen meer verkocht, zoals in de koloniale tijd, maar Chinese, en de Malinezen gaan ze zelf halen, in Dubai of Guangzhou.

Er gloorde iets nieuws aan de horizon en zodra ik erop begon te letten, zag ik het overal. In 1999 maakte de Belgische cineast Thierry Michel een film over Mobutu, waarin we de Congolese president in zijn glorie-dagen zien tijdens een verjaardagfeestje in een van zijn somptueuze paleizen in Gbadolite, het geboortedorp van zijn vader. Onder de genodigden veel westerlingen met malle feesthoedjes, die elkaar serpentine toewerpen en strooien met confetti. Ik heb de film talloze malen bekeken, maar pas tijdens de voorbereiding van mijn reis naar China zag ik dat er ook een Chinees - een diplomaat wellicht - aan tafel zat.

Terwijl de poorten van Fort Europa dichtklappen, gaan de Aziatische grenzen open. Achter de miljardencontracten en *barterdeals* tussen China en Afrika waar de kranten en tijdschriften van volstaan, zwemmen hele scholen visjes elkaars

territorium binnen.

Ik realiseerde me bij het begin van dit avontuur dat het onmogelijk was de relatie tussen Afrika en China te doorgronden zonder me te verdiepen in de economische en politieke aspecten ervan, maar als schrijver was ik op zoek naar het verhaal *achter* deze ontmoeting, naar de manier waarop zij ingrijpt in de levens en de verbeelding van Afrikanen en Chinezen. Hoe is het voor een Afrikaan om, vijftig jaar na de onafhankelijkheid, ver weg van de blanke blik en de 'schatkist van het schuldgevoel', zoals de schrijfster Ellen Ombre het zo treffend noemde, te verkeren in een land waarmee hij geen koloniale geschiedenis deelt? Wat kunnen wij Europeanen, gevangen in de hulpindustrie, van die nieuwe verhouding leren? Met die vragen trok ik in de lente van 2009 oostwaarts.

In Guangzhou ligt een wijk die door Chinese taxichauffeurs *Chocolate City* is gedoopt, met winkeltjes waar je tegen groothandelsprijzen T-shirts, jeans, mobiele telefoons, nepjuwelen en andere chinoiseries kan kopen. Zo'n honderdtachtigduizend Afrikanen doen er dagelijks inkopen. De meesten hebben winkels in Afrika en vliegen af en aan, maar naar schatting twintigduizend Afrikanen hebben zich in Guangzhou gevestigd; ze hebben er transportbedrijfjes, winkels en restaurants, spreken Chinees, helpen hun landgenoten bij de aankoop van hun goederen, volgen orders op als de inkopers terug moeten naar Afrika om op hun winkel te passen. Het is een toren van Babel waar een mengelmoes van Chinees, Engels, Frans, Hausa, Swahili en Bambara wordt gesproken, en waar - als deze talen niet toereikend blijken - woordeloze conversaties worden gevoerd door telmachientjes die over de glazen toonbanken heen en weer schuiven.

*Globalization from below* noemde de Chinese stadsgeograaf Li Zhigang het - een term die de socioloog Alejandro Portes eerder had gebruikt om de trektochten van gemeenschappen elders in de wereld te beschrijven. Li Zhigang maakte zelf ook onderdeel uit van die beweging, vertelde hij me: hij kwam uit een dorpje in het binnenland van China en was op de vleugels van de economische ontwikkeling naar Guangzhou getrokken. Hij was hier ook een vreemdeling, alleen zag hij er hetzelfde uit als zijn landgenoten, waardoor hij niet opviel.

Lange leve de sociologen. *Globalization from below* - het is een handzame term. Voor mijn ogen rees het beeld op van een groot beest met een lange, zwiepende staart waar mijn personages zich manhaftig aan vastklampten. Ze liftten mee, keken om zich heen, zagen alles.



's Avonds neemt een feestelijke stemming bezit van Chocolate City. Dan zijn de zorgen van het onderhandelen, het geld overmaken en het heen en weer racen in de tropische hitte, weggewassen; dan verzacht een baaierd van lampions en gekleurde lichtjes de vermoeide gezichten; dan paradeert iedereen opgetogen door de straten - kom daar maar eens om in het nachtelijke Johannesburg, Lagos of het oosten van Congo; dan zakken *commerçantes* neer in schoonheidssalons en dompelen hun gezwollen voeten onder in een warm badje, of laten hun stramme rug masseren door een meisje dat net uit het Chinese binnenland is gekomen en met evenveel verwondering om zich heen kijkt als zijzelf.

'Guangzhou, c'est Kinshasa qui marche!' riep een Congolese bekende die ik op straat zomaar tegen het lijf liep. Zijn broer was er ook; ze waren gekomen om inkopen te doen voor de nieuwe hotels en restaurants die ze in Congo bouwden en hadden hun vrouw meegebracht. Diezelfde avond belandden we in een Braziliaans spektakelrestaurant waar een Latino bandje optrad en waar er tussen de overwegend Afrikaanse handelaars een sfeer van ostentatief geluk heerste.

Dagenlang liep ik gefascineerd rond. Nooit eerder was ik op een plek waar ik het onstuimige hart van Afrika op enkele vierkante kilometers zo eenstemmig en vreugdevol voelde kloppen - en dat op Chinese bodem. Maar na een tijdje begon er iets te knagen. Ver weg, in het Afrikaanse evenaarsbos, werden bomen omgehakt en naar China verscheept, waarna ze - verbouwd tot meubels - hun lange reis over de wereldzeeën hervatten, richting Saoedi-Arabië, het rijke westen of de somptueuze villa van een Afrikaner. Armere Afrikanen moesten het stellen met tafels van 'geperst afval', zoals een Malinese meubelimporteur het noemde, die vervaarlijk gaan bubbelen als je een glas water omstoot. Wat was het aandeel van Afrika in dit alles eigenlijk? Was het, behalve leverancier van grondstoffen, dan alleen maar een consument?

Zo vergaat het de reiziger. Het ene moment is hij nog vol enthousiasme, denkt hij erover zijn kamp op te slaan in Guangzhou en daar te bivakkeren tot hij de beweging om zich heen in kaart heeft gebracht; het volgende moment ziet hij alleen nog maar mensen met zware tassen van het ene naar het andere continent trekken en wil hij zo spoedig mogelijk weg.

Ik bleek gelukkig niet de enige die de begrenzingen van het dynamische Chocolate City zag. De Congolese Jules Bitulu had in de jaren tachtig in Beijing gestudeerd, sprak al gauw Chinees en was na zijn studies afgezakt naar

Guangzhou, waar hij een transportbedrijfje opende. Intussen was hij getrouwd met een Chinese, had twee kinderen en woonde in een appartement te midden van Chinezen.

In Chocolate City had ik gezien dat Chinese meisjes papieren zakdoekjes voor hun neus hielden als een Afrikaanse commerciant op de bus stapte. Maar toen ik op een zondag met Jules Bitulu en zijn familie ging wandelen in het park, zijn dochtertjes voor ons uit huppelend met hun wilde bos kroeshaar, lachend en pratend in het Chinees, keken wandelaars geamuseerd toe. Een Chinese, een Afrikaan, een blanke en twee wonderlijke Chineessprekende wezentjes - een oude man raakte niet uitgedrukt en nodigde ons uit naast hem op een bankje te komen zitten.

De Rwandese Albert Rugaba was zelfs helemaal weggegaan uit Guangzhou en hield kantoor in het Hightech Industrial Park in de miljoenenstad Shenzhen, honderdvijftig kilometer verderop. Albert was in 1995 naar China gekomen, toen zijn vader daar diplomaat was. Inmiddels sprak hij vloeiend Chinees. Hij maakte zijn landgenoten wegwijs die kleine industriële eenheden wilden aanschaffen om sap of koekjes te maken en begeleidde de delegatie die een fabriek voor bio-afbreekbare tasjes aanschafte - een dringende kwestie nadat president Kagame het gebruik van plastic tasjes had verboden.

‘Vroeger dachten Afrikanen bij een fabriek aan Duitse gevaartes waar je een gebouw van drie etages omheen moest bouwen,’ zei Albert. ‘Die mythe is ontmaskerd: voor 5000 euro installeer je in je garage een machine waarmee je mobieltjes in elkaar zet of thee inpakt. China heeft de industrialisatie voor ons gedemocratiseerd.’

Later ontmoette ik Alberts broer Norbert, die op zijn vijftiende in China was gearriveerd en het land op spectaculaire wijze zag veranderen. ‘Als ik het Louvre of het kasteel van Versailles bezoek, voel ik me geïntimideerd,’ zei hij. ‘Al die geschiedenis - dat halen wij nooit meer in. Maar als ik kijk naar de evolutie die China de afgelopen decennia doormaakte, denk ik: Waarom zouden wij dat niet kunnen?’

En zo bewoog ik verder, dieper het Afrikaans-Chinese landschap binnen. In Beijing werd ik voorgesteld aan Francis, een Kameroener die naar China was gekomen om luchtvaartkunde te studeren maar zo'n talenwonder bleek dat hij

zijn studie opgaf en inmiddels heel China afreist als gast in tv-shows waarin mensen elkaar in rad Chinees te slim af proberen te zijn. Francis nam me mee naar een studio waar elke week een aflevering van een Chinese taalcursus werd opgenomen voor een zender in New York. Gekleed in een traditioneel satijnen gewaad voerde hij humoristische sketches op over zijn eerste stappen op het gladde ijs van de Chinese taal, zong het liedje *Ganlan Shu*, geschreven door een Taiwanese die het Afrikaanse continent voor menige Chinees ontsloot toen ze in de jaren zeventig berichtte over haar reizen door de Spaanse Sahara - *Sáhala* zoals de Chinezen het noemen.

Duizelt het u? Dat is goed, want zo verging het mij ook. 'Waarom schakelen jullie een Afrikaner in om Chinees te leren aan Amerikanen?' vroeg ik aan de programmamakers. Ze lachten verlegen. 'Hij spreekt beter Engels dan wij,' zeiden ze, 'bovendien heeft hij een westerse manier van presenteren, kent hij de valkuilen van onze taal en kan die inzichtelijk maken voor buitenlanders die Chinees willen leren.'

Ik dineerde met Francis in een Chinees restaurant waar koks jongleerden met meterslange noedels en een operazanger op mysterieuze wijze telkens van masker wisselde. De Chinese performers kwamen Francis na afloop van hun act begroeten - ze bleken hem allemaal te kennen.

In Kameroen had Francis wiskunde gestudeerd en hij citeerde met evenveel gemak de Franse wiskundige Henri Poincaré als de Chinese filosoof Lao Tse. Hij maakte grapjes met Chinezen aan belendende tafels en leek zich zodanig thuis te voelen dat ik hem in de loop van de avond vroeg of er volgens hem overeenkomsten waren tussen Chinezen en Afrikanen. 'Schrikbarend veel,' zei hij. Hij had eens met een populaire Chinese zanger opgetreden in een tv-show. Samen hadden ze een liedje gezongen over dat je altijd tijd moest maken om terug te gaan naar je geboortedorp, naar je familie, en dat er niets ging boven de gerechten die je moeder klaarmaakte. Het publiek was tot tranen geroerd. Dat waren waarden, zei Francis, die Afrikanen en Chinezen deelden. En verder? Hij lachte fijntjes. 'Dat moet je zelf maar ontdekken.'

Het gemak waarmee Francis zich bewoog, de gretigheid waarmee hij de Chinese cultuur had opgezogen - instinctief begon ik hem te volgen. Ik zocht hem op in het appartement waar hij woonde met zijn Russische vrouw, levensgrote huwelijksfoto's aan de muur waarop zij nu eens poseerden in westerse, dan weer

in Chinese kleren. Ik ging met hem naar optredens en begon net te overwegen hem te vergezellen op een van zijn reizen naar het binnenland, toen er een hinderlijke bij in mijn hoofd begon te zoemen.

‘Jij hebt zoveel van de Chinezen geleerd,’ zei ik tegen Francis, ‘maar wat leren zij eigenlijk van jou?’

De vraag kwam ongelegen, voelde ik, en hij heeft haar nooit beantwoord. Ik hoorde over andere Afrikanen, die toegejuicht werden als ze Chinese liedjes zongen, maar op desinteresse stuitten zodra ze hun eigen repertoire probeerden te brengen.

De bij in mijn hoofd bleef zoemen. Ik moest denken aan Ralph Singh, de verteller in V.S. Naipauls roman *The Mimic men*, die geboren werd op een niet nader genoemd eiland in het Caraïbisch gebied en zich zodanig bekwaamde in het imiteren van de Engelse kolonisator dat hij zichzelf ergens onderweg verloor. Ik dacht aan de geaffecteerd Franssprekende Afrikanen in hun onberispelijke pakken en met hoornen intellectuelenbrilletjes die ik soms tegenkwam in Parijs. Het leek wel alsof China zijn eigen versie van oom Tom had gecreëerd. Sommige westerlingen, zou ik ontdekken, werden overigens met evenveel enthousiasme toegejuicht als ze op tv Chinese kunstjes opvoerden.

Ook in de buurt van Francis zou ik mijn tenten niet opslaan. Maar onze ontmoeting deed me beseffen dat ik me, als ik de relatie tussen Afrika en China wilde begrijpen, meer moest verdiepen in China zelf. En dus stak ik de brug over naar de andere kant en luisterde naar verhalen over de Chinese admiraal Zheng He, die in het begin van de vijftiende eeuw met een grote vloot richting Afrika voer, niet om het continent te koloniseren, zoals wij Europeanen zouden doen, maar om de wereld in kaart te brengen en lokale hoogwaardigheidsbekleders geschenken van de Chinese keizer aan te bieden. Van die reis zou Zheng He een giraf hebben meegebracht, al bestond er enige verwarring over hoe een dier met zo'n lange breekbare nek de tocht in een vijftiende-eeuwse veredelde sloep had doorstaan.

Een van Zheng He's schepen zonk, maar sommige opvarenden overleefden de ramp, spoelden aan in een dorpje aan de Oost-Afrikaanse kust en vormden daar een gemeenschap waarvan volgens recent DNA-onderzoek tot vandaag sporen zou bestaan.

Ik hoorde over de warme band die China tijdens de koude oorlog met veel Afrikaanse landen had, over de spoorlijn van Tanzania naar Zambia die de Chinezen tussen 1970 en 1975 hadden aangelegd en hoe de Volksrepubliek China dankzij de Afrikaanse stemmen in 1971 lid kon worden van de VN-Veiligheidsraad. Waarna China en Afrika klaar waren voor de win-winrelatie die ze inmiddels onderhielden, want China had grondstoffen en een afzetmarkt nodig, terwijl Afrika behoefte had aan infrastructuur en goedkope producten.

Conferenties over China en Afrika, gesprekken met Chinese Afrikakenners - als een koorddanser boven een woelige rivier voelde ik me. Oude professoren in wie nog aardig wat communistisch vuur brandde, vertelden over de Europese overheersing van de Chinese oostkust in de negentiende eeuw en betoogden dat China en Afrika allebei door Europa gekoloniseerd waren.

Het moment waarop ik achter deze politieke en economische traktaten een glimp opving van een echte ontmoeting tussen een Afrikaan en een Chinees, zal ik niet licht vergeten.

Het was november 2010, acht maanden na het begin van mijn reis. Ik was in Bagua Cun, een dorpje uit het Ming-tijdperk, vijftienhonderd kilometer bezuiden Beijing, met de Ivoriaanse Joseph, die internationale relaties studeerde aan een naburige universiteit, en de Chinese Shudi, die in Zuid-Afrika had gewoond. Bagua Cun ligt in het zuiden van China, onder de rivier de Huai, een regio waar niet gestookt wordt. We hadden het koud en 's avonds warmden we ons aan de brandewijn die onze gastheer uit een achterkamertje haalde. Hij bleek uit een grote bokaal te komen waarin jaren geleden een levende slang was gestopt.

De brandewijn stonk en smaakte naar de levertraan uit mijn jonge jaren, maar mijn nieuwe vrienden dronken er gretig van. Het drankje was goed voor de bloedsomloop, zei Shudi; volgens Joseph maakte het gif dat de slang in zijn doodstrijd had afgescheiden en dat zich met de alcohol had vermengd, je immuun voor slangenbeten.

Van de agonie die de slang in zijn laatste uren moest hebben gekend, was niets meer te zien: vredig opgekruld lag hij te glanzen op een bed van kruiden. 'Die slang is dus verdronken in de alcohol?' vroeg ik. Uiteindelijk wel, zei Shudi, al moest je een jaar of vier wachten. Laatst maakte iemand de bokaal na twee jaar al open. De slang was omhooggeschoten en had hem in zijn vinger gebeten. Mijn

oren toeterden, maar Joseph gaf geen krimp. Zijn grootmoeder in Ivoorkust was een traditionele genezeres geweest die hem vóór haar dood geïnitieerd had – zij had hem vast nog sterkere verhalen verteld.

Maandenlang had ik rondgetrokken en geluisterd naar verhalen over China en Afrika. Die avond vloeide het oude Chinese volksgeloof samen met het Afrikaanse en ik, de Europeaan, zat erbij en keek ernaar. Het was alsof ik eindelijk mijn bestemming bereikte.

Ik zou nog vaker zulke aha-Erlebnissen hebben. Toen ik het boek *The Corpse Walker* las, bijvoorbeeld, waarin de Chinese Liao Yiwu beschrijft hoe een jongetje in zijn dorp op een avond drie grimmige Chinese figuren aan de horizon ziet verschijnen. Ze bewegen zich krampachtig voort; twee van hen zijn gewikkeld in een inktzwarte cape. Het kind rilt van ontzetting, maar is zo nieuwsgierig dat het hen volgt naar de herberg waar ze neerstrijken. Een van de drie mannen blijkt een dode, die ver van huis gestorven is en, verscholen onder een cape, op de rug van een levende naar huis wordt gewandeld. Omdat hij anders een eenzaam, dwalend spook zou worden dat zijn familie heel wat last zou bezorgen.

Het leek wel een Afrikaans verhaal. De Chinezen met wie ik erover sprak, haalden gegeneerd de schouders op: lijkwandelaars waren uitstervende personages, zeiden ze, die zich overigens alleen in afgelegen streken hadden opgehouden. Maar in de Engelstalige Chinese krant *Global Times* las ik kort daarna een reportage over Chinese families die na de dood van een ongehuwd kind op zoek gaan naar de beenderen van een overledene met wie de betreurde in het onderaardse alsnog kan trouwen. Het verhaal was geïllustreerd met de foto van een boer die in 2005 gearresteerd werd met de overblijfselen van zes vrouwen: hij wilde ze verkopen aan de ouders van jongemannen wier geest onrustig ronddoolde.

Toen ik eenmaal de onderliggende gelijkenissen tussen Afrikanen en Chinezen begon te zien, ging de rest vanzelf en rolde mijn reis op wieltjes verder. ‘De Chinese regering slaat een arm om Afrikaanse leiders heen en zegt: Wij zijn jullie broeders,’ zei mijn vriend Shudi. ‘Maar ze kennen de rest van de familie niet, ze beheersen hun taal niet, de taal van de kunst.’ Picasso had zich laten inspireren door Afrikaanse beeldhouwkunst en er indirect aan meegewerkt dat die een plaats vond in de internationale kunstwereld, vertelde hij. China moest Afrika op zijn manier benaderen, het had zijn eigen Picasso nodig.

Ik reisde met Shudi naar Zuid-Afrika, waar hij in het begin van de jaren negentig in een Taiwanese fabriek was gaan werken en waar zijn vrouw reisgids was geworden voor Chinese toeristen. Daar ontdekte ik dat Chinezen niet alleen naar Afrika gaan vanwege de grondstoffen, maar ook omdat de lucht er blauw is, de stranden schoon en leeg. En misschien ook wel omdat, zoals Shudi het noemde, elke Chinees die de Culturele Revolutie heeft meegemaakt een 'steen op zijn hart' heeft en behoefte heeft aan vrijheid.

In Congo-Brazzaville zat ik dagenlang op de markt voor de winkel van Cheikhna, de Malinese commerçant die ik in Guangzhou was tegengekomen, omringd door etalagepoppen met blonde haren, blauwe ogen en Chinese glimlachjes, die de overtocht per container niet allemaal ongedeerd hadden doorstaan: de een had een geblutste neus, de ander afgeschilferde vingers. Boven mijn hoofd de helblauwe zonwering met de letters UNHCR, al zei die afkorting de commerçanten niets en wist niemand dat dit zeil eigenlijk bestemd was voor vluchtelingenkampen. Het was meteen ook het enige teken van de hulpindustrie dat ik er aantrof.

Het was een plezier te verkeren onder mensen die niet gearachuteerd waren, zoals veel Afrikaanse politici, maar elke sport van de ladder beklommen hadden en hun traject niet vergeten waren - al was het maar omdat de ambulante verkopers die de godganse dag voorbij paradeerden, hen daaraan herinnerden.

Ik dacht aan Shudi, die in Durban, meer dan vierduizend kilometers zuidelijker, horloges had verkocht op een strijkplank, zijn schaamte verbergend achter een zonnebril. Gaandeweg schoven Cheikhna's verhaal en dat van Shudi ineen, al zouden ze elkaar, zelfs als ze een gemeenschappelijke taal hadden, weinig te vertellen hebben. Ze waren thuis aan het einde van hun mogelijkheden gekomen, ze konden hun toekomst uittekenen, er zou niets nieuws gebeuren. Door weg te gaan, was hun leven opnieuw in beweging gekomen. Hun geschiedenissen raakten elkaar niet, ze liepen parallel. Pas toen de titel *Op de vleugels van de draak* zich aandiende, zag ik hen voor me - samen, voor het eerst.

'China zuigt Afrika toch leeg?' 'De Chinezen stellen toch geen eisen aan die Afrikanen?' Sinds mijn boek is verschenen, word ik bestormd met vragen. Oude, ingesleten vragen - het is niet makkelijk er los van te komen. Dat de Afrikaanse landen zelf een stem in het kapittel hebben, lijken veel mensen zich vijftig jaar na de onafhankelijkheid nog steeds niet te realiseren. Gelukkig sprak ik ook een

Belgische zakenman die net terugkwam uit Ethiopië en me vertelde dat het land er zo op vooruit was gegaan sinds de Chinezen er wegen hebben aangelegd. Vroeger zat alles vast, zei hij, je kon geen kant op, nu was de handel weer op gang gekomen.

Natuurlijk zijn er grote Chinese regeringsbedrijven die opdrachten in de wacht slepen en die voor een lager bedrag doorverkopen aan kleinere bedrijven, tot de uiteindelijke uitvoerder te weinig geld heeft om zijn werk goed te doen. Hetzelfde gebeurde enige tijd geleden in Polen - een affaire die aan het licht kwam toen een Chinees bedrijf bij gebrek aan middelen op de vlucht sloeg. Maar de Chinezen staan niet stil. Zoals de Chinese ambassadeur in Polen zei: 'Wat wij van deze zaak geleerd hebben, is waardevoller dan de schade die we erdoor geleden hebben.'

Natuurlijk is het asfalt van de wegen die de Chinezen in Afrika aanleggen hier en daar te dun. Sommige Afrikaanse landen schakelen inmiddels westerse inspecteurs in om de Chinese projecten te controleren. Natuurlijk beconcurreren Chinese handelaartjes hun Afrikaanse collega's als ze beignets en tomaten verkopen in de straten van Kinshasa en Dar es Salaam - de Tanzaniaanse regering maakte onlangs einde aan dat soort kleinhandel.

Eén journalist die me de afgelopen weken opzoekt, zette me aan het denken. Een landgenoot - we hadden elkaar al eerder ontmoet. Naipaul had indertijd net het essay *Onze Universele Samenleving* geschreven, een tekst waarvan ik nogal vol was geweest. Nu wees de journalist op de lange rij boeken van Naipaul in mijn kast. 'Hoe was het eigenlijk,' vroeg hij, 'voor een adept van de Universele Samenleving als jij, om in een niet-universele natie te verkeren?'

Hij refereerde aan een artikel in *The Atlantic* van de Amerikaanse journalist James Fallows waarin China een 'niet-universele natie' werd genoemd. Er stond heel wat kritiek in op China die ik van mijn Afrikaanse en Chinese vrienden de afgelopen jaren ook had gehoord: de Chinezen waren te gesloten, ze interesseerden zich niet voor andere culturen, vonden niet dat ze iets te leren hadden.

Nadat ik het artikel van James Fallows had gelezen, herlas ik ook het essay van Naipaul en stuitte op zijn notie 'zoektocht naar geluk' die mij indertijd zo had aangesproken - een enigszins wonderlijke notie voor een schrijver die door velen wordt gezien als een pessimist. Het is een elastisch begrip, schrijft Naipaul, dat



iedereen past. 'Het kan niet worden gereduceerd tot een bepaald systeem,' vervolgt hij, 'maar het bestaat, en omdat het bestaat, worden meer rigide systemen uiteindelijk weggeblazen.'

Ik liet de Afrikanen en Chinezen die ik de afgelopen jaren had leren kennen de revue passeren. Al kruisen hun paden elkaar niet, hun dromen haken in elkaar. De globalisering heeft hen opgetild; helemaal thuiskomen zullen zij nooit meer. Ik moest denken aan de jonge schrijfster Ufrieda Ho. Ze is niet in mijn boek terechtgekomen, maar ik ben blij haar aan het einde van deze lezing te kunnen noemen.

In haar autobiografische *Paper Sons and Daughters* schrijft Ufrieda Ho over de komst van haar Chinese familie naar Zuid-Afrika; over haar grootvader die christelijk wordt nadat hij een overstroming in Pretoria heeft overleefd door zich vast te klampen aan een boom en die bidt met zwarte Afrikanen omdat hij in geen andere kerk wordt toegelaten; over haar vader die lottobiljetjes verkoopt in Afrikaanse townships en in 1994 op zijn ronde gedood wordt door een kogel.

Haar eerlijkheid en oog voor het schrijnende detail namen me voor haar in en toen ik in Johannesburg was, ging ik naar haar op zoek. In de werkelijkheid was de jonge Ufrieda zo mogelijk nog eerlijker dan in haar boek. Lottoverkoper was een beroep om je voor te schamen, vertelde ze, sommige Chinezen hadden haar verweten dat ze daarover geschreven had.

'Wij Chinezen denken dat we perfect zijn,' zei ze. 'Wij werken hard, wij falen nooit, wij zijn kinderen van Huang Di, de Gele Keizer.' Daar moest ze om lachen. 'Terwijl we geen homogene samenleving zijn. Iedere Chinees is anders.' De oude garde Chinezen in Zuid-Afrika deed haar best zich te gedragen en keek neer op de nieuwe garde die ruw en ongeciviliseerd zou zijn. 'Terwijl zij in hun begintijd net zo zijn geweest. Alleen zijn ze dat vergeten.' Zelf leek ze zich met zevenmijlslaarzen van deze stereotypen verwijderd te hebben.

Ze werkte voor een lokale krant en vertelde me dat ze eens verslag moest doen van een bijeenkomst in Chinatown. Van buitenaf zag het gebouw waar het evenement zou plaatsvinden er klein en rommelig uit, eenmaal binnen bleek ze zich te bevinden in een Chinees partijgebouw met indrukwekkende landschapstekeningen aan de muren. Ze voelde zich steeds kleiner worden, duwde met moeite een zware deur open en stuitte op een lege kamer met een

grote rode Chinese vlag. ‘Het was spookachtig,’ zei ze. Als Alice in Wonderland doolde ze rond, tot ze een collega tegenkwam die haar de weg wees. Terwijl ze luisterden naar de formele speeches, bespraken ze fluisterend de festiviteiten ter ere van de verjaardag van de Dalai Lama die ze die middag zouden bezoeken.

Laatst had ze een serie artikelen geschreven over immigranten in Zuid-Afrika, vertelde ze. Eén verhaal ging over een Congolese vluchteling, die advocaat was geweest in Kinshasa. Hij had zijn kinderen vooruitgestuurd en toen hij hen na enig zoeken terugvond, sprak zijn jongste zoon Engels in plaats van Frans, zodat ze niet meer met elkaar konden communiceren. De man woonde met zijn vrouw en drie kinderen in één kamer en verdiende drie dollar per dag als bewaker op een parkeerplaats. In zijn vrije tijd zat hij met zijn jongste zoon op een bankje in het park met een pak koekjes, die ze woordeloos opaten. ‘Dat ontroerde me zo,’ zei Ufrieda.

Het was een aangename zondagochtend in oktober, we zaten op het terras van een café in Parkhurst en hielden Ufrieda’s auto in de gaten, die verderop geparkeerd stond. Haar ietwat ironische blik op haar landgenoten, de zachtheid waarmee ze het verhaal vertelde over de Congolese advocaat – alles wat ik de afgelopen vier jaren had gehoord en gezien, leek naar deze ontmoeting toe te vloeien. Terwijl Ufrieda praatte, realiseerde ik me dat ik aan het einde van mijn reis was gekomen.

Amsterdam, 2 oktober 2013 – Globaliseringslezing Felix Meritis Amsterdam 2013

---

## **How To Achieve Zero Emissions, Even If The Federal Government**

# Won't Help



Prof.dr. Robert Pollin

With Donald Trump in the White House, the prospects for fighting climate change have never been any bleaker in the US. Yet there are options available to state governments to move forward with the greening of the economy even without federal support. This point is made crystal clear in [two studies](#) produced recently by economist *Robert Pollin* and some of his colleagues at the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for the states of Washington and New York. In this exclusive interview for Truthout, Pollin explains the significance of Green New Deal programs.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Bob, two new studies on fighting climate change have been produced by you and two PERI researchers for the states of New York and Washington. How did these studies come about?*

*Robert Pollin: These were both commissioned studies. For the New York study, the commissioning group was New York Renews, which is a coalition of over 130 organizations in New York State, including labor unions, environmental groups and social justice organizations. For the Washington State study, three important groups within the US labor movement commissioned the study — the United Steelworkers, Washington State Labor Council of the AFL-CIO and the Tony Mazzocchi Center for Health, Safety and Environmental Education (TMC). Tony Mazzocchi was a great visionary labor leader with the [Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union](#) (OCAW — [which] has since merged into the United Steelworkers), who fought to link the aims of working people with those of environmentalists.*

It is not an accident that my co-workers and I were asked to do these similar studies at basically the same time. In both cases, the groups supporting the studies are advancing ambitious green economy programs within their respective states. It is obvious that nothing good on climate change is going to be coming out of the federal government under Trump. It is equally obvious that we can't wait around on climate issues (and many other matters) until somebody less awful gets into the White House. We therefore have to take the most forceful possible actions at the level of state politics. This is what the coalitions are doing in both New York and Washington States.

It is also significant that, with both studies, our priority was to show how a viable climate change project can be completely compatible with — indeed, supportive of — a pro-labor agenda. Trump and others on the right have feasted on the divides between labor and environmentalists, claiming that if you are for the environment, then you have to be against working people and their communities. These studies show in great detail (some might even say excruciating detail) that these Trump claims are flat-out wrong.

I will emphasize though that we have to be very careful in making this case (and thus the excruciating detail in these studies). In particular, there is no getting around that, if we are going to stop burning fossil fuels to produce energy — as we absolutely must to have any chance of stabilizing the climate — the jobs of people in the coal, oil and natural gas industries — along with many other allied sectors of the economy — will be lost over time. We need to forthrightly confront this fact, but then advance beyond it, to develop what Tony Mazzocchi himself termed a “just transition” for workers and communities who will be hurt by the necessary environmental transitions. The overarching point of both of these studies is precisely to show how we can stop burning fossil fuels that produce carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions that are the primary cause of climate change, and to accomplish this in ways that expand job opportunities overall while also creating a just transition for workers and communities that are currently dependent on the fossil fuel industry.

*What exactly are Green New Deal programs, and can they be supported without the involvement of the federal government?*

The basic features of Green New Deal programs are simple. The centerpiece is investment in clean energy — i.e. investments that can dramatically raise energy

efficiency levels in buildings, transportation systems and industrial processes; and equally, dramatically expand the supply of clean renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, geothermal, small-scale hydro and clean bioenergy. Raising energy efficiency levels and expanding the supply of clean renewable energy will enable economies to end their dependency on fossil fuel energy over time, and thus drive down CO2 emissions to zero. These investments will also be a major new source of job creation wherever these investments are made, including New York and Washington States, but equally in other places.

At what levels do these investment programs need to be mounted in order for high efficiency and clean renewable energy to supplant fossil fuel dependency over the next few decades? As we show in these studies and elsewhere, the needed level of investment amounts to about 1.5 percent of the overall level of economy activity — that is, GDP — within virtually all economies. That ends up being a lot of money — for example, about \$30 billion per year in public and private investment in New York State, and about \$7 billion per year in Washington State. But keep in mind that while these are indeed very large sums of money, they still only represent about 1.5 percent of each state's annual GDP. That means that 98.5 percent of the state's economy can proceed as it would otherwise, while we are channeling 1.5 percent of state's resources into the Green New Deal project that will significantly support climate stabilization.

It would, of course, be easier to raise this level of investment funds in both New York and Washington States, and elsewhere, if the federal government was supporting the project — as was being done to a significant, if not adequate extent under Obama. But that's not the world we are living in now. So, we have to fight to advance these Green New Deal projects right now, in the existing political environment, as best we can. I am very impressed by the work being done by both the coalitions in New York and Washington States. I am looking forward to their success.

*For the state of Washington, the aim is to reduce carbon dioxide by 40 percent in comparison to 2014 levels. How can this target be achieved, and what do you think will be its impact on the environment, given that it will be a localized effort to combat climate change?*

The Washington State program aims to reduce CO2 emissions by 40 percent as of 2035 relative to 2014. This can happen through the clean energy investment

program of raising energy efficiency standards and expanding the supply of clean renewable energy.

I should emphasize that through investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy, neither businesses nor households should ever have to pay more for energy as the economy transitions out of fossil fuels. This is because energy efficiency investments, by definition, save money for consumers. Meanwhile, the average costs of wind, geothermal, small-scale hydro and clean bioenergy are already at rough cost parity with fossil fuels. Solar energy is still a bit more expensive, but its costs are coming down rapidly. It was also notable that, amid the Trump/ Republican Congress's loathsome tax bill that passed in December, they did not cut the subsidy for investments in solar energy. That investment tax credit will continue to support the rapid expansion of the solar industry.

Now, of course, all of these investments in Washington State will only lower emission in Washington State. Meanwhile, climate change must be addressed not only at the local level, or even the national level. It is a global issue. But we must fight for victories every single place until we get those victories. We at PERI are working, or have worked in the past, on Green New Deal projects in other places, including the US overall, China, India, sub-Saharan Africa, Spain, Brazil, South Korea, South Africa, Germany, Indonesia and Puerto Rico. The same basic principles work everywhere, after adjusting for local conditions, of course.

*Will such a program have beneficial effects for the economy as a whole?*

The investment program for Washington State will expand overall job opportunities in the state by an average of about 40,000 jobs per year. It will also be fully compatible with a healthy economic growth rate for the state, since, as mentioned above, the costs of energy will not rise on average.

*One of the aims of the study for the state of New York is to reduce emissions to zero level by 2050, which is in line with recent UN reports that we must reduce emissions to zero by 2070 in order to avoid global warming of more than 2 degrees Celsius. Do you feel that the political climate in the US is conducive to such bold undertakings on the climate change front?*

I can't claim to be an expert prognosticator of what politics will allow in New York State, or the US overall, between now and 2050. What we do show in the study is that driving down CO2 emissions to zero in New York State by 2050 is entirely

feasible, both technically and economically. As with Washington State, we show that the clean energy investment project that will be the foundation of a zero-emission New York State by 2050 will be a net source of job creation, creating roughly 150,000 jobs per year through 2030, then about 100,000 jobs per year until 2050. We show that this clean energy investment project will not deter New York State from enjoying a healthy overall rate of economic growth, even as the economy transitions over the next 30 years into one with zero emissions. Moreover, we develop specific proposals for supporting both the workers and communities that are currently dependent on the fossil fuel industry, to minimize the negative impact on these workers and communities from the year-by-year contraction, leading to the total shutdown of the fossil fuel industry in New York State.

Given these features of the Green New Deal project for New York State — just as with that for Washington State — there should be, in principle, overwhelming support for this project. Now, of course we know that fossil fuel companies will fight these programs relentlessly, with all the various tricks they have, and with the enormous amounts of money they are prepared to spend to defend their sources of big-time profits. They are not about to throw in the towel. Everyone must realize that.

But organizers have to be equally wary of Democratic Party policymakers who give strong support in rhetoric, and even some support in actual policies, though nothing close to what is adequate to meet the challenges we face. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is a perfect case in point here. Thus, Cuomo was powerful in denouncing President Trump's decision last June to pull out of the 2015 Paris Global Climate Summit agreement. Cuomo also strongly reaffirmed at that time his administration's commitments to climate stabilization policies. His administration's policies are in fact quite good on paper, very much in line with those of New York Renews. But Cuomo has consistently been unwilling to match his rhetoric with a level of financial and regulatory commitment that will deliver on these stated goals.

The response here is simple to state, if difficult to achieve: We simply have to defeat these people and their interests — both the outright opponents among the fossil fuel giants and liberal policymakers who talk a good game, but are unwilling to commit to policies that will deliver on their promises. Getting victories against both sets of forces will require huge amounts of very effective organizing. I am

confident that New York Renews in New York State and the coalition led by the Steelworkers and the State Labor Council in Washington State are ready to take on the challenge and succeed. I also look forward to their successes inspiring similar efforts and successes throughout the rest of the US.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

---

## **TED@ BCG Paris ~ Neha Narula ~ The Future Of Money**



What happens when the way we buy, sell and pay for things changes, perhaps even removing the need for banks or currency exchange bureaus? That's the radical promise of a world powered by cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum. We're not there yet, but in this sparky talk, digital currency researcher Neha Narula describes the collective fiction of money

— and paints a picture of a very different looking future.

*Neha Narula* is director of research at the [Digital Currency Initiative](#), a part of the MIT Media Lab where she teaches courses and leads cryptocurrency and blockchain research. While completing her PhD in computer science at MIT, she built fast, scalable databases and secure software systems, and she spoke about these topics at dozens of industry and research conferences.

In a previous life, Narula helped relaunch the news aggregator Digg and was a senior software engineer at Google. There, she designed Blobstore, a system for storing and serving petabytes of immutable data, and worked on Native Client, a system for running native code securely through a browser.



Go to: [https://www.ted.com/neha\\_narula\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_money](https://www.ted.com/neha_narula_the_future_of_money)