



Unlearning and undoing modernity-coloniality in an entangled and unravelling world: Toward relational and emergent governance

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores pathways for unlearning and undoing modernity-coloniality in policy, through a triad between scholars drawing from political ontology, relational ontology, and practical eko-philosophy. We argue that conventional mechanistic policymaking fails to address the contemporary metacrisis, which we argue require ethico-onto-politico-epistemological shifts from singular worlds to pluriverse. We examine the possibilities and pathways for unlearning and undoing modernity-coloniality in and through policy, asking specifically whether that requires undoing the state and state policy, and what role do predefined policy goals play. Our analysis reveals the need for simultaneous deconstruction of modernist assumptions and reconstruction of relational alternatives. Key pathways include (i) questioning dominant ethico-onto-politico-epistemological assumptions; (ii) reimagining the state as "ontological negotiator"; and (iii) abandoning fixed endpoints for cultivating conditions for pluriversal life-sustaining relations. Our work is inspired by eko-philosophy, Eastern philosophies, and onto-epistemological humility, and embracing of uncertainty as decolonizing methods. We propose "Relational and emergent governance" as a collective organizing arising from deconstructed certainties and reconstructed relationalities—requiring experimental institutions that can maintain relational depth across scales.

1. Introduction: Relationality and emergence in and through policy?

Conventional policymaking tends to assume that single top-down policies, implemented by political leaders, can fix complex systems (DePuy et al., 2021). This approach reflects modernist reductionist thinking that treats the world as a controllable machine with isolated, predictable parts (Böhme et al., 2024). However, the world functions more like a living organism in which matter, meaning, and relations assemble unpredictably, shaping ecologies through entangled intra-actions (Barad 2007, Haraway, 2016, Kimmerer and Artelle, 2024). Recognizing this mismatch between the mechanistic assumptions that policy currently rest on and the living nature of socio-ecological systems is important when imagining pathways through which policy might contribute to undoing the ingrained patterns of modernity-coloniality (De Oliveira, 2021; Escobar, 2020). For

modernity-coloniality, we draw on insights from Political Ontology (de la Cadena and Blaser; 2018, Blaser, 2010) to refer to a project through which a singular, "one-world" modern ontology presents itself as universal and superior, while violently subordinating and erasing other ways of being and knowing. The dominance of this singular modern ontology enforces a particular ordering of reality that marginalizes relational ontologies grounded in living and earthly entanglements, often referred to as 'the pluriverse'.

Acknowledging the power of modernity-coloniality in structuring socioecological relations, requires a shift in how socio-political systems are understood, not as mechanical structures awaiting external manipulation, but as living organisms endowed with forms of agency, ecological embeddedness, and homeostatic resistance to change (Bateson 2023; Haraway, 2016). The critical question then becomes: under what conditions do such living systems transform, and how could the power of modernity-coloniality be challenged (Blaser, 2010, 2018;

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Ives et al., 2023; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2025)? We are particularly interested in policy's potential in enabling such shifts.

Through a triologue format, we explore three interrelated questions concerning whether and how policy can embrace ontological plurality and relationality. As we embark on analyzing this overarching question, we are aware of the paradox it entails; namely how can policy that is in itself a product of modernity-coloniality, contribute to unlearning and undoing itself, while supporting the emergence of a pluriverse. Yet we choose to sit with this tension rather than seeking to resolve it prematurely.

Our perspectives are embedded to various extents in one of those highly interlinked fields, with Jessica drawing from practical eko-philosophy (emphasizing lived ethics and self-transformation as essential to relational transformation), Sabaheta from relational ontology (emphasizing interdependence, entanglement and co-emergence), and Maria from political ontology (emphasizing the power and coloniality of Modern assumptions). Furthermore, our collective thinking is inspired by relational approaches (Walsh et al., 2020; Riechers et al., 2022), indigenous science (Kimmerer and Artelle, 2024; Wahinkpe Topa and Darcia Narvaez, 2022.), Eastern philosophies (Laozi, 1988; Loy, 2019), pluriversal politics and design (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2020), and Marxist- eco-feminist theories (Federici, 2018, Mies and Bunnholdt-Thomsen, 2001,9).

While written as a triologue, in reality the paper got its shape by Jessica writing up her responses to the three questions first, with Sabaheta following up and finally Maria adding in her reflections. The questions are intended not as definitive or exhaustive, but as prompts for reflection, dialogue, and further inquiry on what we consider to be among the key questions to ask when discussing unlearning and undoing modernity-coloniality in policy. Our theoretical framework and our positions on policy are outlined in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

2. Exploring relational and emergent governance through three guiding questions

2.1. Q1) Can policy undo and unlearn modernity-coloniality and if so, how?

Jessica: I will approach this question from a philosophical perspective, because the problems we face today, many argue, were created by adherence to certain philosophical ideas, and therefore, they must be addressed at that same level (Abson et al., 2017; Ives et al., 2023). Philosophies are our ethico-onto-epistemologies, meaning that a philosophy is the inseparable entanglement of what we believe is real (ontology), how we know what we know (epistemology), and how we act in the world (ethics). Addressing philosophies, I believe, requires philosophical practices (Böhme et al., 2025). Philosophy—as it has been understood in the past—has not been about academic discourse but has been a practical meta-technology for self-transformation (Hadot, 1995). Drawing on various wisdom schools not because of their content, but because of their ways—offers a highly potential pathway for transformation. In my personal life, this was the most effective pathway. And even more so, if it is oriented towards an eko-philosophy – an artificial term that relates the individual (ego) with the whole (eco).

One such crucial pathway for policy to undo and unlearn modernity-coloniality, is a threefold pathway of deconstruction, reconstruction and integration.

The shift begins with the deconstruction of inherited philosophies—such as dualism, reductionism, and human exceptionalism — that underpin the dominant WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (Henrich, 2020) paradigm. al deconstructing is not just intellectually knowing that something is untrue but experiencing this on all levels of our existence. For instance, the Socratic method treats thinking as a communal dialogue designed to reveal contradictions in our foundational beliefs (*elenchos*). This process leads to a state of productive perplexity (*aporia*), creating space for

genuine inquiry (Callard, 2025). The second step is to reconstruct alternative philosophies that are more aligned with current understandings of reality. At this point in time, this involves cultivating more relational philosophies which emphasize interconnectedness, interdependence, context, and emergence as fundamental aspects of reality and understand that human wellbeing is inseparable from socioecological and multispecies wellbeing (Riechers et al., 2022). The final pathway integrates reconstructed philosophies through experiential practices allowing iteration and embodiment within specific contexts (Ives et al., 2023).

However, this work confronts fundamental institutional double binds (Bateson, 2023; Bednarek and Hübl, 2024). Governments must ensure immediate stability while systems providing stability drive ecological breakdown. Meta-level double binds exist where change-creating institutions are products of the paradigm needing change. Therefore, the primary pathway involves transforming the policy process itself through institutionalized spaces for reflection and re-orientation where policymakers, experts, and community members engage in structured practices surfacing and questioning underlying ethico-onto-epistemological assumptions (Haraway, 2016) before designing interventions.

Sabaheta: Building on Jessica's exploration of philosophy as practice, I will try to imagine futures that modernity-coloniality has disallowed, suppressed or rendered unimaginable. Such futures:

(i) **A widespread ontological (r)evolution:** As I argue elsewhere (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025a,b, Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2025) and following up on Jessica's deconstructive pathway, policy must begin by undoing the dualist-materialist ontologies and worldviews of separation (Loy, 2019). In practice, this could take a form of reflexive policy and disaggregation of dualist paradigms (e.g. human/non-human, mind/matter) across institutions and the everyday; from education, to health, to global politics (Pritchard et al., 2025). Rather than proposing universally imposed goals, policy could cultivate spaces for dialogues between different ontologies, with the aim of disrupting ontological hierarchies and domination that have resulted in colonialism and capitalism. It could potentially create space for manifesting generative capacities and commitments, such as reciprocity, care, dignity, mutual flourishing and learning (Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2025, Pritchard et al., 2025).

(ii) **Relational ontology as policy grammar:** There is a core paradox, however, between relational ontologies and policymaking: Policymaking as we know it imply interference, linear causality and at least some degree of predictability, all of which are challenged by relational, emergent, and non-linear understandings of reality (Bohm, 2005). Thus, before expecting policy to simply foreground relationality and intra-dependencies, we need to reconceptualize policy itself in ontologically relational and even nondualist terms, implying nonduality between mind and matter (Loy, 2019; Kastrup, 2021). Policy needs reinvention as relational and reflexive practice, which in turn requires changing policy's very grammar from nouns and commands (things and controls) to verbs and invitations (processes and enabling).

(iii) **Justice as the central node of relational policy:** Finally, and just as Jessica emphasized the integration of philosophies through practice, the relational turn in policy likewise requires enactment, which must be rooted in justice as principle and praxis. To avoid the risk of co-optation, the relational turn in policy must not lose sight of onto-epistemic, racial, colonial, multispecies and other forms of (in)justices. Relational and nondual ontologies and epistemologies need to be positioned as onto-epistemic systems in both decision-making and science-policy interface, and holders of those systems, as equal players in science- and policymaking.

Maria: I begin by articulating my argument by thinking with the pluriverse—the multiple worlds obscured by the colonial difference embedded in Modern ontological assumptions. Unlearning requires dismantling hierarchical assumptions rooted in this colonial difference. Sabaheta's point provides a basis for this discussion, which I advance

further. [Blaser \(2010\)](#) links the colonial difference to the "modern myth" that divides nature and culture and impose a universal linear reality. This myth sustains hierarchies by erasing other worldings, making them appear non-existent ([Blaser, 2010](#)). A pluriversal policy-making approach stresses that the world comprises overlapping realities, each with its own ontology. To support this shift in policy, at least three assumptions must be undone.

- (i) Humans are not separate from nature, but part of a web of relations ([de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018](#)). Nonhuman beings are active members of society, and they influence how society is organized. This means that policy must be grounded in place-based knowledges and more-than-human relations ([Blaser, 2010](#); [Escobar, 2020](#)).
- (ii) Time is not linear. In a pluriversal frame, time becomes adaptive to situated contexts, where ancestral wisdoms inform sustainable land relationships ([de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018](#)). Integrating these wisdoms means policies must be situated and responsive to the rhythms of land and ancestral teachings ([Kimmerer and Artelle, 2024](#)).
- (iii) Ontological hierarchies must be dismantled. This demands letting Indigenous knowledges shape policy. Here, the idea of "Two-Eyed Seeing" ([Martin, 2012](#)) offers ways to combine Indigenous and other knowledges without one overriding the other. Hence, unlearning involves disrupting these hierarchies and cultivating respect for the relational worlds that sustain life on Earth.

Finally, undoing modernity cannot happen at a philosophical level only, it must be practiced, as Jessica indicates. This requires that we acknowledge our complicity in the affluence produced by Modernity's extractivist practices that destroy the pluriverse. This means questioning assumptions that modern life is superior and finding ways to reconnect in practice with the land and relations that sustain us.

2.2. Q2) Does this ontological unlearning and undoing require, or even by definition imply undoing state and state policy as a system of governing?

Jessica: The question then of whether unlearning modernity-coloniality requires undoing the state finds its answer in the very nature of practical philosophy itself. As [Hadot \(1995\)](#) argues, ancient philosophy was never merely intellectual exercise but *askesis*—spiritual exercises aimed at complete transformation of one's way of being. These exercises were daily practices that fundamentally reorganized one's relationship to power and governance ([Sharpe and Ure, 2021](#)). However, Hadot's analysis also reveals why this undoing cannot be purely destructive. Ancient philosophical schools developed new institutional forms—the Academy, the Stoa—that embodied their philosophical commitments. Similarly, Foucault's genealogical method wasn't aimed at destruction but at clearing space for "other ways of thinking" and "other rules of the game." Therefore, practical philosophy requires what we might call a creative undoing—the simultaneous dissolution of mechanistic governance structures and cultivation of what [Akomolafe \(2017\)](#) terms "posthuman politics," which implies evolution toward new, more adaptive, networked forms of governance and porous sovereignty ([Brown, 2019](#)), acknowledging deep entanglement with other states, ecosystems, and non-human agents. This involves transitioning from the state as sovereign controller to what we could envision as facilitative networks that support self-organization and emergence. The risk is that undoing without rebuilding creates dangerous vacuums ([Cilliers, 2005](#); [Raymond et al., 2021](#)). But practical philosophy suggests this isn't sequential—deconstruction and reconstruction must be simultaneous practices, like the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) which isn't void but pregnant potential for new forms of interdependent arising.

Sabaheta: I echo Jessica's view on deconstructing "the old" and emerging and co-becoming with and as "the new", emphasizing the

importance of becoming differently through our entanglements and relations, rather than constructing "the new" outside of us. Drawing from indigenous relational governance, and other traditions and schools of thought, I will explore what relational becoming and co-emergence may mean in practice, in the context of policy and governance.

What if the state were reoriented from an entity tasked with steering and problem-solution making (an expression of modernity) to one that cultivates conditions for ontological dialogue, emergence, and reflexivity? Some examples emerge from Indigenous governance, where governing is a continual commitment to relational responsibilities, renewed through ceremony, dialogue, and embodied practice ([Wahinkpe Topa and Darcia Narvaez, 2022](#)). Rather than a system of control or coordination, such governance emphasizes attunement—an ethics of presence, listening, and sensing. In this view, policymaking and governance lies in accompanying the emergent: sharing spaces and power with already-existing yet marginalized worldmaking practices. Such shared spaces should be understood as practices of governing otherwise.

They can also be understood as post-statist and align with feminist theory-praxis and certain currents of degrowth. Degrowth, especially in its anarchist currents ([Dunlap and Becker, 2025](#)), emphasizes that genuine transformation cannot be enacted within the bureaucratic, extractivist logics of the nation-state. The state operates as a disciplining apparatus that sustains global capitalism, displaces radical alternatives, and manages dissent ([Kojola and Pelow 2021](#)). Grassroot and anarchist approaches thus calls for the unmaking of the state as we know it, through proliferation of commons and care networks. This echoes Silvia Federici's calls for reclaiming and restoring commons, by reclaiming and restoring of devalued forms of care and reproduction, which modernity has privatized or erased ([Federici, 2018](#), [Mies and Thompson 2001](#)). These perspectives converge around a shared insistence that governance must be lived, not administered—that it must emerge from reciprocal, place-based relations, rather than be imposed through scale and coordination. As bare minimum, unlearning and undoing modernity necessitates loosening of state and state policy claims of universality, ontological and epistemic supremacy, together with opening spaces for ethical, onto-epistemic, and procedural plurality and justice.

Maria: Building on Jessica's insights about "creative undoing" and Sabaheta's vision of state as facilitator rather than controller, I want to focus specifically on how the colonial difference shapes this transformation process. While I agree with both that we need radical state transformation rather than dissolution, I see the most crucial task as shifting policymaking toward a pluriversal paradigm that addresses the de- and reconstructing of our ethico-onto-politico-epistemologies, and the relational governance described above by Jessica and Sabaheta.

As I discussed above, the colonial difference operates materially in how community members experience the world, requiring parallel processes of self-transformation and decolonization alongside state transformation. The state must therefore become a kind of "ontological negotiator" that both facilitate emergence, as Sabaheta suggests, and creates spaces for conversations across differences with the aim to disrupt modernity's hierarchies and anthropocentrism.

Incorporating such understandings to policy-making requires an acknowledgement that concepts like 'nature' and the 'environment' as currently understood do not sit well within the relational and pluriversal framing we are advancing here. Many Indigenous languages lack words for nature because it's not something separate requiring definition but the home to which they belong ([Kimmerer and Artelle, 2024](#)). Therefore, both state and policy machinery must abandon nature-as-object framings, acknowledging diverse more-than-human practices sustaining different life forms in place. The state's role becomes ensuring policy frameworks are co-produced with knowledge holders from multiple ontological positions, each legitimized in their own right.

To avoid that community autonomy becomes sectarian or regressive rather than open for decolonial transformation, policy must also be designed in ways that it opens up space for mutual learning about what

it means to be human as part of the living world. Such learning spaces would require that policy-making is detached from modernity's illusions (globalization, unlimited progress, detached objectivity) and re-anchored in human relationships in the constantly changing ecological conditions of Earth. Essentially, the state itself must abandon one-size-fits-all solutions for ontologically diverse governance structures rooted in reciprocity and care for different life worlds.

2.3. Q3) Should the destinations or goals be defined, or left open, and (how) can policy encourage emergence and open-ended goals?

Jessica: Attempting to cast "sterilized singular, lifeless, flat ideas into a world alive with weird, wild combining" (Bateson, 2023:33) represents a fundamental error that perpetuates the mechanistic thinking we've been critiquing. This connects directly to what Sabaheta described as moving from "nouns and commands" to "verbs and invitations." Complex living systems are inherently unpredictable, and imposing fixed goals prematurely closes down the "adjacent possible" (Bateson, 2023:212, see also Checkland, 2000). Many of today's intractable problems are the direct, unintended results of yesterday's narrowly-defined goals.

Drawing on Paul's (2015) work on transformative experience, genuine transformation requires that we don't know the outcome beforehand. A truly transformative experience is both epistemically and personally transformative—we cannot know what it is like without undergoing it, and it fundamentally changes our core preferences and sense of self. Therefore, any attempt to design policy toward a fixed "transformed" future creates a paradox: we are making choices for a future self whose values are unknowable to our present self.

Therefore, building on our discussion of relational approaches, policy must abandon fixed endpoints in favor of directional guidance. Instead of defining specific, measurable destinations, policy can be oriented by a compass of core principles and processes of value-ing with others. The *how* and *what* remain open to emergence and context-dependent adaptation, while the *why* provides coherent, orienting direction. This necessitates that moments of "not-knowing" or *aporia* be seen not as failures to be resolved quickly, but as productive catalysts for deeper, more honest inquiry (Callard, 2025; Hadot, 1995). The goal of governance thereby transforms from a search for the right answer to the collective practice of "living the question" more deeply (Wahl, 2016) grounded in practice and iterative inquiry (Checkland, 2000).

Sabaheta: Jessica's insights concerning abandoning fixed endpoints for directional guidance, resonates with the Dao, and the *wu wei*, or the *way of Nature* (Laozi, 1988, Tao Te Ching), translated often as or effortless action. In the present day and time, we could conceptualize *wu-wei* as non-coercive action, action without forcing, or a responsive action that does not impose. Where Jessica emphasizes epistemological humility and living the question, *wu wei* offers insights for cultivating responsiveness through attunement to what is already unfolding. Rather than passivity, it signals outcomes and actions without directing, or controlling. Similarly, the notion of compassionate action (Karunā in Sanskrit), associated with Eastern philosophies (Loy, 2019, Newcombe and O'Brien-Kop, 2020), calls my attention here. Karunā indicates an action rooted in compassion and expressed as an active response to what is unfolding (Loy, 2019). Contemporary thinkers have begun articulating principles such *wu wei* in the context of policy shifts (Schaarsberg, 2023), even if this is often done with the dualist paradigm intact. More research is needed to explore how ancient Eastern philosophies can inform science-based reimagining of policy.

These concepts, ideas and practices can be used in synergy with the questions of power, history, and (in)justice. Non-coercive and compassionate action does not imply neutrality or harmony, but a refusal to violence, domination, and extraction that underpin modernity-coloniality. Attunement, responsiveness, and compassion have political significance, because they *can* interrupt governing practices rooted in mastery and domination, hierarchy, and erasure (Macy, 2021).

Thus, we do not propose emergence and open-ended goals as escapes of historically produced inequalities, epistemic silencing, or ontological erasure, but rather as a commitments of remaining accountable to those most affected by harm and violence of modernity-coloniality (Macy, 2021, Ramcilovic-Suominen 2025a,b).

Maria: Building on Sabaheta's insights about *wu wei* and *karunā* and the practice of slowing down to sense nature's unfolding, I want to emphasize that the modernist logic establishing predefined universal goals is not neutral. How we view the world—and our relationship to nature—shapes policy. To undo this relationship and understand our role as one species among many, we must cultivate what de la Cadena (2015) calls "not-knowing". She frames it as a way of thinking that challenges assumptions about singular ways of understanding the world. This connects to Haraway's (2016) insight that knowledge doesn't just describe reality—it actively creates it. The stories we tell and categories we use shape what we consider real. Not-knowing becomes a decolonizing method (Sundberg, 2014), both practical and political, that extends Jessica's deconstructive work into sustained practice of acknowledging the pluriverse. Not-knowing maintains that space of productive uncertainty that seeks to strengthen pluriversal ways of being. Policy-making becomes a space where the impulse to control is interrupted and listening takes precedence—not to fully grasp the other's world, but to attune to how our worlds are entangled. Therefore, policy becomes a process of pluriversal decolonization where we "walk with" and listen to others (Sundberg, 2014:40), adjusting our (un) learning in ways that allow multiple sustainable futures to emerge.

3. Conclusions

Our dialogue has traced a path from philosophical deconstruction to relational reconstruction, revealing that unlearning modernity-coloniality is a comprehensive transformation requiring new ways of being and with them, new emergent institutional, policy and governance frames of reference. The convergence of our perspectives—Jessica's practical eko-philosophy, Sabaheta's relational ontology, and Maria's pluriversal decolonization —points toward what we might call "emergent governance: a form of collective organizing that arises from the intersection of deconstructed certainties and reconstructed relationalities.

Our exploration of state undoing and reimagining reveals a fundamental temporal paradox: we must act from within modernist institutions to create alternatives that are tentative to the web of life that we humans are part of. Yet, our capacity to envision these alternatives is constrained by our embeddedness in the very systems we seek to transform and the dualist assumptions we aim to transcend. This "bootstrapping problem" cannot be solved through linear planning but requires what complexity theorists call "simultaneous coupling"—the co-evolution of means and ends, process and outcome, deconstruction, reconstruction and integration. Moreover, our discussion of emergent goals illuminates a deeper question about agency itself. If goals emerge from relational processes grounded in place rather than being imposed by sovereign will, what becomes of human intentionality and responsibility? Our dialogue suggests a move toward what we call "distributed agency"—a form of intentional action that works with rather than against the self-organizing properties of complex ecological systems.

These insights point toward three practical imperatives for those seeking to implement such transformations. First, we need experimental institutions that can hold paradox and uncertainty without premature closure—spaces that function as living laboratories for post-modernist governance. Second, we require new forms of leadership that cultivate what we term "facilitative sovereignty"—the capacity to guide without controlling, to steward emergence without predetermined outcomes. Third, we need methods for scaling intimate, place-based practices without losing their essential qualities, which maintain relational depth across multiple scales.

We conclude not with definitive answers but with what Rainer Maria Rilke called "living the questions"—an invitation to readers to engage with these ideas not as fixed prescriptions but as starting points for their own experimental practice.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ramcilovic-Suominen Sabaheta: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Jessica Böhme:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Maria Egrnström-Fuentes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

This perspective paper was invited by the journal editors, to be submitted as a part of the ENVSCI_VSI: Socioecological futures.

Two of the three authors (Sabaheta and Maria) are guest editors of the ENVSCI_VSI: Socioecological futures. This paper should therefore be handled by the journal editors, rather than the VSI guest editors.

No other interests to declare.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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