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Silvia Vega Ugalde

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SILVIA VEGA UGALDE^{*}

Sumak Kawsay, Feminisms and Post-Growth: Linkages to Imagine New Utopias¹

In January 2014, the FLACSO² journal *Revista Iconos* published a special issue on sumak kawsay, revitalizing a debate that had lost impetus in Ecuador lately³. I will use one of the special issue articles, written by Hidalgo and Cubillo, which offers a classification of the different existing positions on sumak kawsay, as a frame for my attempt to identify various conceptions of gender corresponding to each of those positions, either explicitly or implicitly. What I will argue in this article is that, just as sumak kawsay is a polysemous concept, so is gender. A reading that tries to find associations between both concepts within each of the perspectives contained in sumak kawsay is useful and illuminating. Likewise, I will argue that the contestation of the socio-political system in which we live – including patriarchy as a constitutive and inseparable part of that system – differs in each of the perspectives. The meaning of sumak kawsay varies in important ways from one perspective to the other, as does the understanding of gender relations. To put the

^{*} SILVIA VEGA UGALDE is a researcher on historical and social issues and a lecturer at the Universidad Central del Ecuador (Quito). She is a " PhD Candidate of Social Science with specialization in Andean Studies, from FLACSO-Ecuador" and a Doctor of Sociology, from the University of Cuenca,

Ecuador.

¹ This article first appeared as part of the book Post-Crecimiento y Buen Vivir: Propuestas globales para la construcción de sociedades equitativas y sustentables edited by Gustavo Endara and published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES ILDIS) Ecuador. It was translated by María Mancilla García and was published online in http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/7/4/sumak-kawsay-feminisms-and-post-growth-linkages-to-imagine-new-utopias on July 4th, 2015.

² Translator's note: Latin American Social Sciences Institute.

³ Other publications followed that one, which I hope predict a renewed interest on the topic. For example, the book edited by Atahualpa Oviedo (2014) an anthology of the indigenist thought on sumak kawsay (2014) published by the University of Huelva and the PYDLOS programme of the University of Cuenca. It is also worth mentioning Santiago García's unpublished doctoral thesis (2014).

different perspectives on sumak kawsay and on gender into dialogue is mutually enriching; it allows us to imagine new ways of life, new utopic horizons, and to build a nexus and social alliances between actors around those proposals.

In the first part of the article I present the different conceptions of gender that would fit, broadly speaking, with various understandings of sumak kawsay. In the second part, I focus on the degrowth – or post-growth – paradigm, which resonates with the post-developmental and ecological understanding of sumak kawsay. I will reflect on the openings that these perspectives offer to question gender relations, as well as on challenges posed to the post-growth paradigm by feminist economics.

Different meanings of sumak kawsay and gender

Hidalgo and Cubillo distinguish three different perspectives on sumak kawsay: the socialist-statist, the ecological post-developmentalist, and the indigenist-pachamamista. They identify six issues with regard to which these three perspectives differ (Hidalgo y Cubillo, 2014).

Following the first understanding, sumak kawsay is an Andean version of socialism, with an emphasis on state management to achieve social equity, which is the first objective. From this perspective, sumak kawsay constitutes an alternative development paradigm. From the other two perspectives, sumak kawsay is an alternative paradigm *to* development, for its opposition to the modern vision of unlimited growth that preys on nature.

The difference that these authors find between ecological-post-developmental and indigenists-pachamamistas is that the first see sumak kawsay as a project built through the participation of groups that defend contentious positions, while the second see sumak kawsay as the heritage of indigenous people (Hidalgo and Cubillo, 2014).

It could be argued that three different conceptions of gender correspond to these three understandings of sumak kawsay, although proposing a change in gender relations is not central to any of them. A vision of gender based on the liberal notion of equality of opportunity is latent in the socialist-statist vision of sumak kawsay; a vision that defends the complementarity of men and women as a central concept resonates with the indigenist understanding and the vision of the indigenous people; and we can associate the ecological post-developmental vision of sumak kawsay with the understanding of gender put forward by feminist economics and communitarian feminism.

The socialist/statist concept of sumak kawsay and equal-opportunity gender politics

The principle of equality of opportunity between men and women aims to obtain rights for women equal to those enjoyed by men. This perspective puts emphasis on allowing women to access the public sphere (employment, education, politics). It is concerned with discriminatory relationships between men and women, rather than conceiving these as relationships of oppression. The very idea of equal opportunity resonates with liberal feminism, i.e., the dominant perspective in women's movements and in state policies promoting gender equality.

This is the vision that we find in the Plan Nacional del Buen Vivir in Ecuador (PNBV 2009–2013 and PNBV 2013–2017), as the parity targets in elected positions of responsibility attest, together with a more traditional approach to maternity issues, supported by objectives such as: the extension of the breastfeeding period, availability of facilities for assisted birth, services for child care, reduction of maternal mortality in childbirth, reduction of teenage pregnancy and other objectives in which the central concern is protecting the well-being and health of children rather than improving women's living conditions. We also find a couple of objectives that aim to reduce violence against women and to reduce the disparity in the hours employed in housework for men and women. We can consider these two last objectives to be less linked to the traditional 'maternalist' or equality of opportunity paradigms (República del Ecuador, 2009).

In Bolivia, in 2008 a Plan for Equal Opportunities (PIO) was approved. Its first part is a diagnosis that seeks to outline the situation of women in the context of the country's political changes. It also reinterprets certain ideas related to *suma qamaña*, such as the centrality of communities or the complementary pair menwomen, from the perspective of a critical conception of gender.

While this approach is more original than the Ecuadorian, it remains absent from the part of the plan that deals with strategic measures, which, yet again, relies

on the equality of opportunity discourse (Ministerio de Justicia de Bolivia y Viceministerio de Género y Asuntos Generacionales, 2008).⁴

The problem with the vision that I have associated with the equality of opportunity discourse is that by focusing on the public space, it dismisses the need for changes in private spaces. Perhaps more importantly, it uncritically sets the androcentric Western order as the universal referent of rights.

The indigenous conception of sumak kawsay and the idea of gender complementarity

In the binary vision of the indigenous peoples of the Andes, the cosmos is presented as a conjunction of the masculine and the feminine. This conception, transposed to the relationships between men and women, appears in the idea of *chacha-warmi*, which is the man-woman married couple among Aymaras, and also among Quichuas.

The man (*chacha* in Aymara) and the woman (*warmi*) become *Jaqi* (human being) only through marital union. A single man could never be *Jilaqata* ('authority', i.e. assuming a position of leadership and responsibility in the community), and neither can a single woman be *Mama t'alla* (Layme, n.d.). The couple assumes the position of 'authority' in the community in a rotatory fashion, based on gender (men assume the position of 'authority' over men and women over women). Men and women also assume different daily and ritual functions which are perceived as complementing one another (Choque, 2005).

There is a tendency to present this idea of Andean complementarity, at least in certain cases, as a feature that has survived despite colonization. Or, in other cases, it is argued that if this feature has been undermined, it has been as a result of colonial acculturation. This is especially true in the case of communitarian male leaders who affirm the existence of harmonious relationships between men and women within indigenous communities.

Nonetheless, indigenous women have started to question a notion of complementarity that, in practice, positions them as subordinates. For example, the

⁴ Beyond the weaknesses in the conceptualization of gender dimensions in the discourse of sumak kawsay, this fact proves the difficulty of making operational a project that until now was formulated in the realm of ethics and political philosophy.

organization of *Mama T'allas* within CONAMAQ⁵ in Bolivia is planning an alternative arrangement scheme that challenges the current way of accessing positions of responsibility since presently the authority of women follows that of their husbands. Indeed, women become *Mama T'allas* only as spouses of a *Mallku*.⁶

For Blanca Chancoso, an Ecuadorian indigenous leader, complementarity is to "interact in equal conditions, it is to clean the face with both hands, it is mutual help. It is also to break impositions, egoism and individuality. It is to add what the other is missing, not to be the other's walking stick, nor the other's ladder, and even less his labourer. It is to support each other in order to address, develop and foster shared dreams" (Chancoso, 2014: 224).

Challenges to the notion of complementarity centre on the impossibility of thinking about women's and men's personal autonomy, since it is necessary to be married to be complete, which complicates the experience of being single or the acknowledgement of sexual diversity.

However, the concept of complementarity is also seen as a mobilizing idea. In that sense, it is not seen as something that exists in current cultural practices, but rather as an ideal to be built.⁷

The ecological-post-developmental vision of sumak kawsay and the conception of gender in feminist economics and communitarian feminism

It is more difficult to find a conception of gender in the ecologist-postdevelopmental thinking than in the other versions of sumak kawsay, but we can identify convergences with some of the positions defended by feminist economists, on the one hand, and by the thinkers of communitarian feminism on the other. In the first case, the proposals have appeared independently of the discussions on

⁵ Translator's note: National Council of *Ayllus* and *Markas* of *Qullasuyu*, a confederation of traditional governing bodies of highland indigenous communities.

⁶ Arminda Velasco, leader of the Mama T[']allas of CONAMAQ, argues: "We have proposed that everything be chacha-warmi. Before it was Tata and his Mama, now we are suggesting the Mama and her Tata. We are now passing legislation proposed by the Mamas. Now there is a front line of Tatas and there are their Mamas, sort of in the background. There needs to be an alternation: we have said if the first head is the Tata and his Mama, the following must be a Mama and her Tata. And like this, with this kind of alternation, participation needs to be shared" (Interview to Arminda Velasco, 4 October 2013).

⁷ This is what the *Plan for the Equality of Opportunities: Women Building the New Bolivia to Live Well* (Plan de Igualdad de Oportunidades. Mujeres Construyendo la Nueva Bolivia para Vivir Bien) argues (Ministry of Justice of Bolivia and Vice-Ministry of Gender and Generational Matters, 2008).

sumak kawsay, while in the second, there are explicit links, since communitarian feminism aims at decolonizing feminism, appropriating and reinterpreting certain Andean paradigms in a feminist key.

The conceptual category that allows us to associate feminist economics with sumak kawsay is that of the 'reproduction of life'. We find this category in both perspectives, although understood differently. From the sumak kawsay perspective, the idea of the 'reproduction of life' deals with orienting production and consumption to satisfy human needs and not to accumulate capital. From the point of view of feminist economics, 'reproduction of life' refers to reproductive work, generally considered women's responsibility. This work serves to satisfy basic human needs, which resonates with sumak kawsay's understanding of the concept. Both concepts challenge Western 'scientific' knowledge, since it has led to an instrumentalization of nature and an invisibilization of women's economy. Both perspectives propose to transform the present organization of the economy as part of a developmental scheme into an economic scheme centred on the reproduction of life.

Some feminist economists distinguish within the discipline between positions of 'conciliation' and positions of 'rupture.' The first are interested in vindicating the conciliation of productive and reproductive work, reproducing the binary logic of the socio-economic system, where the productive pole ends up receiving priority, subordinate to the reproductive one, in such a way that the capitalist logic of production and the masculine preeminence in the public world remain untouched.

Feminist economists who advocate a rupture seek to transcend that binary logic of analysis because "production and reproduction don't have the same analytical value, and indeed, production, the markets, don't have value in themselves, only insofar as they promote or impede the maintenance of life, which is the central category of analysis" (Perez, 2005: 54).

The project of communitarian feminism proceeds from criticism of liberal feminism and seeks to decolonize feminism by rooting feminist reflection in the values and worldview of the Andes. They seek to recuperate the community, not as an existing reality – since they criticise, for example, patriarchy and other exploitative relations in some indigenous communities – but as an ideal in the making that transcends individualism, and also the state. They take up the defence of Pachamama and a harmonious relationship with nature. This current of thought has essentially been developed in Bolivia and it considers the Plurinational State as

an instrument for the transition that should lead to unity and the self-management of communities (Arroyo, 2013).

The three visions briefly presented coexist, clash with one another and at times, unite. Women's movements in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia have sought to obtain from the Morales and Correa governments some attention to their agendas, with more or less success, depending on the kinds of proposals that have been put forward. Having said that, what has been missing is depth in the debate over long-term strategic implications for women of a constitutionalised paradigm like that of sumak kawsay/suma qamaña, focusing on the immediacy of concrete and pragmatic demands. The proposal to 'depatriarchalize' the state and society that has been put forward in Bolivia, has put the discussion back in a strategic arena and has opened a space to dispute meanings, something that hasn't happened in Ecuador.⁸

Gender transformations in the context of imagined post-growth

One of the paradigms in which the ecological post-developmental conception appears is that of post-growth. Some central ideas of this paradigm can be put into dialogue with the postulates of feminism to define common questions, although that very intention is foreign to post-growth theorists.

Based on an analysis of the environmental crisis that threatens to destroy the planet, as well as on an analysis of the levels of alienation and overwork to which human beings are submitted in the current capitalist state, authors like Latouche and Harpagés (2011), together with Paolo Cacciari (2010), propose the utopia of degrowth, which purposes to overcome the productivist vision that has oriented different societies in the past centuries, independently of their capitalist or socialist ideology.

Degrowth suggests redefining production based on the satisfaction of needs and not on the profits that the spiral of production for production entails.⁹

The main objective of degrowth is the reduction of global production to the levels of 1960–1970, to obtain an ecological footprint equal or inferior to one planet. This goal, expressed in economic terms, implies a reconceptualization of the

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the debates on de-patriarchalization in Bolivia, see Vega, 2014.

⁹ The synthesis presented here draws on the work of Serge Latouche and Harpagés (2011).

current way of life; it presupposes some of the central ideas that Latouche and Harpagés develop to define their proposal: firstly, the need to 'recraft space-time dimensions'; secondly, 'working less to live better'; thirdly, 'reducing distances and regain slowness'; and fourthly, 'taking back the local'. All these changes are interrelated (Latouche and Harpagés, 2010: 52–78).

Producing in order to satisfy needs means to construct smaller spaces for coexistence – as opposed to the mega cities of capitalist modernity – which, as far as possible, can be self-sustainable in the production of their energy sources and self-sufficient in food and economic conditions. This could be achieved by fostering local and seasonal agricultural production, with more contact between producers and consumers, by the reduction of transport, storing and refrigeration of products, by the use of local or regional money, and the revitalization of the social fabric. It is about leaving behind the irrationalities of transnational product to be processed thousands of kilometres away, and then having the final product return back to the consumers' homes.

A key idea associated with degrowth is the need for a considerable reduction of intermediary consumption such as transport, packaging, publicity and energy. For that purpose, relocating economic activity, restoring peasant agriculture, reducing energy waste, penalizing publicity spending, reducing the number of working hours, appear as essential measures - among others - that could be encouraged via incentives, taxes and other political decisions. Recuperating the local has economic, but also political potentialities, because it allows a relationship of higher proximity among residents, as well as participation and collective decision-making on topics of common interest; we would be looking at a re-appropriation of politics from below. The recuperation of the local wouldn't be a matter merely of place, but of identity. The creation of a space for the recognition of a collective life project together with coordinated and solidary action becomes viable. Housing would be redefined to propose grouped constructions that would optimize the use of energy and break the walls of individuality, combining adequately private and collective spaces. By reducing productivism, working time should also be reduced. In other words, the productivity that is achieved would be the product of the necessary time to produce goods and not to increase profits, which inevitably leads to producing more and more.

With extra liberated time, the flourishing of artistic activities, recreation, sports, spiritual contemplation, public participation, voluntary work and collective support would be allowed to blossom. It is a matter of quantitative reduction and qualitative transformation of work.

As can be appreciated in this narrow synthesis, degrowth advances a deep cultural revolution, a change in the current imaginaries of progress and well-being, a questioning of consumerism, and a rehabilitation of sobriety, savings, environmental conscience and the revalorisation of social fabric.

What openings do we find in degrowth proposals to question relations of gender domination? There are some elements that are particularly suitable to advance the destabilization of androcentric patterns of social interaction. The first is precisely the call for a deep cultural change entailed in the degrowth paradigm, a change that aims at transforming daily habits, from what we decide to eat to the configuration of neighbourhoods and houses. The degrowth framework, which seeks to shake up mentalities, is a suitable arena to question other common sense notions related to interpersonal and gender relation. Feminist cultural hegemony has naturalized certain habits, and their destabilization is difficult to accept.

A second aspect that favours the questioning of gender relationships is the emphasis in the degrowth paradigm on reconquering time through the reduction of distances and commuting, as well as through the reduction of working days. That would allow women, who are generally "poor in time" as a result of their double or triple working days, to advance more equal uses of working time and of free time for themselves and to put into question the distribution of time between men and women, with the aim of abolishing the sexual division of labour.

A third aspect that would favour a change in gender relations is the revalorisation of the local, since in local spaces, the visibility and the social and political prominence of women is paramount. These are areas of proximity that would boost political participation, voluntary social action, and would allow women to safely commute for paid work or recreation and leisure activities.

Correspondences and divergences with regards to the 'sustainability of life'

What, then, are the proposals of feminist economics for the organization of life and how do they fit – or not – with the degrowth paradigm? As previously highlighted, the feminist economics of rupture defends a reorganization of life, society and its behaviour around the sustainability of life, putting at the core people's care – material and affective – and the simple satisfaction of people's needs. Bosch and other authors find a convergence between the ecological perspective and the feminist one on questioning the capitalist idea of time as clock-time, homogeneous and scarce. Both schools understand time from the experience that natural – as much as human life – evolves in discontinuous and heterogeneous times. As far as the human dimension is concerned, time is lived as experience, relation, learning, companionship, and thus it is never equal to itself. Natural cycles are repetitive, but never identical (Bosch et al., 2004).

Similarly to the idea in the feminist economics of rupture of adapting productive work to the biological time of human life to guarantee first the satisfaction of care needs, the ecological perspective puts forward the same adjustment based on the cyclical time of nature (Bosch et al., 2004). On the new organization of time, Carrasco argues that:

Schedules and working days should adapt to the necessary domestic work and not the other way around as it is presently done. Commercial arrangements should become more flexible, but in order to adapt to human needs. The result would be a growing valuation of non-commercial time, which would help the male sector of the population to diminish the number of hours devoted to the market and to assume its part of responsibility in the tasks of direct care. That way we could achieve 'equality' between women and men, because the latter would be imitating the former, participating in similar way in what are the basic activities of life. In parallel, the participation in work of men and women would progressively become homogenous (Carrasco, 2001: 24).

Echoing the idea of ecological footprint advanced by the defenders of degrowth, Bosch and other authors speak of a 'civilising footprint', an indicator that would entail a proper balance between what people receive and what they bring in terms of care time (affection and time to provide for the satisfaction of basic needs) to guarantee the continuity of life for different human generations:

The ecological footprint refers to the sustainability of human life on the planet, making visible the unequal distribution-consumption of resources; the civilising footprint would refer to the sustainability of life in conditions of humanity in the network of relationships that make it possible, making visible the unequal inputreception of loving and caring energies between women and men (Bosch et al., 2004: 17).

It could be argued that the common concern for the sustainability of life brings together feminist economics and the post-growth school, but the emphasis in each position lies in different places. Post-growth, as formulated by authors like Latouche and Harpagés, is blind to gendered social relations, and therefore does not perceive the different workloads and responsibilities in the sustainability of life that men and women have. Feminism, by contrast, emphasizes that difference because it argues that it is on the sexual division of labour that gender domination is based. This is achieved by establishing the public world as the dominating space of men, to the detriment of the private world, the world of care, which is culturally assigned to women.

The compatibility of the two paradigms will remain only apparent if those that champion degrowth don't make a deliberate effort to include a feminist reading in their understanding of the reproduction of life, which entails dealing with the issue of who performs the work of human and natural care, under which conditions such work is done and what costs it implies for men and women. On their hand, feminists should incorporate the ecological understanding of the sustainability of life in order to frame their argument about the sexual division of labour outside of and beyond the horizon of the productivist and consumerist way of life of 'modern' societies.

Relocating the debate under utopic horizons

The proposals formulated by the schools of degrowth and feminist economics of rupture, are, today, utopic, but as Cacciari says, utopias "are like the stars for sailors in the night. Nobody thinks of reaching them, but they help to maintain one's course" (Cacciari, 2010: 16). The exercise of imagining how social relations of production and gender domination could change in other possible worlds, in other life contexts, organised around the paradigm of life sustainability, is imperative to keep alive the tension necessary for historical change, civilizational change.

The governments and societies of countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia are losing their utopic horizon and as a result are following a mistaken course, which is why political projects supposedly aiming to produce change are trapped in pragmatism and productivist immediatism. But this problem does not only affect the governments. Latin American feminism is going through a similar journey. We have become used to fighting for sectorial demands, to being thrilled with the small concessions of patriarchal states, taking them for big victories. We speak of gender 'transversality' in public policy, following development agencies' discourses, and it has become indifferent to us whether gender is 'transversalized' in a neoliberal or in a neo-developmental state, in such a way that feminism is losing its subversive identity, its revolutionary identity, becoming yet another reformist trend, which at the end of the day doesn't really disrupt women's state of oppression, or any other of the oppressions that we suffer.

Thus, as feminists we urgently need to relocate gender discussions under the horizon of new utopias, such as sumak kawsay, degrowth, or others. This is necessary not only to restore feminism's revolutionary edge, but also to find common causes with other movements and with other social and political sectors interested in moving history forward without succumbing to ecological, capitalist and patriarchal barbarism.

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