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“Bien Vivir” – Between “Development” and the De/Coloniality of Power

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“**Bien Vivir**” – Between “**Development**” and the De/Coloniality of Power²

*The whole extensive historical formational process of the Global Coloniality of Power has entered a deep crisis. The “**Bien Vivir**”, an expression of the indigenous populations of Latin America, is shaping an alternative for social life that can only be realized as a De/Coloniality of Power.*

What I am proposing here, opens a crucial question of our crucial moment in history: **Bien Vivir**,³ in order to be an effective historical realization, cannot be but a complex

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² This article was translated by Sebastián Garbe and originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2016/1/20/bien-vivir-between-development-and-the-decoloniality-of-power1> on January 20th, 201.

³ “**Bien Vivir**” and “**Buen Vivir**” are the most common terms in a debate of and in the new movement of society, most of all of the indigenized populations in Latin America towards a different social existence that has been imposed by the Coloniality of Power. “**Bien Vivir**” is probably the oldest formulation within “indigenous” resistance against the Coloniality of Power. Interestingly, it was adopted in the Viceroyalty of Peru by no one else but Guamán Poma de Ayala approximately in 1615 in his *Nueva Crónicas y buen gobierno*. Carolina Ortiz Fernández is the first who paid attention to this historical fact. See: Ortiz Fernández, Carolina (2009) “Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, Clorinda Matto, Trinidad Henríquez y la teoría crítica. Sus legados a la teoría social contemporánea”, in: Yuyaykusun (Lima: Universidad Ricardo Palma), Nr. 2, December. The differences cannot be merely linguistic but rather conceptual. It will be necessary to demarcate the alternatives, as well as in Latin-American Spanish, as in the most common variants of Quechua in South America and in Aymara. In Quechua of northern Peru and in Ecuador, one says Allin Kghaway (Well Living) or Allin Kghawana (Good Way of Living) and in Quechua of southern Peru and in Bolivia one says “Sumac Kawsay”, which is translated into Spanish as “Buen Vivir” (Good Living). But “Sumac” in the north of Peru and in Ecuador means pretty, nice, beautiful. So, for example, “Imma Sumac” (How beautiful!) is the artistic name of a Peruvian singer. “Sumac Kawsay” would be translated as “Living Nicely”. What is more, there are uninformed Eurocentrists, who want to make Sumac the same as Suma and propose to say Suma Kawsay.

of social practices oriented towards the democratic production and reproduction of a democratic society, another mode of social existence with its own and specific historical horizon of meanings, radically alternative to the Global Coloniality of Power and the Eurocentred Coloniality/Modernity.⁴ This model of power is still globally hegemonic today, but also in its deepest and most existential crisis since its constitution for not much more than 500 years. In these conditions, today, *Bien Vivir*, might make sense as an alternative form for social existence, as a De/Coloniality of Power.

“Development”, a Eurocentric paradox: modernity without de/coloniality

Development was, most of all as debated in Latin-America, a key term of a political discourse associated with an elusive project of deconcentration and relative redistribution of the control of industrial capital as part of a new geography within the configuration of global colonial-modern capitalism at the end of the second World War.

⁴ The theory of the Coloniality of Power or Global Coloniality of Power and of Eurocentrism or Eurocentred Modernity/Coloniality as its specific historical horizon of meanings has been originally proposed in my writings since the beginnings of the last decade of the 20th century. For the purpose of the present debate, it might be useful to cite only the most important ones. “Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad”, originally published in *Peru Indigena*, Vol. 13, Nr. 29, Lima 1991; “Americanity as a Concept or the Americas in the Modern World-System”, published jointly with Immanuel Wallerstein in *International Social Science Journal*, Nr. 134, November 1992, UNESCO/Blackwell, 549-557, Paris, France; “América Latina en la Economía Mundial”, published in *Problemas del Desarrollo*, Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, UNAM, Vol. XXIV, Nr. 95, October-Dezember 1993, Mexico; „Raza, Etnia y Nación: Cuestiones Abiertas”, in *José Carlos Mariátegui y Europa*. Amauta, 1993, 167-188, Lima, Peru. “Colonialité du Pouvoir et Democratie en Amérique Latine”, in *Future Antérieur: Amérique Latine, Democratie et Exclusion*. L’Har mattan, 1994, Paris, France; “Colonialidad, Poder, Cultura y Conocimiento en América Latina”, in Lima, *Anuario Mariátegui*, 1998, Vol. IX, Nr. 9, 113-122, Peru; “Qué Tal Raza!”, in *Familia Y Cambio Social. Cecosam*, 1998, Lima, Peru; “Colonialidad del Poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina”, in Edgardo Lander (ed.), *Colonialidad del Saber, Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales, UNESCO-CLACSO, 2000*) 201-246; “Colonialidad del Poder y Clasificación Social”, originally published in Festschrift for Immanuel Wallerstein, in *Journal of World Systems Research*, Vol. VI, Nr. 2, Autumn/Winter 2000, 342-388, Special Issue, Giovanni Arrighi and Walter L. Goldfrank (ed.), Colorado, USA; “Colonialidad del Poder, Globalización y Democracia”, in *San Marcos*, Second Cycle, Nr. 25, July 2006, 51-104, Universidad de San Marcos, Lima, Peru. At the moment, this theory is being debated on a worldwide scale.

At a first moment it was a virtually official discourse. Nevertheless, it gave space to complex and contradictory questions, which derived in a rich and intense debate with worldwide resonance as a clear expression of the magnitude and the deepness of the socio-political conflicts of interest that were part of this whole new geography of power and, particularly, in Latin-America. In this way, a wide range of categories became produced (mainly development, underdevelopment, modernization, marginality, participation on the one hand and on the other imperialism, dependency, marginalization, revolution), which was deployed in close contact with conflictive and violent movements of and in society that lead to dead-end processes or relatively important, but unfinished, changes in the distribution of power.⁵

In short, one could say that in Latin America the main result was the destitution of the “oligarchic state” and of some of its expressions in the social existence of those countries population. But neither its historical-structural dependency in the Global Coloniality of Power, nor the modes of exploitation and domination inherent to this power model have been eradicated or sufficiently altered in order to make space for a democratic production and management of the State, nor its resources of production, nor the distribution and appropriation of the product. Despite its intensity, this debate never managed to liberate itself from the hegemony of Eurocentrism. In other words, these changes did not lead to “development”. Otherwise it would not be possible to understand why the term always manages to reappear, for instance now, as the ghost of an unfinished past.⁶

The global coloniality of power and the ghost of the nation-state

In this debate, the hegemony of Eurocentrism lead to perceive “development” in Latin America only in relation to the Nation-State. But, in the context of a Global

⁵ The names of Raúl Prebisch, Celso Furtado, Anibal Pinto, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Enzo Faletto, Andrew Gunder Frank, Rui Mauro Marini, Theotonio Dos Santos, José Nun among those who took part in that debate are probably known to most of the readers. And there is, of course, a huge body of literature available in that regard.

⁶ See Aníbal Quijano (2000) “El Fantasma del Desarrollo en América Latina”, in *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, 2/2000, 73-91, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela. Of the same author (2000) “Os Fantasmas da América Latina”, in Adauto Novais (org.), *Oito Visoões da América Latina*. SENAC, 49-87, Sao Paulo, 2006, Brazil.

Coloniality of Power, this perspective was historically misleading. What is more, precisely after the second World War, this power model entered a long period of decisive changes on a global scale. It is pertinent to summarize those:

1. Industrial capital began to be structurally connected with, which was known at that time as the “technological-scientific revolution”. This relationship implied, on the one hand, a reduction of the need for living and individual work force and consequently for paid labor as structurally inherent to capital in that new period. Unemployment ceased to be a temporary or cyclical problem. “Structural unemployment” was the term, which later was employed by more conservative economists to make sense of that process.
2. These transformation tendencies of the relationships between capital and labor implied an amplification of the range of speculative accumulation – not only cyclically but also as a structural tendency –, which was understood as a progressive “structural financialization”. In that way a new industrial-financial capital was formed, which soon experienced a relatively fast global expansion.
3. A process of tecnocratization/instrumentalization of subjectivities, imaginaries and all historical horizons of meanings specific to the Eurocentred Colonial Modernity. Strictly, it is about the growing withdrawal of the original promises of the so-called “modern rationality” and, in that sense, a deep change in the ethical-political perspective of the original Eurocentric version of “Coloniality/Modernity”. Despite its new character, it did not cease to be attractive and persuasive although it turned out to be more and more paradoxical, ambivalent and ultimately historically impossible.
4. Development and the expansion of the new industrial-financial capital, together with the defeat of national-socialist/fascist sectors of the global bourgeoisie, in a struggle over the hegemony of capitalism during the second World War, facilitated the disintegration of European colonialism in Asia and Africa and, at the same time, the prosperity of bourgeois groups, the middle classes and even considerable sectors of the exploited Euro-American working classes.

5. The consolidation of the bureaucratic despotism (renamed “really existing socialism”) and its sudden expansion inside and outside of Europe happened inside the same historical process. This mode of domination became affected more profoundly and irremediably by this technocratic and instrumental flow of colonial/modern “rationality”.

6. In this context, the hegemony of that version of “modernity” had the function of the most powerful domination mechanism of subjectivity, as well as through the global bourgeoisie as through the despotic bureaucracy of the so-called “socialist bloc”. In that way and despite their rivalry, both modes of domination, exploitation and conflict converged in a repressive antagonism of the new movements of and in society, particularly regarding the social ethic of labor, gender, subjectivity and collective authority. Contrarily, it would be much harder to explain the successful alliance of both modes of domination to overthrow most of all juvenile movements (be that in Paris, New York, Berlin, Rome, Jakarta, Tlatelolco or Shanghai and Prague). At the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s, they fought as a minority, but in the whole world, not only more against labor exploitation, colonialism and imperialism, but also against colonial-imperial wars (for that period Vietnam is the emblematic case), but also against the social ethic of productivism and consumerism; against the pragmatic bourgeois and bureaucratic authoritarianism; against the domination through “race” and “gender”; against the repression of all non-conventional forms of sexuality; against the technocratic reductionism of instrumental rationality and for new aesthetical-ethical political frameworks. Fighting, consequently, for a radically different historical horizon of meanings than that of the Eurocentred Coloniality/Modernity.

7. At the same time a new model of conflicts came up. First, the delegitimation of the whole domination system assembled through the axis “race”/”gender”/”ethnicity”. This tendency already began since the end of the second world war as a result of the global repudiation regarding the atrocities of national-socialism and Japanese military authoritarianism. The racism/sexism/ethnicism of those despotic regimes was consequently not only

defeated in war, but also and to no lesser extent and as a part of the delegitimizing references of racialization, patriarchy, ethnicism and militarist authoritarianism converted within the power relations. But it was mostly during the decade of the 60s in the 20th century that a great debate on “race” and “gender” could gain a new and definitive prominence, announcing the enormous contemporary global conflict regarding the control over these areas of social behavior and praxis.

8. Despite the defeat of those anti-authoritarian and anti-bureaucratic movements and the following imposition of “globalization” as the new Global Colonial Capitalism, the seed of a new historical horizon was able to survive among the new historical-structural heterogeneity of global imaginaries and momentarily germinates as one of the most visible signs in the proposition for a Bien Vivir.

The new historical period: the existential crisis of the global coloniality of power

The evolvement of these new historical tendencies of industrial-financial capital lead to a prolonged booming and changing period, culminating in an explosion of an existential crisis in the power model as such, the Global Coloniality of Power, its ensemble and its crucial elements, since the second half of 1973.

Together with that crisis, the world entered a new historical period, whose specific processes have a similar deepness, magnitude and implication with the period that we call “industrial-bourgeois revolution”, although with opposing signs. The terms “neoliberalism”, “globalization” and “postmodernity” (which cannot be discussed here at length)⁷ present with reasonable efficacy and despite of all their ambivalences

⁷ My contribution to that debate, principally in: *Modernidad, Identidad y Utopía en América Latina. SOCIEDAD Y POLITICA*, Lima 1988; “Colonialidad del Poder, Globalización y Democracia”, originally in *TENDENCIAS BASICAS DE NUESTRA ERA*. Instituto de Estudios Internacionales Pedro Gual, 2001. Caracas, Venezuela. An updated version in: *SAN MARCOS*, Nr. 25, July 2006, Universidad de San Marcos, Lima, Peru; “Entre la Guerra Santa y la Cruzada”, originally in *AMERICA LATINA EN MOVIMIENTO*, Nr. 341, October 2001, Quito, Ecuador; “El Trabajo al Final del Siglo XX”, originally in *PENSÉE SOCIALE CRITIQUE POUR LE XXI SIÈCLE*, Melanges en l’honneur de Samir Amin. Forum du Tiers- Monde, L’Harmattan 2003, 131-149, Paris, France; and “Paradojas de la Colonialidad /Modernidad/Eurocentrada”, in *HUESO HUMERO*, Nr. 53, April 2009, 30-59. Lima, Peru.

and complexities the character and the main tendencies of this new period.

The first consists basically in the ultimate imposition of the new financial capital in the control of the global colonial-modern capitalism. Precisely, it is about the worldwide imposition of a “structural unemployment” woven by the “structural financialization”. The second is about the imposition of that definitive framework on all countries and the whole human population, initially in Latin America through the bloody dictatorship of general Augusto Pinochet in Chile and later through the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in Britain and the U.S. together with the support and/or subjugation of all other countries.

This imposition produced a social dispersion of the exploited workers and the disintegration of their main social and political institutions (mainly trade unions); the defeat and disintegration of the so-called “socialist bloc” and virtually of all regimes, movements and political organizations involved. China and later Vietnam chose to be on the side of the new industrial-financial and globalized “really existing capitalism” under a reconfigured bureaucratic despotism as a partner of the mayor global financial corporations and of the Global Imperial Bloc.⁸

Finally, “postmodernity” denominates in a rather unsatisfactory way, the ultimate imposition of tecnocratization/instrumentalization of what was known as “modern rationality”, that is the Eurocentred Coloniality/Modernity.

We are then deep within a historical process of a complete reconfiguration of the Global Coloniality of Power, the hegemonic power model of the planet. It is about, in a first stance, the acceleration and deepening of a re-concentration tendency regarding the control of power.

The central tendencies of that process consist, in a brief overview, in:

1. The re-privatization of public spaces, mainly the State;
2. The reconcentration of the control over labor, the resources of production and of production-redistribution;

⁸ On the concept Global Imperial Bloc, see „Colonialidad del poder, globalización y democracia“, op. cit.

3. The extreme and increasing social polarization of the world population;
4. The aggravation of the “exploitation of nature”;
5. The hyperfetishization of the market, even more than of the product;
6. The manipulation and control of technological resources of communication and of transportation in order to impose the tecnocratization/instrumentalization of Coloniality/Modernity;
7. The mercantilization of subjectivity and life experiences of individuals, mainly of women;
8. The universal aggravation of individualist dispersion of people and of egoistic conduct, cross-dressed as individual liberty, which is the equivalent of the universalization of the “American Dream” in social praxis, perverted as the nightmare of brutal individual quest for wealth and power against others;
9. The “fundamentalization” of religious ideologies and their corresponding social ethics, what ultimately re-legitimizes the control over the main areas of social existence;
10. The growing use of the so-called “cultural industries” (most of all images, cinema, TV, video, etc.) in the industrial production of terror and mystification of experiences, leading to a legitimation of the “fundamentalization” of ideologies and repressive violence.

The “exploitation of nature” and the crisis of the global coloniality of power

Although only in an allusive way, it is pertinent to point out that one of the foundational elements of the Eurocentred Coloniality/Modernity is the new and radical Cartesian dualism that separates “reason” from “nature”.⁹ Hence, one of the most characteristic ideas/images of eurocentrism in any of its expressions is the “exploitation of nature” as something that does not require any further justification,

⁹ A more detailed debate can be found in „Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social“ in Arrighi and Goldfrank (2000), op. cit.

expressed properly in the productivist ethic originated in the “industrial revolution”. It is not difficult at all to perceive the inherent presence of the idea of “race” as part of “nature” – as an explanation and justification for the exploitation of “inferior races”.

Under the protection of this metaphysical mystification of human relations with the rest of the universe, the dominant groups of the homo sapiens, within the Global Coloniality of Power and especially since the “industrial revolution”, lead the species to impose its exploitative hegemony on all other species of animals as well as a predatory conduct over all other existing elements of the planet. Based on that, the Global/Colonial Capitalism performs an increasingly fierce and predatory conduct, that leads to jeopardize not only the survival of the whole species on the planet, but also the continuity and the reproduction of the conditions of life, the whole life on the planet. With its imposition, today we are killing each other and destroying our common home.

From that perspective, the so-called “global warming” of the global climate or the “climate crisis”, far from being a “natural” phenomenon that happens within something we call “nature” and supposedly separated from us as members of that animal species Homo Sapiens, is the result of the aggravation of that global disorientation of our species on earth, which has been imposed by the predatory tendencies of the new industrial-financial capitalism within the Global Coloniality of Power. In other terms, it is one of the most central expressions of this existential crisis of this specific power model.

The new resistance: towards the de/coloniality of power

Since the end of the 20th century, a growing proportion of the victims of that power model began to resist these tendencies in virtually the whole world. The oppressors, the “servants of capital”, whether as owners of big financial corporations or rulers of despotic-bureaucratic regimes, answer with violent repression, not only inside the conventional borders of their own countries, but passing through and by them, developing a tendency of global re-colonization, using the most sophisticated

technological resources, which allow to kill more people, quicker and with less cost.

Based on these conditions, the Crisis of the Global Coloniality of Power and especially of the Eurocentred Coloniality/Modernity, the aggravation of conflictivity and violence has been set up as a globalized structural tendency.

Such aggravation of conflictivity, fundamentalisms and violence, coupled with the growing and extreme social polarization of the world population, causes the resistance itself to produce a new conflict model.

Resistance tends to evolve as the production of a new sense of social existence, life itself, precisely because the vast concerned population perceives with a growing intensity, that what is at stake here and now is not only their poverty as their never-ending way of existence, but rather and nothing less than their own survival. Such a discovery implies necessarily that one cannot defend human life on earth without defending at the same time and in the same movement the conditions of the very life on earth.

In that way, the defense of human life and its conditions on the planet becomes the new sense for resistance struggles for an enormous majority of the world population. And without subverting and disintegrating the Global Coloniality of Power and its colonial-global capitalism in its most predatory period today, these struggles may not advance towards the production of a historical meaning alternative to the Eurocentred Modernity/Coloniality.

De/coloniality of power as a continuous democratic production of social existence

This new historical horizon of meanings, the defense of the conditions of one's own and other's life on this planet, is already under consideration in the struggles and alternative social practices of the species. Consequently, against all form of domination/exploitation within social existence. That is, a De/Coloniality of Power as a point of departure and the democratic self-production and reproduction of social existence as a continuous orientational axis of social practices.

It is this historical context, where it is necessary to locate the whole debate and elaboration of the proposition of Bien Vivir. Following, it is most of all about admitting this open question, not only in debate, but also in the everyday social praxis of populations who decide to warp and inhabit historically this new possibility of social existence.

In order to evolve and consolidate itself, the De/Coloniality of Power would imply social practices configured by:

- a. The social equality of heterogeneous and diverse individuals, against the *de-equalizing* racial and sexual social classification and identification of the world population;
- b. Consequently, neither the differences nor the identities will be any longer a source or argument for the social inequality of individuals;
- c. The groups, belongings and/or identities might be the product of a free and autonomous decisions of free and autonomous individuals;
- d. The reciprocity between socially equal groups and/or individuals in the organization of labor and in the distribution of products;
- e. The egalitarian redistribution of resources and products, tangible and intangible, of the world between the world population;
- f. The tendency of communal association of the world population on a local, regional or global scale as a way of producing and managing collective authority directly and, with that precise meaning, as the most efficient mechanism to distribute and redistribute rights, obligations, responsibilities, resources, products, between groups and their individuals, in every area of social existence (sex, labor, subjectivity, collective authority) and a co-responsibility regarding the relationship with all other living beings and entities on the planet or the whole universe.

The “indigenous” of the “global south” and the proposition of bien vivir: open questions

It is not an historical accident that the debate about the Coloniality of Power and the Eurocentred Coloniality/Modernity has been produced, foremost, in Latin America.

Neither, that the proposition of Bien Vivir comes from, basically, the new movement of Latin-American “indigenous”.

Latin America is the place constituted through the “Accidental Indies” (ironic reference to the common idea of the “West Indies”).¹⁰ And by that, as the the kick-off time and space of a new historical world and a new power model, the Global Coloniality of Power. At the same time, as the original time/space of the first “indigenization” of the survivors of the colonizing genocide, as the first population of the world suppressed through the “racialization” of their new identity and their subjugated place inside the new power model.

Latin America and the “indigenous” population, then, have an elemental, foundational role in the constitution and history of the Coloniality of Power. From there derives their actual place and role in the political-ethic-aesthetic-historic-theoretic-epistemic subversion of this power model in-crisis, implied in the proposition of a De/Coloniality of Power and Bien Vivir as an alternative social existence.

But still if America and particularly Latin America was the first new historical identity of the Coloniality of Power and their colonized population the first “indigenous” of the world, since the 18th century all the rest of the planet and its populations have been conquered by Western Europe. And those populations, the vast majority of the world, have been colonized, racialized and consequently “indigenized”. Their contemporary emergence does not constitute, then, just another “social movement”. It is about a whole new movement of and in society whose development could lead to a Global De/Coloniality of Power, meaning to another social existence, liberated from domination/exploitation/violence.

The crisis of the Global Coloniality of Power and the debate and struggle for the De/Coloniality, prove at plain sight that the social relation of domination/exploitation grounded upon the idea of “race” is a product of the history of power relations and not of any Cartesian “nature”. But it also shows the extreme

¹⁰ Finley, Robert 2003. *Las Indias Accidentales*, Barcelona, Barataria.

historical heterogeneity of the “indigenized” population, first in their pre-colonial history and second in their history produced through the experiences under the Coloniality of Power for almost half a millennium. During the latter, a new historical movement of and in society is now producing the De/Coloniality of Power.

It would make no sense, though, to wait for this historically heterogeneous population, which composes the overwhelmingly vast majority of the world, to produce or to take over a universal, homogenous historical imaginary as an alternative to the Global Coloniality of Power. This would not even be conceivable taking only into account the population of Latin America or the Americas as a whole.

In fact, all these populations, without any exception, come from historical experiences of power relationships. Until now, power seems to have been, in all known history, not only a phenomenon of all long-term social forms of existence, but particularly the main motivation of the historical collective conduct of the species. Such experiences of power relations are without any doubt different between each other and regarding the Coloniality of Power, but nevertheless possible common experiences of colonization.

However, the “indigenized” population under colonial rule, first in Iberian “America” and later in the whole world under the rule of “Western Europe” not only shared universally the perverted forms of domination/exploitation imposed by the Global Coloniality of Power. Also, paradoxically but effectively, the resistance against those forms made it possible to share common historical aspirations against domination, exploitation and discrimination: the social equality of heterogeneous individuals, the freedom of thought and expression of all those individuals, the equal redistribution of resources as well as the egalitarian control over all of the central areas of social existence.

It is because of that, that within the historical “indigeneity” of those victimized populations under the Global Coloniality of Power, lies not only the heritage of the past, but also the lessons for a historical resistance on such a long time span. We are, therefore, walking towards the emergence of a new historically-structurally heterogeneous identity whose development might produce a new social existence

liberated from domination/exploitation/violence, which is one central demand of the World Social Forum: Another world is possible!

In other words, the new historical horizon of meanings is emerging in all its historical-structural heterogeneity.

In that perspective, the proposition of Bien Vivir, is necessarily a historically open question,¹¹ which requires continuous inquiry, debate and praxis.

¹¹ In that regard, for example the recent interviews by Aymaran leaders in Bolivia, made and diffused by E-Mail of the CAOI. The journal *América Latina en Movimiento* of the Latin American Information Agency (ALAI) dedicated their issue 452, February 2010, under the general title „Recuperar el sentido de la vida“ entirely to this debate. Regarding the social praxis itself, there is a very important movement of specific research. See: „Vivir Bien frente al desarrollo. Procesos de planeación participativa en Medellín“, in Gómez, Esperanza *et. al.*, Medellín, Universidad de Medellín, 2010.