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## Buen Vivir: New Wine in Old Wineskins?

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## **Buen Vivir: New Wine in Old Wineskins?<sup>1</sup>**

According to the scholarly tradition in cultural sociology, which can be traced back to Durkheim and his disciples Hertz and Mauss, we people tend to make sense of the world by coding phenomena in terms of binary oppositions: good/evil; hot/cold; sun/moon... and also some more contentious ones: civilized/barbarian (relevant cleavage in anti-colonial struggles); rational/emotional (feminist struggles); society/nature (core issue in ecological thought); etc. We bring this up right at the outset because it is important in the context of this article, for the two following reasons:

First, because we will frame the two main arguments of our understanding of Buen Vivir in terms of such binary codes, namely: a) the repackaging of an indigenous cultural model into modern clothing by scholars and statesmen mainly in Ecuador and Bolivia, which I will frame as a binary opposition Sumak Kawsay (SK)/ Buen vivir (BV); and b) the binomial proposition of Buen Vivir versus sustainable development (SD) –whose oppositional character is actually our main interrogation. These two binary oppositions will also serve as the two structural pillars of this article. The second reason why binary codes are important here is that, so we will argue, the value added of BV lies, to a large extent, precisely in destabilizing (and thus opening up to change) some essentially unsustainable yet

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deeply entrenched binary codes making up the metanarratives—the basic cultural fabric—on which Western modern civilization builds.

Maybe a good starting point would be addressing the question of why BV is worth discussing in the first place. I just mentioned its destabilizing potential vis-à-vis some of the basic cultural pillars of the (European) modern project. But then other contemporary sustainability discourses also perform such critique. Think of Gaia theory (Lovelock, 2007), the global justice movement; the ecofeminist, degrowth, or commons movements, to name only a few. So is there anything distinctive to BV, anything particularly reinforcing of this destabilizing potential? We have identified two more drivers which make Buen vivir worth being taken seriously:

1. BV is not some philosophical utopia with any empirical grounding: the constitutive principles of BV inform actual social praxis of indigenous populations in the Andean-Amazonian region that has been going on for centuries. But—perhaps more interestingly—these principles have often also combined with modern worldviews thus yielding bifurcated socio-cultural trajectories, all of which could still claim to be ‘modern’, albeit being non-identical. Such métissages have been captured by the theories of Global modernity (Dirlik, 2007; Domínguez, 2006), Entangled modernities (Arnason, 2003; Therborn, 2003), Multiples modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000; Larraín, 2005, 2007), or else Modernity as experience and interpretation (Wagner, 2008, 2010). What these theories all have in common—and in opposition to classical theories of modernity, is that they disregard the possibility of universal and general theories of everything.
2. The second driver making BV appealing as a case study for cultural and societal transformation is the fact that BV, as we define it, is the dynamic product of discursive interaction among an innovative constellation of actors, what we have called—in free analogy with Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz’ (1996) well-known model of innovation— a “Latin-American triple helix” of State-Academia-Indigenous movements relations. Such singular ménage, we argue, offers fresh potential for social innovation.

Now that we have made the point of why BV is worth some thought, we will, as anticipated, structure the rest of our intervention alongside the binomial codes

BV/SD and BV/SK. We will start by presenting the concepts of SD and BV and later relating them to each other.

### **Buen Vivir versus Sustainable Development**

What is Buen vivir? According to Eduardo Gudynas and Alberto Acosta, Buen vivir can be defined as an “opportunity to build a different society sustained in the coexistence of human beings in their diversity and in harmony with nature, based on recognition of the diverse cultural values existing in each country and worldwide” (Acosta & Gudynas, 2011, p. 103). It arises out of a combination of (1) the ethical principles of ancient Andean-Amazonian cultures, (2) the contributions of contemporary critical intellectuals, and (3) from an incipient assimilation of both these sources by the political sphere. The latter is especially visible in Bolivia and Ecuador, which recently accorded the principle of Buen vivir constitutional rank. The emergence of BV as a discourse, however, can be traced back to the late 1990s, as a result of the confluence of three important factors: the Latin-American social movements of the time (particularly the indigenous movement against late 20th century rampant neoliberalism); the convergence between said movements and the ideologies of certain global movements (especially the anti-/alter-globalization and the environmental movements); and a widespread disenchantment with the idea of development, viewed as a neo-colonialist project of the world financial powers.

We emphasized earlier that the Buen vivir discourse performs a dual role as a critique of European modernity, on the one hand, and as a proposal for a cultural, social and political renewal on the other (Houtart, 2011). Let us elaborate a little further on that. BV may be said to challenge the European modern worldview in two fundamental ways: BV views society and its natural environment as interdependent and indivisible (thus challenging the modern society-nature dualism) and conceives the ‘universal’ as a plural reality (which calls Eurocentric universalism into question). Similarly, Buen vivir cannot be equated to the western idea of continued progress towards welfare, where the idea of ‘progress’ refers to an indefinite future. It is rather a way of living the present in harmony, that is, assuming and respecting differences and complementarities (among humans and between humans and non-humans) from an ecological perspective that could be described as holistic and mutualistic. Hence Buen vivir breaks away from the reductionist Cartesian worldview to adopt a systemic perspective encompassing the entire ecosphere (including abiotic components). It also breaks away from the idea of cultural and social homogeneity, assuming its logical impossibility in a diverse

world, and posits instead a path of harmony and “unity in diversity”. Does this mean that BV seeks to overthrow modernity altogether? By no means. Moreover, in a controversial essay on “symmetrical anthropology”, Bruno Latour (Latour, 1993) goes as far as arguing that the seminal Cartesian opposition between nature and society undermines the very possibility of realization of the modern project, namely, the emergence of self-governing societies. In that sense, one could argue, modernity (understood, with Guy Bajoit (2003), as a cultural model) would profit from an epistemic dialogue with BV to avoid its self-engendered endangerment (Beck, 1992). This said, how ‘elastic’ modernity will prove to be as a cultural model, and to what extent is it capable of endogenizing pluralism and the ecological imperative are open questions yet to be answered, but we argue that BV provides some hopeful perspectives to help modernity(es) emancipate from reductive Eurocentric premises.

Let us turn now to our second contestant: sustainable development (SD). Borne out of the conflicting discourses of environmentalism, on the one hand, and economic development (which is nothing else than the newest avatar of the core modern ideal of progress) on the other, the idea of a “sustainable development” appears rather as a political compromise formula than as a likely fusion of ideas. This contentious progeny has turned SD into a heavily contested concept, or rather, as we depict it, into a hybrid and diffuse global discursive field (Connelly, 2007; Dryzek, 2005; Hopwood, Mellor, & O’Brien, 2005; Sachs, 1997). While the spectrum of views on sustainability has grown increasingly diverse, a conservative trend largely supporting the political and economic status quo, advocating minor reforms, green growth, and better environmental management within the existing configuration of power and institutions gradually became dominant, supported by most states, by the international development sector and leading environmental NGOs. Yet simultaneously, out of the perception that these more conservative approaches are either essentially headed in the wrong direction, or that they are achieving “too little, too late”, a whole range of more radical/transformational visions on development and sustainability have pullulated in the last decades, some with a significant impact (however not system-destabilizing) in academic, political and/or social debate. Examples include the French-borne *decroissance* discourse (Latouche), the commons movement, the Great Transition, or the various equal per capita emission rights proposals in the climate policy realm, among many others.

### Unlikely Couple..?

Does BV fit this group of radical views within the discursive field of SD? Or is it rather fundamentally incompatible with the minimal premises of the concept of development itself? In other words, is BV better to be conceived of as an alternative form of development, or as an alternative to development? We see Buen vivir as both: on the one hand, BV does denounce the drifts of the civilizational project associated with the idea of development as irremediable, but simultaneously, on the other, it draws on the social and ecological imperatives that first gave rise to the criticism of development in the 1970s, portraying itself as an attempt to overcome the limitations of SD (generally equated with mainstream understandings of the concept). In other words, BV accepts the basic challenges proposed by SD as a legitimate battlefield, on the one hand, while at the same time it rejects mainstream understandings of SD and seeks to reshape the contours of the discursive field around it.

Our analysis suggests that while the initial impulse was to position BV as an alternative to, as an 'other' of development, over time it has gradually moved towards a more dialogical position. The question arising from this shift, which has divided waters in the social and academic debate around BV, is whether such a dialogue is to be seen as degrading the 'essence' of the BV discourse (as mostly scholars in the tradition of Decolonialism argue –Anibal Quijano, Edgardo Lander, and Catherine Walsh, among others), or rather as a potentially mutually-enhancing, cross-pollinating interaction yielding stronger transformative potential (as scholars closer to the political sphere tend to argue: Alberto Acosta, Pablo Dávalos and René Ramírez in Ecuador; and, in Bolivia, David Choquehuanca Céspedes, and Pablo Mamani Ramírez, i.a.). But even if one should endorse the second answer, as we do, the question arises about what the ontological limits of this dialogical space would be, before fruitful interaction turns into outright cooptation by the path-dependent forces of conventional development.

In order to answer these questions, let us address the second binary code proposed at the beginning of this article: Buen vivir versus the Quichua concept of Sumak Kawsay (or else those of other Andean/Amazonian indigenous people who –nuanced differences notwithstanding– share basically the same constitutive principles, such as the Suma Quamaña of the Aymaras or the Ñandereko of the Guaraníes).

### Buen Vivir versus Sumak Kawsay

These two concepts, BV/SK, are normally used interchangeably as equivalents, both in the academia and in politics. We found it useful, however, to make a semantic distinction between BV and SK, which serves our core analytical purpose, namely, assessing the dialogical ‘elasticity’ of what we have termed ‘the BV discourse’. SK, we understand (even as we reject any type of essentialist rigidization) is a regulative principle which belongs to a cultural model alien to modernity, and therefore cannot be directly extrapolated to our contemporary settings or debates (for details see Beling, Gomez Lechaptois, & Vanhulst, 2014). Unless SK is to remain confined to anti-modern islets, it necessarily requires undergoing a dialectical process of transformation whereby it is rendered amenable to dialogue with modern discourses –that is, discourses built on modern cognitive/cultural categories. The individual human subject, for example, is a non-entity in the Quichua worldview, which does not conceive of the idea of ‘being’ other than in relational terms. It seems safe to assume that this aspect of Sumak Kawsay could never permeate modern societies, however collectivistic they may be. Indeed, suppressing the idea of the individual human subject altogether would arguably extinguish its modern character ipso facto. This would thus speak for the need to “modernize” SK. But then there is the legitimate fear that opening up SK to dialogue with modernity will risk its ‘late colonization’ by Western/Northern epistemologies. This dilemma between de-naturalizing dialogue and non-dialogical isolation is, however, only apparent. In order to minimize the risk of colonization of the indigenous imaginary, one need not talk of fusion, hybridation, or even of translation of SK –in fact the Aymara cosmology upholds the principle of Ch’ixi, which could be equated with the ‘third-included logic’. This means that two binary opponents can constructively engage with each other to yield a higher instance, a space of mediation where tensions can be fully developed (rather than melted into some form of unity or homogeneity). The result is thus not a synthesis, but a restless ‘cultural magma’, an incandescent breeding ground for cultural creativity. In other words, the Ch’ixi world seeks to embrace the tension out of which it originated instead of trying to eliminate it: a “ch’ixi grey” color, for example, would be white and would also not be white; it would be white and simultaneously be black, its opposite. The ch’ixi world thus opens the possibility of combining the indigenous principles with their opposites without hybridizing, therefore preventing the loss of energy and substance associated with the birth of a sterile mixture, the chhixi.

This way of mutual engagement could yield, so we argue, a fruitful quest for new forms of knowledge, for new forms of rationality, for an eco-solidarity culture capable of effectively permeating societal organization patterns. This, of course, implies accepting that culture can be looked at also, to an extent, as an autonomous force, as an independent variable capable of influencing the process of societal change and not merely as dependent variable, a superstructure resulting from the determination of other social forces, as the Marxist tradition, for example, upholds. *Buen vivir*, as we envisage it, is thus a discursive work-in-progress resulting from the cross-pollination of traditional indigenous knowledge (whose standard-bearers are the indigenous movement organizations raised to influential political players in the last two decades), and the interpretative and articulating work done by a generation of scholars and political leaders engaged with these ideas. By ‘work-in-progress’ we mean that the discursive boundaries and programmatic implications of BV are not well defined yet, and evolve alongside continuing ideational contributions and political negotiations (one should keep in mind that BV is not a programmatic concept in and of itself, but rather a life-philosophy with normative ascendancy over the political debate). It should come as no surprise that this undetermined character, combined with the political stakes involved in the institutional/practical grounding of BV, makes this emerging discourse vulnerable to political instrumentalization. We ought then to ask ourselves the following question: how can we differentiate between natural evolution of the boundaries of discursive meaning and outright cooptation of BV? We will now turn to this question by resorting to the Ecuadorean experience as illustration.

### **The Buen Vivir Experiment in Ecuador**

Although a detailed consideration of the many aspects and dimensions relevant to the issue under scrutiny would be impossible here, we will try to address the major cleavages by decomposing our analysis into two separate though related questions:

1. How truthful are government policy-instruments such as the Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir in Ecuador to the ethos (or, say, the minimal necessary descriptors) of BV? That is, in how far is the ethos of SK well reflected in the political appropriations/ articulations of the BV discourse?
2. How truthful is the actual socio-economic praxis of the government in Ecuador vis-à-vis both the BV “ideal principle” and its political articulations?



Let us start with the second question. Among scholars concerned with BV, there is large consensus about the fact that Ecuador and Bolivia, the breeding grounds of the Buen vivir discourse, increasingly resemble textbook illustrations of neo-extractive economic agendas. After having attained office by appealing to the larger and historically underprivileged or marginalized population strata (invoking, i.a., the indigenous heritage of Sumak kawsay and Suma Qamaña), the administrations of President Correa in Ecuador and of President Morales in Bolivia are currently rather following a pathway of economic development that reinforces well-worn (neo)extractivist practices (mainly oil exploitation but also large-scale mining). This contradiction between discourse and practice seems fairly straightforward, and is increasingly arousing the disappointment and indignation of former supporters in many civil society strands (Hollender, 2012). Arguably, the rift between principle and political implementation in Ecuador became especially visible with the recent cancellation of the emblematic Yasuni-ITT Initiative. The initiative had been officially launched in 2010 following an international agreement and the creation of the Yasuni Fund under the aegis of the UNDP. However, on August 15, 2013, President Correa announced the cancellation of the initiative, invoking arguments such as the lack of support by the international community and the need for oil revenues to fight poverty. The failure of Yasuni-ITT shows that, at least for the time being, the neo-extractivist logic of the "Commodity Consensus" –as Maristella Svampa (Svampa, 2012, 2013) has termed the current neo-extractivist wave in Latin America following the 'Washington Consensus' of the 1990s– seems to prevail in government agendas over the regulative ideal of BV.

What may seem less evident, by contrast, is that the root of such contradictions might well lie –to an extent, at least- in the indefiniteness of the Buen vivir discourse itself; and this leads back to the first of our questions above. As Prof. Monni & Pallotino from University Roma Tre rightly point out, "the translation of the principles of BV into the political arena (rather than simply in the 'development debate') implies a certain degree of ideologization, that may be needed in order to define a political perspective at the price of introducing a level of rigidity" (Monni & Pallotino, 2013, p. 13) –in other words, giving up part of its epistemological innovation potential. In addition, according to these Italian authors, being a conceptual work-in-progress, the "Buen vivir" label is open enough to be distinctively applied to a heterogeneous set of political and philosophical-anthropological ideas and institutions, ranging from narrow equalizations with a particular governmental agenda all the way up to an abstract cosmology, which turns the Buen vivir discourse itself into a field of struggle about its meaning and

raises the question about whether and how Buen vivir can be realistically expected to escape the evanescent fate of “sustainable development”, which progressively turned into a ‘catch-all’ and therefore largely meaningless concept. Yet in the case of BV, we argue, hermeneutical variability is limited, in that it is necessarily constrained by its filiation with Sumak Kawsay. Indeed, as can be clearly derived from its social and academic appropriations, the ethos of the BV discourse is fundamentally critical and transformative, and thus cannot be legitimately used to justify conservative politics. So again we hit the question: where, then, does the limit lie between heterogeneity in appropriation and outright cooptation of the BV discourse? While the precise definition of such limits is a matter open to debate, the contours of BV can safely be held to be more indicative than those of SD. Indeed, no possible definition of BV could justifiably overlook, for example, the principles of complementarity and reciprocity among humans and between humans and the rest of nature, which are axial to the ethos of BV as rooted in Sumak Kawsay.

This said, it would also be a mistake to view the Ecuadorean government’s agenda as a coherent whole steering the country away from BV. Indeed, in the wake of the failed Yasuní-ITT project –and alongside popular mobilization to bring it back to life with renewed strength–, new initiatives are being pushed forward by the government itself, which could be read as seeking to pave new pathways for the grounding of BV, certainly in a less direct yet possibly in a more effective fashion. I am thinking here of the just-launched FLOK Society project hosted by Ecuador’s post-graduate state school IAEN, whose objective is to create a legal, economic and social framework for an entire country (Ecuador) that is consistent with principles that are the basic foundations of the Internet: peer-to-peer collaboration and shared knowledge. This foundation is viewed as a way to break out of the extractivist trap and transform the Ecuadorean economic matrix –as well as societal and political culture and power relations– without relying on a classic left-wing revolution with massive nationalizations and redistribution of property (IAEN, 2014). The FLOK Society project claims to pursue Sumak Yachay (‘good knowledge’) as the cornerstone of a society rooted in Sumak Kawsay/ Buen vivir. With its combined technological-anarchic and transcultural-plural ethic drivers, the FLOK society project seems likely to be appealing as a model to a wider global audience. However, at the same time, the Correa administration is pursuing a FTA with the EU, which would likely impose an exogenous constraint onto the research outputs from the FLOK society project to reach the institutional and policy level. In a ch’ixi outlook, however, one could view these contradictions in the Ecuadorean government agenda as fueling the cultural change dynamics: the beauty of

complexity is that developments can hardly be controlled or even predicted with any precision. Will scattered impulses and partial approaches suffice to trigger a larger societal transition? This is an empirical question which can only be answered by sustained observation of the impacts of the project which will unfold in years to come.

### **Some final reflections**

Whatever the short-term outcomes of this or other concrete projects; whatever the difficulties and disappointments with State-led attempts at practical implementations, making the currency of BV contingent upon these would be, we contend, a serious mistake. Although some damage in terms of discredit and suspicion should be expected as a result of the strong symbolic ties of the BV discourse with the Ecuadorean government's agenda, Buen vivir is not there through invalidated as a transformative discursive force. Indeed, the idea remains clearly not only alive with its original proponents in Ecuador and Bolivia, but keeps diffusing to new actors in the public, political and academic spheres. Moreover, Buen vivir has begun to gain resonance on a global scale and to influence various groups and social movements that are looking for viable alternatives to the discourse of development based on economic rationality and the Modern-European ideal of progress. As argued earlier, we hold the cultural destabilizing potential of BV to be its greatest asset, especially in combination with other transformative views in the global discursive field of SD. Their synergistic interaction has the potential to expanding the frontiers of what is speakable, of what is deemed desirable or even conceivable. This expansion of collectively shared cultural and cognitive templates is a necessary condition (though by any means sufficient) for enabling the realization of the ideal of harmonious plural and ecologically sustainable societies underlying the ideal of Buen vivir.

This is not meant as a comforting 'retreat into the (ideational) fortress' as a consequence of insufficient or unsatisfactory practical translations of BV. On the contrary, its incipient institutional and practical translations can be positively invoked as proof of the transformative power of ideas despite structural obstacles and the opposition of powerful vested interests: the granting of constitutional rights to "nature" in the new Montecristi Constitution, and the inclusion of historically marginalized population strata in the constitutional deliberative process cannot be emphasized strongly enough as ground-breaking steps in the direction of fundamental cultural change. Our claim is that as long as it is viewed as a nostalgic

echo from a mythical past of “noble savages” and a wholesale attack on SD, BV is likely to be a short-lived discursive enterprise. Conversely, if without giving into anthropocentric and expansionist deformations, it remains open to synergistic dialogue with other transition discourses in search for alternatives to the ‘Green Economy’ of Rio+20 or similar variants of mainstream views, BV holds the promise of making the wisdom of marginalized and forgotten voices amenable to political debate, engaging in the discursive struggle to endow the ‘empty signifier’ of SD with operational meaning in new, creative ways.

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