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## Wellbeing in the Margins: Notes on a New Conceptual Cartography

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## Wellbeing in the Margins: Notes on a New Conceptual Cartography<sup>1</sup>

Wellbeing is becoming an emerging concept representing a new paradigm that might help orient development policies. The need to question what should be the larger aim of development and how policies should be designed and implemented is at the heart of academic and political discussions at the moment. An example of this is the one taking place in the context of the post millennium development goals debate. Aspects of this debate are diverse, some of them concerns to whether there is a need to change how we measure development and how to measure it, other issues relate to a universal application of the goals or whether is best to have locally designed ones, or importantly if there should be a greater focus on how to achieve the policies' aims rather than the aims themselves.

I believe indigenous people and social movements in Latin America are providing the case to rethink this debate in new light. As seen in recent literature concerning, for instance, the emerging concept of *buen vivir* (including those shown in this blog), there are new approaches to rethink development's broader issues concerning local understandings of how to live a good life and achieve a wellbeing. I am going to refer in this piece to some thoughts about understandings of wellbeing I documented while doing fieldwork among the Tarahumara people (or Rarámuri as they call themselves) in northern Mexico. Empirical findings discussed here come from my PhD research that had the objective of exploring persistent asymmetries on power relations between the Rarámuri and the non-indigenous mestizo population. I will explore how the Rarámuri people, like other minority groups living in the margins of nation-states and global markets, are

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constrained to act strategically to face political and socio-economic exclusion fluctuating between the tension of having the right to live differently and the need to be part of the larger society. Specifically, I want to explore how these wellbeing notions can be better understood if we consider the idea of the margins, as a conceptual space and as a place where notions (such as wellbeing) are created, configured and reconfigured by the articulations of forces that interact in dynamic and complex ways.

In this respect, this text advocates for a new conceptual cartography to help understand these dynamics of the understandings of wellbeing. This cartography is based on the space that takes place on the interactions between the Rarámuri political and cultural community on the one hand and the State political and cultural community on the other. I will explore further the idea of the margins on the third section of this post. In what follows, I will firstly describe very briefly the context of the region. Next, I will explore the discourses I have documented which build up the wellbeing understandings among the Tarahumara/Rarámuri. Finally, I propose to explore how the space of 'the margins' can help give meaning to the different wellbeing discourses as broader intercultural relations between the Rarámuri and the non-Rarámuri people.

### **The Tarahumara people and the region.**

My PhD focused on a qualitative micro-study on the Tarahumara mountain range in Northern Mexico that has an important indigenous population. Four indigenous groups live in the region, being the Rarámuri the most demographically significant. It is among the Rarámuri people where I did one year of fieldwork living, working and sharing with them and the neighboring mestizo towns in the region. The Tarahumara region, in Mexico, is an arena of ethnic interactions embedded in evident asymmetrical relations. This region has, throughout its history, been a politically contested one, in terms of both the control of natural resources and the human-land relationship among the indigenous and mestizo populations. A crucial element is the increasing effect that national and global economic neoliberal policies are having on the region. These policies have led to the exploitation of natural resources such as forestry, land for commercial use, the development of tourism, the cultivation of narcotics and the growth of the mining industry which benefits a few. Interethnic tension has been increasing. For instance, the introduction of a set of new mostly mestizo authorities driven by different political and economic incentives than the existing socio-political organization of the Rarámuri has stirred up political tension. Additionally, this region has visible

inter-ethnic disparities if we consider common socio-economic indicators (i.e. Human Development Index, life expectancy rate, poverty head count), comparing the indigenous and non-indigenous (mestizo) population at the national level and in the Tarahumara region. Yet, this region has also been characterized by a persistent indigenous way of life that has become resilient in order to maintain their ethnic identities.

To understand the formation and perpetuation of asymmetrical social, economic and political relations at the local level in the Tarahumara region, my research explores three main pillars. The first pillar focuses on what the Rarámuri consider to be “living well”, or rather I am interested to document their discourses around the ideas of what and how wellbeing is achieved. The second explores how these notions of living well are hindered by interethnic power relations. The third pillar analyses how the Rarámuri engage in culturally embedded forms of resistance to those power relations. Upon these three pillars I argue that, in order to understand the formation of the asymmetries that exist between the Rarámuri and the mestizo, power relations must be taken into account from the moment in which understandings and notions of wellbeing are defined. In this post, I focus on the first research pillar: the diversity of understandings of wellbeing for the Rarámur. In the last segment of the post, I look at how these understandings are situated in the margins.

### **What are the emic understandings of wellbeing by the Rarámuri?**

In responding to this question, it is worth noting that I am not arguing for a simple way to understand wellbeing or for a limited number of dimensions involved in the calculations of wellbeing. I am only exposing an angle of a very complex political, economic and cultural process. Having said that, I believe that there are clear discourses that Rarámuri people put forward when considering how wellbeing is expressed and lived. During fieldwork I came across with two distinctive normative discourses concerning the way Rarámuri people conceptualize living well.

The first one was prominent with traditional authorities within the indigenous political structure and men and women that enjoy certain social status within their community. It referred to an idea that appeared quite often while conducting fieldwork among the Rarámuri: the idea of living on the right path or ‘Gara wachi inaropo nai gawich’ in the Rarámuri language. The idea of living on the correct path relates to the ideal of how to be a Rarámuri, how one should live. It stresses differences between the Rarámuri and the mestizos in the sense that for the former

the search for living well implies maintaining living conditions that allow them to live well but not necessarily to improve conditions through material accumulation and commodities in order to live better as the mestizo population. This discourse is based on a desire and ideal of homogeneity in living conditions, and a collective ability to control own cultural practices and spaces. Crucially, this discourse is related on the persistence of an ethnic identity that contrasts with the non-indigenous wider world. Accordingly, there are two main dimensions of living well that build up this discourse; the significance of farming; and the importance of having a strong sense of community rooted in solidarity and co-operative practices. I mention the significance of farming, because it is not limited only to land access as only a physical asset: it concerns having access to good quality land, water, seeds and the holistic processes involved in the act of farming. Traditional livelihoods are based on subsistence agriculture where maize is fundamental in their diet and it is the main ingredient for doing the all-important teswino beverage shared in ceremonial fashion in special gatherings. The second dimension is having a strong sense of community and it has to do with community cohesion and effective social ties between families and friends from which the social and political Rarámuri structures emerge. These two main dimensions build up the first discourse of wellbeing.

The second discourse is associated with young adults and teenagers that -at least some of them- engage in seasonal migration to the cities, a role expected for the -especially male- of that age. This discourse is in a way more in tune with the discourse portrayed by the mainstream development model. The narratives found in this discourse speak more of the importance of securing a family income throughout the year instead of relying on subsistence agriculture. It represents being perhaps more publically open to material assets and accumulation in the calculation of wellbeing as justified on precarious and often vulnerable livelihoods. And, crucially, it relates to the idea of improving one's quality of life instead of preserving and maintaining cultural institutions, practices and traditions.

Both discourses seek to endure and make do with what one faces in life, an aspect encountered by Jackson (2011) among the Kuranko people in Sierra Leone along with other ethnographic accounts. However, these discourses also show differentiated ways of conceiving and achieving livelihoods, aspirations and ways of relating with nature and society. They constitute, in terms of Nancy Fraser (1990), the struggle between hegemonic and subaltern understandings -in this case of wellbeing- in order to formulate oppositional interpretations of identities, interests, and needs. This clash highlights a key difference in the sense that one implies the

maintenance of living conditions that allow one to live well, while the other focus on the need to improve their condition through material accumulation in order to live better, or in a manner similar to what is currently associated to the non-indigenous population. These two discourses evidently reflect diverse ideas of living and are portrayed to a certain extent to ethnic membership.

However, these two discourses are exactly that; discourses. The dynamics of wellbeing understandings are no clear cut all the time. If we consider the full complexity of the social and political realms surrounding human relationships, I see them not necessarily in opposition to one another, but rather their relationship can be more accurately described as strategically complementary. In some moments, depending on specific political and social arenas, Rarámuri people articulate and reconfigure one discourse over the other without ruling it out completely, just in case. In a way both discourses are accepted, it is in certain moments where one, or the other or both are expressed, defended or contested.

In this sense, I argue that wellbeing among the Rarámuri can be understood as the balance of two forces: a right and a need. On the one hand, living well is harnessed by the right to maintain a livelihood based on subsistence agriculture, their distinctive set of cultural and religious beliefs, a communal rather than individual ownership of the means of production; social systems based heavily on kin relations and the practice of culturally-embedded forms of sharing and reciprocal exchange which entails collective returns rather than focusing on individual accumulation. In short, the right to have the control over those everyday mechanisms that help reinforce the Rarámuri identity and self-definition.

Conversely, on the other hand, living well for the Rarámuri does not limit itself to the right to maintain autochthonous practices of self-consumption and collective networks; it also implies the need to have equal relations with the state and the wider society which implies having income generating activities and access to the benefits from social protection programs, and to basic services. Crucially, for the Rarámuri people this need to participate within the wider non-indigenous world must be in equal circumstances, and not immersed by current conditions of exclusion and domination that build-up the persistent asymmetries between groups. It is in the fluctuation of these two forces that wellbeing is pursuit, sometimes moving to one side, sometimes emphasizing the other one. It is therefore, in the spaces between these forces that wellbeing understandings construct their meaning. If we consider traditional livelihoods in the Tarahumara, I believe they follow the same path of pursuing a balance between self-consumption agriculture and at the same time, having the possibility of engaging with temporal migration on

agricultural fields away from their communities or with other jobs in cities. In a way, having a mixed economy of self-consumption and market participation ensures them being able to adapt and brings together vulnerabilities and advantages at the same time.

It seems that the Rarámuri idea of 'living your life through the correct path', consists precisely of maintaining this balance that places the individual in harmony with the social, physical and spiritual worlds. The path that the Rarámuri follow implies that moving forward is not necessarily to be equated with moving upward, a notion that is more firmly rooted in Western values of progress.

### **Wellbeing in the margins**

I am arguing that the tension between the right to live differently and the need to engage with the broader society and its context has many parallels with the commonplace notion that situates indigenous people in the margins of the state and global markets and how many authors conceive the margins as crucial places of interaction. On one hand, they are on the margins of a web of political relations dominated by the power of political elites and economic policies that orient themselves towards a free market and the commoditization of everyday life. On the other, they have certain self-defined spaces where cultural practices are produced strengthening their ethnic identity. Although they have a foot in both camps, they are neither completely inside nor outside of the other. This condition of being on the margins represents, however, being economic and socially vulnerable because of a lack of proper recognition of their socio-cultural and economic rights by the national government. However, it also enables them to make strategic decisions in order to - if not to negotiate the overall terms of relations with the mestizo dominance in the region and the national state and society - at least to manage their role as an ethnically differentiated group within the state and the national society in order to secure cultural survival. Therefore, the empirical evidence described on my research, suggests that the Rarámuri people are required to adopt a strategic approach to deal with economic vulnerabilities as a result of processes of exclusion, but also to benefit from the opportunities that their position of living in the margins implies so as to reinforce their identity and self-definition. In that sense, ethnic minorities and indigenous people have the potential to adopt different cultural repertoires in order to serve their group interest. The Rarámuri discourse of living well takes place and makes sense in the context of them fluctuating on the margins; this means fluctuating between the tension of having the right to live differently and the need to be part of the larger society.

The implications of this position in the margins require having a multi-centered approach in the dynamic relations between the State and the indigenous people, between the core of each political and cultural communities. This implies having a new cartography of how to consider the margins. All too often, being in the margins is only understood in relation to the center, a centered approach that considers just one center, of which the nation state is the most common. The state as the only political community that has the monopoly to order society and human relations and to organize, gives and denies individual rights, creates and labels subjects. However, in multicultural settings where indigenous people are involved, their own distinctive parameters are important. If we consider the literature for instance about ethnography of the state -Das and Poole (2004) to mention an example- the margins are considered as the absence or diminished influence of the State understood as the epistemic, political and economic center. In the multi centered approach I am proposing, the margins not only refer to the absence or diminished influence of the state but also of the other political community, in this case, the center of the Rarámuri community.

The margins are then the synapses of practices and relations between the zone of influence of two political communities that creates different ways to articulate wellbeing discourses and organize the human experience in a multicultural context. I believe this shift to understand the margins not only in reference to one center, is needed to account for power structures. For instance, because the notion of 'marginal groups' reflects and reproduce the longstanding idea of colonial power that sees the modern state as the only legitimate political center exerting the monopoly of subjectivities and representations. The outside of the political community of the State is charged with all kinds of negative representations. For instance, Scott (2009) argues, people living at the margins of the state and society are abnormal and pose a threat as their subjects are not under its control, and are depicted as being fugitive, violent or uncivilized. We run the risk of considering all those living 'outside' or in the margins of what is considered to be accepted as unwanted and in the need to be changed.

In other words, I argue that a decolonial perspective lays at the heart of the need to consider a new understanding of what the margins are and what they can tell us: margins that show the irruptions of subaltern/local epistemologies.

Authors of the decolonial perspective have expressed ideas related to what I am arguing. For instance, Enrique Dussel talks about the Eurocentric myth: that all valid knowledge comes from the center of the global system from where it is unequally distributed towards the peripheries that have a passive role of being only



consumers but never producers of that knowledge. Chakrabarty (2007) has proposed a compelling solution to the Eurocentric dilemma in his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. He mentions that we should not erase Europe and substitute its center with another one; instead we should aim to consider diverse centers by moving Europe away from its privileged place of hegemonic power and provincializing it. In that way, other epistemologies, experiences, ways of life, cultural systems of meanings, and understandings of wellbeing can be considered in an equal position, not neglecting any diversity, instead taking advantage of it. In the same way, I argue to move the hegemony of the state to a side, and equally consider it as other centers of knowledge, other ways of living. Only in the margins, is where the possibility of any anti-hegemony can happen, not entirely outside the edifice. It is here, where adaptation, re-appropriation and dynamic consolidation of knowledge and epistemologies do occur. At the same time, defined frontiers of the margins are needed in order to have clear and legitimate centers as political projects.

I believe this approach to the margins as synopsis of practices can be applied broadly to help understand the dynamics of ethnic minorities or indigenous people from other latitudes and regions across the globe that have suffered exclusion from development in the form of: effective legal frameworks to secure collective social, economic, environmental and political rights, spaces and opportunities to engage with public policy that directly affects their livelihoods and, access to quality public services such as education and health. Instead of being the subjects of progressive policies that consider their own development orientations, often these people are the least well-served when compared to dominant populations. However, they are not passive subjects of the negative effects of global neoliberal markets. Indigenous people react, contest and resist in diverse ways those interventions that they see as violent expressions of territorial dispossessions, cultural misrepresentations and structural violence.

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