

## Post-Development concepts? Buen Vivir, Ubuntu and Degrowth

Draft version, will be complemented until the conference. Comments welcome.

### Abstract:

The paper links the academic debate about Post-Development approaches in development theory with the political and philosophical concepts of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu and Degrowth and asks to what extent the latter can be seen as PD concepts, as manifestations of PD in different cultural contexts. The examination yields that Buen Vivir undoubtedly qualifies as a PD concept, but Ubuntu and Degrowth also exhibit striking similarities to PD in some respects. From the perspective of a sociology of emergences, this could indicate that we are indeed at the beginning of a new era. However, another result is that all three concepts have been faced with the criticism of functioning as an ideology of the ruling classes – there are no ‘safe’ concepts and emancipation is a continuous struggle. The paper is a first step to bring the different concepts and future visions into dialogue.

The Post-Development school is a name given to a body of thought in development theory which came to prominence during the 1990s and questioned the foundations of development theory and policy. Its name derives from its claim that the ‘era of development’ is ending and it is time to think about alternatives. The paper discusses to what extent the concepts of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu and Degrowth can be seen as such alternatives: do they qualify as Post-Development (PD) concepts?

Starting from the premise that many of PD’s criticisms are valid and that we need to fundamentally rethink our approach towards global inequality and social change, this question is indeed relevant. A comparison of the concepts will show in what respect they actually go beyond the classical paradigm of development and in what respect they remain within its assumptions.

The paper will proceed as follows. In section 1, the central arguments of PD and its criticism of the development paradigm will be presented, as well as criteria for possible PD concepts. In section 2, 3 and 4, the concepts of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu and Degrowth will be discussed in relation to these criteria. Some conclusions will be drawn in section 5.

### 1. Post-Development

Inspired by the works of Illich and Foucault, a number of writers started to question the paradigm of development already in the 1980s (Escobar 1985, Esteva 1985, Rahnema 1985). During the next decade, three widely cited books were often seen as exemplary for the PD school (Sachs 1992a, Escobar 1995, Rahnema 1997a), while a few other authors were also linked with the fundamental critique of development although they did not share all of the conclusions made by the original PD authors (Ferguson 1994, Rist 1997).<sup>1</sup> Their central objective was not to improve development aid and find ways how to achieve development in the global South, but to reveal the relations of power in

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<sup>1</sup> Other notable PD works include Alvares (1992), Latouche (1993), Esteva/Prakash (1998), Norberg-Hodge (1991), closely related are Apffel-Marglin/Marglin (1990, 1996), Nandy (1988, 1992, 1994), Mies/Shiva (1993),

development knowledge, often openly questioning the Eurocentrism and the alleged superiority of the 'developed' societies.

In 1992, the first major PD publication announced: 'The last 40 years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary' (Sachs 1992b: 1). Four reasons were given (ibid.: 2-4): 1. The assumption of an evolutionary scale at the top of which were the industrialized countries had been shattered by the ecological predicament; 2. the idea of development had been an instrument of the Cold War but the promise of a brighter future for the global South was redundant after the demise of the Soviet bloc; 3. The project of turning the 'less developed' countries into 'developed' ones had obviously failed and the gap between rich and poor had widened; 4. the attempt to universalize a certain model of society would lead to a barren monoculture, so its failure was actually a good thing.<sup>2</sup> So a new, post-development era was in the making, and the PD scholars saw its beginnings in social movements and the informal sector of the global South, where after the failure of the development project people would turn to alternatives, to other models of politics, the economy and knowledge.

Rejecting Eurocentric universalism, PD of course could not promote a single model of society and is thus principally open to a number of culturally diverse concepts, but some critics argued (not without justification) that some PD authors like Esteva, Rahnema and Alvares endorsed a return to cultural traditions and vernacular societies. Others, however, advocated hybrid models (Escobar) and were sharply critical of the violence inherent in some cultural traditions (Nandy). As Kiely noted: 'Referring to the post-development idea in the singular runs the risk of caricaturing a number of different writers' ideas' (1999: 49). Therefore, a division between skeptical and neo-populist PD (as in Ziai 2004) seems useful.<sup>3</sup>

But what are the commonalities of the approaches that could provide criteria for PD concepts? Escobar (1995: 215f, 226, 58-61) lists the following:

- an interest not in alternative development but in alternatives to development, thus a rejection of the entire paradigm;
- an interest in local culture and knowledge and the defense of cultural difference;
- a critical stance towards established scientific discourses, denying their status as only valid form of knowledge;
- the defense and promotion of localized, pluralistic grassroots movements;
- a critique of economic growth, the model of homo oeconomicus, and economics as a science.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There are some incoherencies in this diagnosis: it shifts between conceptualizing development as a way of thinking and a political project, and between a disingenuous promise and a serious attempt to universalize Western ways of living. Further, the improvements e.g. in life expectancy which took place all over the global South are not discussed. For criticism of PD see Corbridge (1998), Kiely (1999), Nederveen Pieterse (2000) and Nanda (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For other contributions to the debate around PD see Nustad (2001), Gibson-Graham (2005), Matthews (2004, 2008), Simon (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Here, Esteva's critique (1992) of economic man and the assumption of unlimited needs is significant as well.

So in the following sections I will use these criteria to examine the three concepts Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, and Degrowth, bearing in mind the PD debate and the necessity of alternatives to the paradigm of development. The selection of concepts is to a certain extent arbitrary in terms of their content (others like Swadeshi-Sarvodaya, Umran or Bantaare would be equally appropriate, see Latouche 2001), but the ones chosen seem to be the most prominent candidates for PD concepts in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe respectively. All three concepts provide a general principle of how society should be organized, and all suggest departing from the general principle of 'development', that has dominated discussions in the global South during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Buen Vivir

Buen Vivir, or Sumak Kawsay in Kichwa, emerged as a political concept of indigenous movements in Latin America during the 2000s, but its principles are of course far older. The growing influence of these movements led to the incorporation of Buen Vivir in the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia in 2008 and 2009. Leaving aside particularities, Buen Vivir denotes a good life, which can only take place in community with other persons and nature (Gudynas 2011: 442). The indigenous cosmology which includes a spiritual dimension and sees nature not as dead matter, but as 'mother earth' (pachamama) and a subject of rights, is of central importance (Fatheuer 2011: 17f, Acosta 2009: 219). The concept 'promotes the dissolution of the Society-Nature dualism' (Gudynas 2011: 445).

Concerning the paradigm of development, Gudynas sees Buen Vivir as 'a replacement of the very idea of development' (2011: 445). Acosta stresses that it does not share the ideas of social evolution and an 'underdevelopment' which has to be overcome (2009: 219) and Walsh points out that 'the very idea of development itself is a concept and word that does not exist in the cosmologies, conceptual categories, and languages of indigenous communities' (2010: 17). Further, the relationship to nature of Buen Vivir is entirely incompatible with the idea that nature has to be conquered and governed (Bacon's *natura parendi vincitur*), which is at the root of Western science, which in turn constitutes the foundation of development thinking (Bajaj 1988).<sup>5</sup>

The indigenous cultures and their differences in comparison with Western world views thus take a prominent place in Buen Vivir. But the concept equally stresses the necessity to decolonize knowledge: to reject the claims to universality of Western knowledge and legitimize other, historically oppressed forms of knowledge (Gudynas 2012: 25f). According to Gudynas, Buen Vivir 'strongly supports the need to explore alternatives to development beyond conventional Eurocentric knowledge' (2011: 445).

Buen Vivir's relation to social movements is quite obviously very strong, and although there are bitter controversies in Ecuador and Bolivia over the degree to which the governments adhere to or ride roughshod over the Buen Vivir agenda, the concept's success story is rather unique. One could merely ask whether the movements promoting the concept can still be regarded as grassroots movements. However, the pluralistic character is affirmed by the proponents on every occasion.

Regarding the relation between Buen Vivir and the economy in the traditional sense, Gudynas portrays the concept as 'a reaction against the conventional domination of utilitarian values,

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<sup>5</sup> Rostow (1960) sees the application of science to production as the key to the process of development, i.e. modernization and the take-off towards an industrialized society in the image of the West.

particularly expressed in the reductionism of life to economic values and the subsequent commoditization of almost everything' (2011: 445). Acosta supports this view, arguing that 'the glorification of economic activity, above all the in the market, has led to a neglect of non-economic instruments crucial for improving the conditions of life' (2009: 220, own translation). Buen Vivir proponents advocate an alternative economy based on solidarity, in distinction to one based on supposedly free competition (ibid.: 221). Acosta rejects exclusively market-based and state-based solutions equally, promoting private property, public ownership of strategic resources and strong workers' rights (ibid.: 221f). Gudynas sees Buen Vivir as post-capitalist, but also post-socialist (2011: 446). Despite slightly different emphases, the rejection of mainstream economics and its criteria is shared.

So on all five accounts, Buen Vivir fulfils the criteria established in the previous section and can thus be seen as a PD concept.

### 3. Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a philosophical concept widely known in Sub-Saharan Africa which derives from the Xhosa phrase 'Ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu', which means 'A person is a person through other persons' (Murithi 2006: 28).<sup>6</sup> It is reflected in everyday greetings in Shona (quoted after Nussbaum 2003: 4):

'Mangwani, marara sei? (Good morning, did you sleep well?)' – 'Ndarara, kana mararawo. (I slept well, if you slept well.)'

'Marara sei? (How has your day been?)' – 'Ndarara, kana mararawo. (My day has been good if your day has been good.)'

The concept thus stresses the interconnectedness of human beings, the well-being of one is closely linked or even presupposes the well-being of the other. The self is, according to Ubuntu, rooted in community, in its relation to others.<sup>7</sup>

Examining Ubuntu in terms of its relationship to the classical paradigm of development is rather difficult, because in many texts dealing with the former the concept of development (at least in the sense which refers to the development of societies) is not mentioned explicitly (Nussbaum 2003, Binsbergen 2001, Tambulasi/Kayuni 2005, Swanson 2007, Cornell/van Marle 2004). However, if one assumes individualism to be a part of this paradigm (there are good reasons for that, Western science being based on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*), there is a clear break. At least a politics of unbridled competition is incompatible with the concept, as 'Ubuntu undoubtedly emphasizes responsibilities and obligations towards a collective well-being' (Swanson 2007: 65).

The interest in African culture and the defense of its difference towards the West is highly visible. Tambulasi/Kayuni (2005: 148) claim that 'ubuntu is the underlying foundation of African

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<sup>6</sup> There are similar phrases in other languages of the Nguni family like Zulu (Murithi 2006: 28, Binsbergen 2001: 53, Tambulasi/Kayuni 2005: 148).

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the world view of the black communities in Colombia exhibits striking parallels. Libia Grueso, a speaker of the Proceso de Comunidades Negras reiterated this very motive in her speech in Berlin at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress of Development Policy Actions Groups (BUKO 23) in 2000: 'Somos por que otros son', we are because others are.

communities' culture'. Although this sounds rather generalizing, also more nuanced evaluations share the view that this philosophical concept (or variants of it) are prevalent throughout the continent (Cornell/van Marle 2005: 196). An explicit critique of science is rare in the discussions of the concept. Yet Cornell/van Marle (2005: 199) use the concept to maintain that African philosophy – passed down orally, in rituals, aphorisms and parables – has usually not been recognized as such. The case of an oppressed form of knowledge is underlined by Binsbergen's claim that Ubuntu, 'while being an academic philosophy emulating a globalised format, is in the first place born out of pain, exclusion, justified anger, and the struggle to regain dignity and identity in the face of Northern conquest and oppression' (2001: 79).

When it comes to the proponents of Ubuntu, it can be said that while many Africans are sympathetic to the concept, it is hardly anywhere linked to social movements, but treated generally as a question of ethics. Although it has been included in the epilogue of the post-Apartheid constitution of South Africa (Cornell/van Marle 2005: 196), it has nowhere been as effective a political concept as *Buen Vivir* in Latin America.

As already mentioned above, Ubuntu provides a clear rejection of the model of *homo oeconomicus*, imagining humanity as a family, not an assembly of competing individuals. Murithi (2006: 32) envisions 'Ubuntu economies' based on a fair distribution of resources for the benefit of all.<sup>8</sup> Tambulasi/Kayuni (2005: 154) also see redistribution and equality as part of a politics of Ubuntu, although they emphasize that linked with lack of accountability and transparency this can be instrumentalized to maintain an unjust regime, as happened in Malawi. Likewise, Binsbergen mentions the view that Ubuntu is opposed to a 'market-oriented economic logic of maximalisation' (2001: 58), but also sees the danger of Ubuntu functioning as an ideology in the interest of ruling elites (2001: 58, 62).

At first glance, Ubuntu does clearly not fulfil the criteria of a PD concept: no link to social movements, no explicit rejection of the development paradigm, and only implicit criticism of the ruling order of knowledge. Merely the emphasis on cultural difference and the vision of an interaction between human beings different from that in capitalism are akin to PD. However, it seems enough to qualify Ubuntu as a potential PD concept – it could hypothetically be used in a similar manner as *Buen Vivir*.

#### 4. Degrowth

Degrowth here refers to two related European concepts: *Décroissance* in France and *Postwachstum* in Germany. Both agree that the existing model of society prevalent in Europe has to be fundamentally rethought, in particular in the light of the ecological consequences of this model. Here, some parallels to PD can be found. But as 'development' never was a general principle for social change in the North (it was confined to the areas of the global South constructed as deficient in comparison to the European and North American societies), the focus of the critics was more on the concept of growth, which was similarly perceived as myth, justification and objective of policy. Serge Latouche, one of the leading proponents of *Décroissance*, has written several books from the PD perspective (e.g. Latouche 1993). Notable contributions to the debate also come from Bayon et al. (2012), Ridoux/Besson-Girard (2006), Lavignotte (2010) in France and Paech (2012), Miegel

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<sup>8</sup> This already goes in the direction of questioning market-based distributive mechanisms. However, this does not seem to be a necessary feature of Ubuntu: some interpretations of Ubuntu are apparently compatible with publishing for the World Business Academy (Nussbaum 2003).

(2011), Schmelzer/Passadakis (2011) in Germany. The discussion here will be confined to Paech (2012) and Schmelzer/Passadakis (2011) and is aware of its limits.<sup>9</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the concept of development does not figure prominently in the degrowth debates. A closer look at the assumptions of the development paradigm reveals that most of them are not discussed or implicitly accepted, the exception of course being that industrialization and economic growth are not anymore seen as necessary elements of progressive social change. In general, the focus is on the ecological limits of the current economic model in Europe, in particular its consumption and production patterns, thus relating to the first of the reasons given by PD for the end of the development era, but not to the others. Global commodity chains, global markets and global competition are also problematized, partly for ecological reasons (Paech 2012: 17), partly because of the accompanying social injustice of the 'imperial lifestyle' of the global middle and upper class (Schmelzer/Passadakis 2011: 88f). The degrowth approach in the interpretation of Paech amounts to a serious implementation of sustainable development's demand for intergenerational (and, oft forgotten, intragenerational) solidarity, Schumacher's 'small-is-beautiful'-ideas and Illich's convivial technology, but contains little which goes beyond this.

Cultural differences between the West and the Rest (Hall) are nowhere being addressed in the degrowth texts. Yet issues of culture are present when sufficiency and slowness are promoted (Paech 2012: 126). Here, the critique of the production of addictive consumption needs which do not lead to happiness (ibid.: 110f) resembles some PD texts (Esteva 1992, Illich 1997?).

The critique of science in the sense envisioned by PD (colonization by science and destruction of other systems of knowledge) is entirely absent in degrowth. The arguments put forward for social and ecological change are often based on scientific studies,<sup>10</sup> not at all on spiritual considerations about the rights of nature as in *Buen Vivir*. However, a critique of science in another sense is present, namely of the belief in scientific progress which will allegedly allow to maintain consumption patterns clearly identified as ecologically unsustainable and oligarchic (Paech 2012: 72f).

Although some of the degrowth proponents are members of Attac, so far there is no degrowth social movement to be found. There are certainly many individuals who live according to the degrowth ideal, and those who have joined communes and projects dedicated to such a lifestyle could be seen as constituting a grassroots movement (see Habermann 2009 for examples).

The rejection of economic growth is self-evident in degrowth. This also holds true for the model of the homo oeconomicus. The discipline of economics sometimes is criticized, but not in a fundamental manner (Schmelzer/Passadakis 2011: 46f). Some degrowth proponents criticize the capitalist system of production itself (not only its fixation on growth) and envision a post-growth economy based on solidarity and democratic appropriation of production (Schmelzer/Passadakis 2011: 74f). Nevertheless, in other interpretations (Miegel 2010), degrowth can be used for casting an ecological veil over austerity politics.

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<sup>9</sup> Of course this does not cover the whole range of approaches. The two works in focus here can both be seen as progressive, in comparison to conservative (Miegel 2011) and liberal (Seidl/Zahrnt 2010) approaches.

<sup>10</sup> A striking example is provided by Schmelzer/Passadakis (2011: 39), in which they calculate the degree to which the usage of CO<sub>2</sub> has to be more efficient by 2050 when the population grows by 0.7% per year, per capita income increases by 1.4%, and CO<sub>2</sub>-output is reduced by 4.9%.

So can degrowth be seen as a PD concept? Strictly speaking, the lack of awareness regarding cultural differences and the uncritical stance towards (Western) science lead to a negative answer. Yet the critique of economic growth and the corresponding culture (ever growing needs, goods and efficiency) are striking similarities to PD. Maybe it would be appropriate to designate degrowth as a specifically European PD concept: secular, science-based and oblivious to the problems of universalism.

## 5. Conclusion

While Buen Vivir can clearly be seen as a PD concept, the case with Ubuntu and Degrowth is at best ambiguous. However, even with the latter two, there are striking parallels to some PD arguments, so that PD could provide a frame for a dialogue between the three concepts – a dialogue which could lead to some awareness of other possible positions, but also to cooperation and a common political agenda. If we are determined to build a ‘world of many worlds’, as the Zapatistas say, this common agenda has no need for homogenizing differences and can accept different visions.

Another result which is pertinent is that all three concepts have been faced with the criticism of functioning as an ideology of the ruling class.<sup>11</sup> This alerts us that even concepts aiming at emancipation are never safe from being coopted.

From the point of view of a ‘sociology of emergences’ (Sousa Santos), which aims at identifying the ‘Not Yet’, ‘the way the future is inscribed in the present’ (2002: 241), the most interesting result is that in completely different cultural contexts, we find intensifying debates about concepts which fundamentally challenge the existing model of society. We may after all really be standing at the beginning of a post-development era.

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<sup>11</sup> PD was faced with a similar argument (Nanda 1999).

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