

Sumak Kawsay: Indigenous women living non-capitalist values in a capitalist world

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Abstract

The principle of Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir) produces a dispute regarding possibilities for living non-capitalist values in a capitalist world. Using Benjamin words, Sk expresses an irruption or an epistemic break inside a word where ‘the’ capitalist relation is hegemonic. We ask: *how is the colonized gaze still driving the way intellectuals and governments understand Sumak Kawsay?* While intellectuals try to make sense of the SK as a novelty, Ecuador’s government promotes the realization of Sumak Kawsay pointing to the indigenous struggle as pre-or anti-modern. Thinking about Sumak Kawsay as a novelty or as something that belongs to the past produces a double silencing: de-historicizing and depoliticizing the resistance of indigenous people. My argument is that the process of celebrating SK as a novelty to re-think development is delegitimizing its already existent and practiced transformative character: SK is an irruption that makes visible the presence or the existence of non-capitalist values in our historical present. Thus, Sumak Kawsay is a political and historical rationality that allows us to feel our lives as being deeply connected to the ‘Other’.

Key words: Sumak Kawsay, anti-capitalist- Eurocentric- indigenous women, non-capitalist values, emergence and time.

1. Introduction: Sumak Kawsay - dialectic of the present and the past

Some Andean societies are reluctant to approach the crisis of capitalism from the ideological and fetishistic framework of capitalist market. As a consequence, some social groups are re-thinking the idea of development and new rationalities are proposed as emerging alternatives. One of them is the Sumak Kawsay (“Buen Vivir” in Spanish and “Living good fullest”, in English), inspired by indigenous philosophies. We argue that the Sumak Kawsay, understood as rationality different to the capitalist one, has been a transformative driving force for leaving non-capitalist values in a capitalist world. This fact is not a novelty to be celebrated; rather, it is a lesson of struggle with relevant features for the degrowth movement. In fact, history explains that the indigenous leader Waman Poma in the XVII century introduced this philosophy to the King Felipe III. Trying to reverse the conquest to a broader politico-cultural project, Waman Poma set up a new dialogue between the old and new world where different rationalities co-exist. Four hundred years later in Ecuador’s new Constitution, the Sumak Kawsay is recognized as a development target and apparently a new political-cultural project is emerging.

However, Ecuador’s government, by promoting the realization to Sumak Kawsay, is silencing the voice of indigenous struggle as pre-modern or anti-modern, thus delegitimizing its still ongoing conflicts. Nowadays, similar to the situation four hundred years ago-, we are still not able to understand it. In fact, indigenous peoples have understood Sumak Kawsay as a driving force to achieve a radical change in the

control of their spaces and social reproduction systems using the political government and the democracy values. In their social struggle they are seeking to establish a minimum condition for keeping alive non-capitalist values in a capitalist world. In this paper we will be illustrating the permanent presence of Sumak Kawsay: it functions as an “interruption” of the now / time, or as Walter Benjamin would say, an irruption (or emergence) in the present. It brings face to face –‘the’ capitalist existence with other ways of being to reveal its possible coexistence as well as conflicts. So, the Sumak Kawsay “emerges” in history again to make visible that Sumak Kawsay has long had a transformative non-capitalist character, which already meant living non-capitalist values in a capitalist world. As in the past, indigenous people have been deeply affected by the colonial relationship, the commodification relationship and then by the capitalist relation. In fact, capitalist/modernity has transformed and destroyed most of their knowledge and productive systems.

Based on some indigenous women’s declaration made during the demonstration against the cancelation of the Yasuni-ITT Initiative on August 2014, we will detail in the following section, how Sumak Kawsay is perceived as an already existent way of being. Indigenous women are no talking about Sumak Kawsay as about some strategic action because SK is their way of life; they are talking about their relationship with the land, with the Amazon. They are deeply connected with the Nature and with the space where they reproduce their lives in a now/time.

2. Constitutional changes and Sumak Kawsay

History explains that the indigenous leader Waman Poma in the XVII century introduced the idea of *the conviviality* of the old and new world to the King Felipe III. Trying to reverse the colonial character of the Conquest to a broader politico-cultural project, where the indigenous people could live their values and social reproduction systems in a co-existence with the rationalities and values of the conquerors. At that time Waman Poma argued that "a new chronicle is necessary because the Castilian’s chronicle, all of them, have limits"¹. Waman Poma proposed a “fullest government” as a place of coexistence. It means a trans-national and inter-cultural political project of conviviality.

Four hundred years later, in Ecuador’s, the last Constitution recognized the SK as a development target and apparently a new politico-cultural project is emerging. Here indigenous people are proposing a civilizational paradigm shift, one that is pluri-cultural and pluri-national. This is presented as a new rationality, different to the capitalist one, which has filtered the political scene in order to practice living non-capitalist values. Thus, the preamble to the Ecuadorian constitution (2008) established the bases for a new political social deal: “We have decided to build a new form of citizen coexistence in diversity and harmony with nature, to achieve the Good life: Sumak Kawsay. As you can see, it is a political pact because it is the duty of the state, "the National Development Plan, eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable development and equitable distribution of resources and wealth, to access the good life. (Article 3.5)

¹ Castro-Gómez, S., & Grosfoguel, R. (Eds.). (2007). El giro decolonial: reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global. Siglo del Hombre Editores.

This principle has a double relevance when it is considered as the key within the development regime (article 276); the duties of the State to achieve the good life (article 277); and the obligations of individuals and communities to achieve the good life (article 278). In sum, the Sumak Kawsay in Ecuador is the goal of the development policy: "The development regime is the ensemble, organized sustainable and dynamic of economic, political, socio-cultural systems which guarantees the realization of the good life, of Sumak Kawsay".

Other values coming from the indigenous philosophies are also recognized and the coexistence spirit is looking for the harmonious relation with nature where apparently the inter-cultural is the component of this deal: "The good life will require that people, communities, peoples and nationalities effectively enjoy their rights and exercise their responsibilities in a framework of inter-culturalism, respect for their diversities, and harmonious coexistence with nature" (article 274, third paragraph).

The fact is that the Ecuadorian Constitution, not just referring to the "Buen Vivir" (Good Life) as a mere principal or narrative construction, devotes about fifty articles (articles 275 to 339) to it. On the whole, the governance of food sovereignty, political economy, fiscal and trade policy and property ownership are all aimed at achieving the Good Life.

3. Results

3.1 The Sk in the voice of the indigenous women

Indigenous women started walking on October 12th from Puyo and arrived to Quito on October 17th in order to express their feeling and rationalities related to the oil extraction in the Amazon south and in the Yasuní too. However, Correa did not receive them. Looking closing at their testimonies, during the demonstration called 'Women Mobilized for Defense of Life' we can observe that SK is not a novelty but an ancestral way of being. First, it's essential to remember that their testimonies express an already existent lived way to live. SK is a rationality that expresses the ontology itself of a society that without being entirely pre-modern cannot be exactly a modern capitalist one (Echeverría, 1998).

Echeverría advocates a dialectical reading of the narratives proposed by Indians. According to him, these narratives are contradictory and antagonistic in themselves and this is their richness. For him it would rather be useful to recognize the existence of a multiple, diverse, pluri-cultural rationality, which has historically been in conflict with the capitalist modernity project: *"(...) The Indians are not enemies of modernity, they are not chasing back to Pachamama -claim which corresponds to the dream of the petty bourgeois intellectuals who come to the indigenous"* (Echeverría (2010)

It's worth mentioning that SK per se does not appear as central in their discourses of resistance: such discourse takes us back to roots of conflicts that still linger in our societies. In short, SK is not some new discourse or narrative: it is a way of existence in which conflicts have always been present. All in all, indigenous peoples understand SK as a driving force to achieve a radical change in the control of their space and social reproduction systems in the now/time.

In their historical and material struggle, indigenous women are seeking to establish a minimum condition for keeping alive non-capitalist values in a capitalist world. Therefore, issues such as territory, cultural identity, knowledge, production system and traditions continue being central in their claims. In 2008 a letter from Waorani's women to Correa expressed this dispute: *"(...) We want to live in a large territory, our culture is of a big territory, free of pollution and disease, that is our, it is not that the state decided, is God who gave us, therefore speak of our territory, our children, our language. In the elderly words it means to keep the land, without territory, we cannot live (...)"*

They cannot reproduce and keep their social organization and values without their land: *"(...) I have to defend, because land is like a mother to us, because we feed from this land, because in this land we grow our children and make their food, so I have to defend, I have to fight to the last, I do not fear anyone, when the oil company came to my land I will defend it, I do not fear my death, I have to leave my children in freedom"* (Mayra Gayas- Pueblo ancestral Sarayaku. Amazon Women Press Conference on October 15, the Amazon Women)

3.2 The embodied sk: practices and habits

Actually, as in the past, indigenous people are continuing being deeply affected by 'the' capitalist relation, and how it has transformed and destroyed most of their knowledge and productive systems. *"(...) As women, we feel the harm done by the extractive industries deeply in our stomachs. We find that a debate on the conjuncture generated by Yasuni-ITT is urgently needed and feel the need to rise-up in defense of our nourishing mother, which gives birth, raises, and protects all her children regardless their ethnos, actions or social class"* (Press Release of the Amazon Women in Defense of the Yasuni).

What they are prompting to us to see is not merely a form of resistance against rentier capitalism (extractivism) but a different way of being. In fact, through their processes of resistance as a traditional way of life, they have long been creating something different to 'the' capitalist values: they are giving a lesson of knowledge about a sacred relation with the land they used and they belong to. All the testimonies strongly believe that there is a bodily relation with the land as a mother, whose uterus is giving birth to life.

Bodyly-relationship is important because is an engine for promoting non-capitalist relations and non-capitalist values, for the recovery of the sacred from the non-human and human, to develop relationships based on the value of use of nature and not on commodification:

"(...) I came to defend my land, how I will leave the land to fight alone, I have to fight to the last, why I will leave her (referring to the Amazon), she is my mother" (Rosa Gualinga- Nacionalidad Shiwiar. Amazon Women Press Conference on October 15, the Amazon Women)

3.3. The everyday Sk: ongoing struggles in practice

'Time' for indigenous peoples *is not a time in an empty future*, or a mere remembrance of the past, it is an ongoing everyday political exercise to update the struggle of *their ancestors and wises as the way to transit for their children: "(...) If you do not fight for our children, in the jungle they have gave us, in the memory of our ancestors, so not,*

we should never allow ourselves to be manipulated. It is, enough" (Linda Engueri - Dirigenta de la GONOA. Amazon Women Press Conference on October 15)

As an ancient way of thinking and being, SK is the coexistence between well being, nature, humans and the sacred and spiritual world. Since then an interesting academic debate has arisen about SK. In an attempt to translate it in academic terms, one of the main limitations is '*the coloniality of knowledge*' as a consequence our understanding of time/modernity.

For us, SK, understood as a way of being, or as knowledge, breaks with the temporal perspective of history, that places the colonized peoples, their subjectivities, their philosophy and forms of knowledge production in the past (Quijano, 2011). On the contrary, indigenous women live SK in the everyday life is already an alternative in itself to be considered, with important implications for degrowth: Is important not to look for something different in the past or in the past experiences, we have to look for something different in the present.

For that reason SK has to be understood as 'emergence' that break with a certain imaginary as the development and progress that walk in the same hand. The quarrel of the Amazon women is not for a dream future or a better world. It is not for an idealized world, which does not exist. Their dispute instead is deeply connected with who they are and how they live. So, the destruction of their land is the destruction of their way of being.

But the most important is that indigenous women through their processes of resistance are giving us something different to 'the' capitalist value: A different way of being and live in the capitalism but against it. When we operationalize the indigenous world merely in the language of our struggle for decision-making or as process '*in construction*' we are missing the inherent resistance that unfolds in the everyday life through this form of existences.

We are trying to say that for indigenous women the SK or "The living forest" (for the Amazon women) is an integral concept: its sense, its dispute, its reason of being is to resist the attempt of the capital to subsume the indigenous rationalities non-productivity world into a unique way to create value.

4. Conclusions

On the one hand, SK seeks it establish a new dialogue between different worlds and rationalities but government pretends the realization to SK leaving voice and posing the indigenous struggle as pre or anti-modern and thus delegitimizes its transformative character. On the other hand, to the extent that SK is celebrated outside the home of its birth as a novelty, has to do more with who celebrates it and for what purposes rather than with those who actually live it as an ongoing life.

So in the process of celebrating SK, the conflicts that are still happening are forgotten. SK is a driving force for leaving non-capitalist values in a capitalist world but the way intellectuals imagine it is through the idea of a different development, or overcome the idea of development itself and built something that is different IN the present.

Perhaps, in their effort to translating of the SK, intellectuals express their own needs to imagine a new beginning for the world more generally in the context of a crisis for alternatives to the capitalist system. The problem with such placing of SK in the future as actualization/re-making of a past is the double silencing: de-historicizing and depoliticizing the resistance of indigenous people. They do not need to talk or theorize about SK as a 'novelty', because their lives express a rationality, which updates the past to build something different for the future.

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