

Societal Relations with Nature and Mental Infrastructures

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A critical glance from Buen Vivir and Theravāda-Buddhism

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Introduction

Research on social-ecological transformations seldom respects the importance of cultural conditions for infinite growth. Thus, it is often ignored that relations with nature are of particular relevance for human behavior, since they provide basic coordinates for our lives. Against this background, the first part of this article identifies the modern nature-culture-dualism, which is a specific way of perceiving the world, as crucial for Western mental infrastructures (a persons unconsciously internalized psychological, social and cultural settings). It is found that the nature-culture-dualism hinders a transformation towards a degrowth-society, since it is conducive to the exploitation of nature, the development of ethnocentrism and the dominance of production as the preeminent form of relating to the world. In a second part, Buen Vivir and Theravāda-Buddhism are analyzed as two examples that are not characterized by the dualism. It is found that their non-dualistic relations with nature can shape mental infrastructures, which allow a less exploitative behavior towards (non-)humans. The article is understood as a contribution to attempts of stressing the neglected relevance of power relations within the degrowth debate.

Societal Relations with Nature – A critical dialectic perspective

Before explaining in more detail, why and how Western societies are characterized by perceiving nature as a divided sphere from society (nature-culture-dualism), as highlighted in the anthology of the French anthropologist Philippe Descola (2011, 2013), Christoph Görg's concept of societal relations with nature (in German: gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse) (Görg 2003a, 2003b, 2005) will be presented. Görg's work stresses the importance that relations with nature have for societies and individuals. Its presentation eases the understanding of Descola's complex approach and allows establishing a first link between human relations with nature and mental infrastructures. In this article, mental infrastructures will be understood as a persons unconsciously internalized

psychological, social and cultural settings. At the moment these models are strongly shaped by a growth-oriented pattern which affect our thinking, actions and daily habits.

Görg essentially claims that societies are always determined by their relationship with their natural environment (Görg 2003a: 175f.). He champions a particular perspective when he holds that society is never *just* society on its own, but is always positioned in a dialectic constellation to nature (Görg 2005: 57). Such a view point, stemming from the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, refers to a dynamic interdependence of nature and society. Trying to understand nature and society as the product of a continuous exchange means that nature must be understood as being both, (re)produced by society and something which remains inaccessible for and different from society. Importantly, the assumption of a dialectic constellation entails that “nature and society are neither ontologically divided entities nor clearly divided subject matters at all” (Görg 2003b: 121; translation by CMS). This also applies to individuals when Görg highlights Adorno's and Horkheimer's famous quote of “the remembrance of nature in the subject” (in German: “Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt”) (Görg 2005: 62; translation by CMS).

Görg furthermore argues that endorsing a dialectic interdependency of society and nature avoids the assumed modern dilemma that we either have to give up the attempt to emancipate from nature or continue our efforts to master it (Görg 2005: 53, 61). Against this backdrop, and this is important, the dialectic perspective turns into a critique of the subsumption of nature under the ends of society (ibid.: 58), which is, again with Horkheimer and Adorno, identified as the most problematic form of thinking in modern times (Görg 2003a: 189). The reason for this is that the mastering of nature is understood by Görg as a strategy that is closely connected with the organization of rational rule within the modern state, the development of capitalism and modern gender relations (ibid.). Brand argues similarly when writing that “economic growth is [...] closely linked to a male, rationalistic and western understanding of development that is first and foremost [...] oriented at the mastering of nature” (Brand 2014: 298; translation by CMS). For Görg, already existing social patterns of rule are a prerequisite for the emergence of the ideology of mastering nature. Yet, because of the interdependence of nature and society, the subsumption of nature also reinforces existing ruling patterns (Görg 2003b: 127). However, the latter causal relation is not explicitly highlighted in Görg's approach. Mastering nature does not only refer to technical appropriation, but includes, in a wider sense, its symbolic and linguistic socialization (Görg 2005: 58). In sum, it is crucial to realize that the mastering of nature is closely linked to other patterns of social control and thus to economic growth, which can be interpreted as a hegemonic concept (Schmelzer & Passadakis 2011: 20ff.). As this critical perspective is widely absent in the recent degrowth discourse, analyzing societal

relations with nature is above all an important contribution to the challenge of hegemonic ruling patterns, which are linked to economic growth. Often enough it has been stressed that these patterns are not interpreted as such by those who are subdued by them. On the contrary, subduing power mechanisms are often perceived as a “silent force of anonymous relations, as hardly controllable processes of technical progress and global market, of productivism and globalization” (Brand 2014: 298, translation by CMS).

This is exactly the reason why Görg's approach of societal relations with nature, notably his claim that the mastering of nature is essentially a form of thinking, links up to Harald Welzer's concept of mental infrastructures. With this term Welzer points to the fact that our lives and realities are not only shaped by material and institutional infrastructures, but also by our cognitive modalities of perceiving the world and relating to it. In his short essay (2011) he attempts to show how particular historical developments in the so called West contributed to the inscription of ways of thinking as well as of norms and values that impact on our actions and on our social formations in general. In that view, the ideology of mastering nature can be interpreted as shaping particular mental infrastructures that allow to exploit (non-)humans. It also hinders us to understand that the natural crisis is actually not a crisis *in nature*, which has to be managed, but a crisis *of our relations to nature*. As long as the idea prevails that we have to master nature in order to solve the crisis, we will hardly be able to trespass the current logic of subsuming it under our proper (capitalist) aims. The project of a Green Economy is a prime example for a persistence within this way of thinking.

To wrap up, Görg's work renders four aspects clear. *Firstly*, a relation to nature that is dominated by an ideology of mastering it, does allow its exploitation. *Secondly*, this ideology requires social ruling patterns that are conducive to develop it. *Thirdly*, these patterns get reinforced by continuously subsuming nature under society, since nature and society must be understood as being in a dialectical constellation to each other. *Finally* and importantly, this dialectic constellation points to the ontological interdependence of nature and society. Hence, the ideology of mastering nature seems to uphold the ideal of emancipating from it, without being able to fully achieve such desired freedom. In that regard, the culturally constructed divide between nature and society is perceived as problematic for both, the planet's biodiversity and the ways, how societies organize.

Notably, Görg neither explicitly ask how the ideology of mastering nature emerged, nor how it specifically shapes our mental infrastructures beyond enabling the mindset that is required to exploit nature. With Görg's work in the back of our mind, this will be possible by turning to Philippe Descola's most recent work, in which he prominently analyzes the modern nature-culture-

dualism. This will allow preliminary inference on the dualism's impact on our mental infrastructures before turning to Buen Vivir and Theravāda-Buddhism.

The divide between nature and culture and its relevance for mental infrastructures

In his anthology “Beyond Nature and Culture” (2013) Philippe Descola suggests a way of grasping those most basic structures of human lives, from which unconscious and internalized forms of behavior, habits and thinking depart, which are labeled mental infrastructures in this article but which may also be grasped with the well-known terminus of *habitus* (Descola 2011: 148f.). Thus, Descola presents an original matrix of four basic ontologies (animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism) that classifies different views on the world according to ways of identifying it. Thereby, identification is understood as the first of two central modalities of individual and collective experience (relationship is the second one and will be treated below). The four ontologies emerge from combining the possibilities of identifying non-humans as being similar to or dissimilar from human physicalities and interiorities (Descola 2011: 189). The set, as depicted below, is of great value, as it allows systematical comparison of basic ontologies in an innovative way.

Interiorities are similar Physicalities are different	Animism	Totemism	Interiorities are similar Physicalities are similar
Interiorities are different Physicalities are similar	Naturalism	Analogism	Differences of interiorities Physicalities are different

With “Beyond Nature and Culture” Descola “stakes out the neo-Copernican claim that other people's worlds do not revolve around ours” (Sahlins 2013: xiii). Indeed, it is most important to understand that the modern way of identifying the world, ironically labeled as naturalism by Descola, is just one possible perception of non-humans. Essentially, naturalism is characterized by a dualism between nature and culture. This means that humans of this ontology identify non-humans as having differences in their interiorities and similarities in their physicalities in comparison to themselves. Thus, humans in Western societies normally assume that all beings and things share common features in their physicalities as everything consists of molecules, specific chemical components etc. Moreover, they normally think that only people have self-awareness. This is the reason why we perceive non-humans as being different in their interiorities.¹ At this point it is important to add that Descola does not argue for equalizing humans and non-humans. He acknowledges that an hypothesized observer, free of cultural influences, could identify a variety of

¹ Descola admits that Western scientists are increasingly cautious to state the discontinuity between humans and non-humans (Descola 2011: 269).

differences of what we understand today as humans and nature. Yet, he argues that there is also an abundance of evidences in favor of the perception of a gradual continuity in the relationship between humans and non-humans (Descola 2011: 140).

Descola traces the genealogy of the naturalist ontology throughout large parts of European history. While he states that in the Greek thought of Aristotle, humans were still part of nature (Descola 2011: 112), although objectification of nature already took place (ibid: 110), Christian belief set humans outside of nature (ibid.: 112). In this religion, humans are perceived as being created by god according to his proper image. This distances them from non-humans with which they are no more inherently connected. Tellingly, they were assigned to administer the world in the name of god (ibid.).² Hence, the superior status of humans in comparison to non-humans was clearly enhanced by Christianity. As to Descola, in the Middle Ages the idea of creation get intertwined with Greek physics, which causes, with the double authority of both thinking traditions, the emergence of a dominant metaphor that powerfully depicts the exteriority of nature. As to this metaphor, nature is perceived in all its harmony and diversity as an open book, which allows decoding the divine creation. Hence, the world gets reduced to an annotation of the divine word (ibid.: 113).

The emerging dualism of nature and humans was then strongly underpinned by the scientific revolution of the 17th century through which the idea of a mechanistic nature was legitimated (ibid.: 105). While the physical world turns into a machine, whose wheels can be disassembled, analyzed and reassembled by mankind, the spirit is strictly separated from this perception and becomes the ultimate affirmation of human existence.³ “Henceforward mute, inodorous and unseizable, nature has been emptied of all life” (Descola 2011: 105; translation by CMS). To stress these particularities of the Western and modern perception of nature, Descola writes that from the perspective of a hypothesized non-European historian of science, “Aristotle, Descartes or Newton would, in comparison to the choices of the rest of mankind, not so much appear as the revealers of the distinct objectivity of nonhumans and the laws that are ruling them, but rather as the architects of a naturalist, entirely exotic cosmology” (Descola 2011: 107; translation by CMS). To trace the last remaining step to establishment of the nature-culture-dualism, Descola shows, how the notion of culture as reality *sui generis* emerged from the already existing dualism between nature and humans (ibid.: 125).

² For instance, in the *Genesis* is written: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, »Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that creeps on the earth«” (Crossway Bibles 2007: Genesis 1: 27-28).

³ Most famous is Descartes' differentiation between *res cognito* and *res extensa*, which strictly divides material objects from thinking objects.

In order to understand, how the dualism between nature and culture contributed to the shaping of the mental infrastructures of current Western individuals, we need to understand the second principal modality of experience that Descola suggests: relationship. Relationship refers to the differences that appear *between* ontologies but also *within* the same ontology in regard to the concrete and practical ways of relating to the world (ibid.: 452). Descola identifies two main categories of forms of relations: In the first category, the relations between two similar entities are potentially reversible, while this is not the case in the second category that “is characterized by univocal relations that are founded upon connections between nonequivalent terms” (Descola 2013: 311). These two categories encompass three forms of relating to the world respectively. They are claimed to comprise the majority of all possible ones. Exchange, predation and gift are part of the first category; protection, production and transmission belong to the second one (ibid.: 453).

In the naturalist ontology production became dominant (ibid.: 572). The pattern of the production relationship bases on two interdependent premises: “the preponderance of an individualized intentional agent as a cause of the coming-to-be of beings and things; and the radical difference in the ontological status between the creator and that of whatever he produces” (Descola quoted in Sahlin 2013: xiii; Descola 2011: 471). This means that the creator (producer) knows how to produce a thing. She_he acquires the technical devices necessary to fulfill her_his plan of projecting her_his will onto the material (Descola 2011: 472). As this action pattern involves the ontological non-equivalence between producer and product, their relationship is not reversible: The product can never produce its producer. The entities of production are thus inevitably organized in a hierarchical way (ibid.: 486).

Production became the dominant form of relationship in the West since the nature-culture-dualism is very conducive to its emergence. Notably, the mentioned act of divine creation prepared the transfer of production patterns to the profane sphere: “According to the paradigm of creation-production, the subject is autonomous. Its interference into the world mirrors its personal features [...]: No matter if god, demiurge or a mere mortal, he produces its work according to a previously fixed plan and with regard to a particular purpose” (Descola 2011: 471; translation by CMS). Against this background, humans started to impose their wills (their interiorities) on nature (on non-humans), which is thereby virtually reduced to a pool of resources to be arranged according to human plans. Soon the production pattern was no more scrutinized and exploitation of nature for societal purposes turned into the dominant pattern of relating to non-humans, notwithstanding that it required some changes from the early divide between nature and humans: “The thoughtless ransacking of the planet’s resources and the destruction of its biotic diversity may well contribute to increasing the wealth of the very rich, but they result from our forgetting the belief that prevailed in

the first ages of modernity, namely that the splendid otherness of nature is necessary for the manifestation of the specific qualities of humanity” (Descola 2013: 397).

At this point it is helpful to remember Christoph Görg’s claim that societies are always determined by their relationship to their natural environment. In this view, it is plausible to assume that the pattern of production not only drives our relation to nature but also impacts on our social and individual relations within a society and towards other ones. If we work with the outlined thesis that there is a dialectic interdependence between nature and society, we can reason that a particular form of social rule is not only a prerequisite for the emergence of the nature-culture-dualism but its reinforcement also one of its results. Indeed Descola stresses that the production of objects (non-humans) determines the relationship between subjects (humans) (Descola 2011: 472). Against this backdrop, the exploitative attitude towards nature can be interpreted as transferable to the social sphere. In that regard, the understanding of human work and knowledge as a factor of production is most telling. Hence, Descola refers to patterns of global injustice when stating the necessity of reforming the naturalist ontology (Descola 2013: 584). However, he also reminds us that production, as a dominant mode of relating to nature, has so far not been generalized for the handling of inter-human relationships – attempts of, for instance, reproductive cloning notwithstanding (Descola 2011: 572).

In what other ways did the the nature-culture-dualism influence our mental infrastructures? Firstly, it allowed to discriminate other world views as it sponsored a deep rooted ethnocentricity, which was masked “behind a rational approach to knowledge” (Descola 2013: xv). By consequence, the nature-culture-dualism could be declared as the benchmark of all systems in the world (Descola 2011: 133) and was able to influence our interpretation of other ontologies: The so called savages were regarded as “preliminary sketches of citizens, protonaturalists, quasi historians and nascent economists: in short, precursors who fumble at a way of apprehending things and human beings that we ourselves are believed to have discovered and codified better than anyone else” (Descola 2013: 81). If we recall some recent theories of development, such as the modernization theory that is still taught at university and that assumes a progressive transition from pre-modern to modern societies at the example of the West, we realize that the nature-culture-dualism still reproduces the mentioned ethnocentricity. Modernization theory even assumes that the less modern a society is, the more difficulties it has in its contacts with nature (Görg 2006: 183). Secondly, as the dualism facilitates the relation-type of production, it marginalizes other possible reversible and non-reversible forms of relations to the world. For instance, in the naturalist ontology, the reversible relation of giving (gift) “only survives in the rites of intimacy or in humanitarian charity, and possibly also in the providential notion of the generosity of good Mother Nature, which however, would appear not

very convincing given the outrages that we heap upon her” (Descola 2013: 397). Lastly, I would like to allude to the possibility of loosing nature as a sphere of resonance due to the nature-culture-dualism. Hartmut Rosa recently developed the term of resonance as a counter concept to the notion of pathological forms of alienation, that may be caused by social acceleration (Rosa 2012, 2013). He stresses that nature can be a sphere and/or can provide the occasion for experiencing the world as a responding and carrying system of resonance (Rosa 2013: 9). Now, Horkheimer and Adorno claimed that by attempting the mastering of nature through objectification, we alienate ourselves from it (Horkheimer & Adorno 2003: 15). This significantly hinders the experience of resonance. The previous analysis of the nexus between modern Western mental infrastructures and the nature-culture-dualism needs substantial further underpinning in the future. This especially applies to the question how exactly their co-evolutionary and interdependent development took place. In a wider sense, this requires research on the possible and dynamic interrelationship of the internalized nature-culture-dualism, its power related implications as well as (other) psycho-social foundations of economic growth. In that regard, an investigation of Calvinist Protestantism and its inner-worldly asceticism is most interesting. Here, wealth, continuous re-investment and efficiency were interpreted as qualities agreeable to God. This is the reason, why Harald Welzer refers to Protestant ethics as a source for infinite growth and the respective mental infrastructures (Welzer 2011: 19f.). Yet, although both, the nature-culture-dualism and the spirit of capitalism, were apparently enhanced by Christianity, an in depth decoding of their relationship still misses and exceeds the scope of this paper. What could be revealed here is limited to the fact that the nature-culture-dualism is conducive to patterns of social and natural exploitation. Moreover, the dualism sponsored the development of an ethnocentric view on other ontologies that were and sometimes still are assumed to be backward. Lastly, it enabled the relation-type of production to become dominant at the price of other possible modes to relate to the world. This was indeed crucial for the development modern economics and the modern organization of society.

Against the background of his own findings, Descola leaves no doubt that the naturalist ontology has to be reformed (Descola 2011: 584).⁴ He is even favorable for an overcoming of the dualism (ibid.: 583; title of the book) and bets that is only a matter of time until someone will construct a “building” in which humans and non-humans will coexist in a better way (ibid.: 14). Hence, he would obviously agree with Görg's opinion already quoted above: “nature and society are neither ontologically divided entities nor clearly divided subject matters at all” (Görg 2003b: 121; translation by CMS; see also Görg 2006: 186). The subsequent brief analysis of the Latin American

⁴ Note, that the nature-culture-dualism is not an evil by itself as it greatly pushed the development of modern sciences. By no means, it would be reasonable to make the dualism responsible for all evils of the modern era (ibid.: 132).

concept of Buen Vivir, in general and as lived by the Amazonian Achuar people in particular, and of the teachings as well as selected practices of Theravāda-Buddhism serve as a critical completion of the insight on the nexus between the nature-culture-dualism and mental infrastructures. In that way, they might shed new light on the locked-in-structures of Western societies and contribute to its social-ecological transformation.

Buen Vivir as an example of non-dualistic societal relations to nature – Insights from the Amazonian Achuar people

The recent Latin American concept of the “good life“ stresses a fundamentally different relation to nature, in which humans are no more subsuming nature under societal ends (Gabbert 2012: 1). On the contrary, it promotes a harmony with nature, in which humans and non-humans are not divided (Gudynas 2012: 6). Hence, for Buen-Vivir-theorists it seems plausible to reject the capitalist categories of modernity, progress, growth and development (Gabbert 2012: 3). Buen Vivir bases on a plurality of different views on the world that are rooted in the cultures of different indigenous people of Latin America. It is not yet a well established concept, but still a vision in progress. Thus, it does not merely reproduce the particular indigenous relations to nature, but rather uses them as sources of inspiration. Most authors refer to the *sumak kawsay* of the Quechua people or the *suma qamana* of the Aymara people. However, a concept of Buen Vivir can also be found among the Amazonian Achuar people, where the good life is known under the term of *shiir waras* (ibid.: 14). In general, we must state that the ontological roots of Buen Vivir are not very well portrayed in the recent debate. This hinders linking the concept to the approach of Descola, which I deem essential to better understand in which ways ontologies with non-dualistic relations to nature can shed new light on our mental infrastructures and possibly contribute to their transformation. By consequence, in the following I will make a first preliminary attempt to provide some ethnological insight in the societal relations with nature of the Achuar people and their understanding of the good life by using the ontology set of Philippe Descola.

The Achuar people are a tribe of the Jívaro people, from which they barely differentiate. They live on both sides of the border between Ecuador and Peru (Descola 2011: 23). The Achuar identify non-humans according to the ontology of animism. Hence, interiorities of non-humans are similar to human ones, while physicalities are different. What does this mean? The Achuar assume that

most plants and animals have a soul (*wakan*). They believe that non-humans dispose of a reflexive consciousness, feelings and intentionality (*ibid.*) which requires to treat them as persons (*aent*). However, they see them as *disguised* persons as they have feathers and coats, which causes the identification of dissimilarities in physicalities (Descola 2011: 197). As persons, non-humans are assumed to be able to communicate. By nonverbal communication, non-humans are believed to transport thoughts and wishes to the souls of their addressees, which can cause changes of the latter's state of mind and of the latter's behaviors (*ibid.*). How does treating non-humans as persons look like? For instance, Achuar men see game animals as their brothers-in-law, which involves a difficult and instable relationship that requires mutual respect and caution (*ibid.*: 24). Achuar women treat the manioc plant, an important part of the Achuar's daily aliment, as their children. We can see that the non-existence of the nature-culture-dualism manifests in different behavior to the world than in Western societies. By consequence and strictly speaking, the Achuar people don't know (agricultural) production. As there is no ontological divide on the level of interiority, Achuar women do not produce plants for consumption, but consort with them from person to person, to contact their souls, to reconcile with them, to foster their growth and to help them to overcome difficulties of their existence (Descola 2011: 472). Achuar men don't produce the animals they hunt, but consort with them from person to person. This involves a prudent relation, which means that the men are trying to win over the game by using captious and cunning words (*ibid.*). Here, “the relationship between subjects (humans and non-humans) determine the production of means of subsistence rather than that the production of objects determines the relations between subjects (humans)” as it is the case in the West (Descola 2011: 472; translation by CMS). Another important example for different behaviors towards the world and non-humans is the restrictive use of work power. The Achuar only use 35% of their daily time for the organization of their subsistence (Descola 1996: 310). The ample possibilities of intensifying work aren't capitalized either (*ibid.*). This underexploitation of resources is important for their understanding of the good life: “one criterion [...] is the ability to ensure balanced domestic reproduction while exploiting only a small fraction of the production factors available” (*ibid.*: 313). Hence, we can state that the Achuar are “a good illustration of [...] harmonious self-restraint in which a restrictive definition of goals does not engender frustration” (*ibid.*: 328). However, the Achuar people are far from being a non-belligerent society, since relations exterior to the domestic sphere are mediated by war (*ibid.*: 308). Also, they know hierarchies, which are constructed according to communication capacities. As the Achuar can see each other and speak to each other in the same language, they set themselves at the top of the pyramid (Descola 2011: 25). Moreover, the form of relation of predation must be understood as the dominant one in Amazonian societies. This stems from the metaphysical attitude that predation is

“indispensable for a definition of the self: in order truly to be myself, I must take possession of another being and assimilate it. [...] Predation is not an unbridled manifestation of ferocity or a deadly impulse set up as a collective virtue. Even less is it an attempt to reject as inhuman some anonymous other. It constitutes recognition that without the body of this other being, without its identity, without its perspective on me, I should remain incomplete” (Descola 2013: 320).

How can these very preliminary insights in the ecology of the Achuar people be used for a project of a social-ecological transformation of Western societies and of their mental infrastructures? First and foremost, we could see that a non-dualistic relationship to nature involves for the Achuar people treating non-humans as subjects. This goes along with neither subsuming them nor using more non-humans for the proper survival than necessary. The form of relation of production is widely absent. This entails fundamentally different mental infrastructures than the desire to gain that prevails in Western societies. This is best expressed by the concept of the good life which focuses on stable reproduction. For the Achuar the good life, in its social dimension, “is a normative horizon” (Descola 1996: 309), which means that the goal of their society is to strive for the *shiir waras* and not for growth and material wealth. Interestingly, their efforts seem to require a minimum of work load that is by no terms comparable with the efforts the economic growth paradigm demands from people of Western societies. Lifestyles such as the one of the Achuar recently inspired Ecuador and Bolivia to grant much more rights and appreciation to non-humans in their constitutions.

On the question of how to learn from other ontologies

In his article on Buen Vivir and Degrowth Thomson writes: “If we were truly wise, we would recognize from time-to-time that the original filters and patterns used to identify information in data might be wrong or biased or require adjustment” (Thomson 2011: 450). In that regard, understanding the lifestyles of indigenous people of Latin America better and realizing that their relations with nature is not based in a culture-nature-dualism is certainly conducive to the process of self-reflection wished by Thomson. But there remains a major question to be asked that is important for (self-)transformation: Why don't we change our habits although we have understood something cognitively. Recently, Harald Welzer noted that “knowledge is [...] not a sufficient condition to change circumstances, since these circumstances base not on knowledge but on material and institutional infrastructures” (Welzer 2013: 66, translation by CMS). Thus, for the changes of mental infrastructures, he alludes to the necessity to rehearse attitudes and stances (Welzer 2014). Departing from this argument, I would like hypothesize that we might have so tremendous difficulties to change our habits, since we lack opportunities to rehearse attitudes and behavior that

we cognitively prefer. In that regard, a first review of the Western ontology suggests that it is not very well equipped with integral methods to constantly question our morals and habits. On the contrary, Foucault, for instance, stated that the modern approach to self-transformation is a predominantly cognitive one.⁵ Quite similarly, Descola noted that the emergence of Western ethnocentrism was masked by a rational search for knowledge (Descola 2011: 11). Moreover, in the recent degrowth debate, sufficiency is highlighted (Paech 2013). Sufficiency and self-restraint is not very much in fashion among most Westerners, which can be interpreted as an indicator for the dominance of a cognitive approach to (self-)transformation. Certainly, this hypothesis needs further research and underpinning.

Returning to our case of Buen Vivir, we must question if and how it can practically inspire a transformation of Western mental infrastructures. More research and educational approaches are needed to answer this question. However, insight from various cultural backgrounds heightens the potential of critical annotation of the naturalist ontology. Hence, I opted for the integration of a second case study into this article. There are three reasons why I chose Theravāda-Buddhism. *Firstly*, its teachings do, just like Buen Vivir, reject the nature-culture-dualism. *Secondly*, it offers integral self-techniques that stress the importance of awareness and mindfulness for our thinking and behavior. In the context of degrowth, Welzer, Seidl and Zahrnt recently highlighted the potentials of a culture of mindfulness (Welzer 2013, 2009; Seidl & Zahrnt 2012). Welzer, for instance, wrote that “mindfulness points to the permanent examination and revision of existing expectations as well as an increased awareness for possible errors and deviations. In sum: a permanent learning in a constantly changing environment. Mindfulness is nothing but the constant actualization of ones observations and analysis. What sounds so simple, however, presupposes a shift in the priorities, according to which we are acting” (Welzer 2013: 144; translation by CMS). *Lastly*, mindfulness techniques rooting in Theravāda-Buddhism are increasingly spread in Western societies. This entails some pitfalls but also points to existing compatibilities. Theravāda-Buddhism has been judged by Western intellectuals as more compatible with rational ways of thinking than other Buddhist schools. However, mindfulness techniques taught in the West, often only cover aspects of what Theravāda-Buddhists understand when talking about mindfulness. Hence, the risk is that parts of the Buddhist knowledge are assimilated into the Western ontology in order to heighten individual resistances against the psycho-social pathologies it produces.⁶ The following analysis of

⁵ He analyzes the Greek cynics to stress that asceticism was part of self-transformation processes before the modern era (Heubel 2007: 97; Foucault 2010: 15, 285).

⁶ In the Online journal “Huffington Post” Purser und Loy warned for instance: “[T]he rush to secularize and commodify mindfulness into a marketable technique may be leading to an unfortunate denaturing of this ancient practice, which was intended for far more than relieving a headache, reducing blood pressure, or helping executives become better focused and more productive” (Purser & Loy 2013).

Theravāda-Buddhism does not base on ethnological insight as it was the case for Buen Vivir. Future research on Buddhism and mental infrastructures should integrate knowledge on how Buddhist in the East and West live today for what reasons, to be able to identify differences between theory and practice.

Theravāda-Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion with strong philosophical connotations that bases on the teachings of Siddharta Gotama, known as the Buddha (a title meaning the “awakened one”). In the almost 2500 years of the religion's history, it spread to most parts of Asia and also to the West. The name of Theravāda-Buddhism indicates that this school is following the teachings of the elders. Hence, “it has kept close to what we know of the early teachings of Buddhism“ (Harvey 2013: 2). In the following, I will briefly present these doctrines, in order to be able to link them to the topic of the article subsequently.

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the relief from suffering (*dhukka*) to exit the continuous cycle of rebirth and to enter the timeless *Nirvana*. According to the *first of four noble truths*, the basic doctrines of the religion, *dhukka* is an undeniable characteristic of reality. Buddhists, for instance, refer to the fact that we are all getting older. Sometimes we don't get what we want. Sometimes we are separated from things we like and sometimes we have to cope with things we don't like. One day we all have to die. *Dhukka* encompasses all forms of physical and mental suffering. Importantly, “this is not, as sometimes said, a pessimistic world view, since the Buddha also explained, how to overcome such a suffering involving existence” (Freiberger & Kleine 2011: 201; translation by CMS). To overcome suffering, its origins need to be understood first. In that regard, the *second noble truth* assumes craving as the primary source of *dhukka*. In the Buddhist understanding, craving includes explicitly aversion and hate as forms of not-wanting. At this point it is helpful to introduce the concept of conditioned arising: Theravāda-Buddhism holds „that all things, mental or physical, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions, and cease once their conditions are removed” (Harvey 2013: 65). These conditions (*nidāna*) have psychological, physical and spiritual features which are connected with those five factors that are deemed to make up a person (*khandas*). These are: body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedenā*), perception (*samjñā*), mental constructing activities (*samskaras*) (e.g. volition) and consciousness (*viññāna*).⁷ According to the postulate of conditioned arising, all these aspects constantly change and culminate in suffering. This is important to understand for the topic of the article. To put it in a nutshell: Buddhism holds that a

⁷ The role of *nidāna* in conditioned arising is more complex. Conditioned arising actually expresses a pattern that can be found in a series of conditioning links (*nidāna*). Normally Buddhism has a standard formula of twelve *nidānas*, that displays how suffering emerges by respecting the five factors, that make up a person (Harvey 2012: 67).

complex process, which is shaped by an interdependency of physical, psychological and spiritual variables, necessarily also produces suffering (Harvey 2013: 65). A common example of Buddhist teachers, that is often used to render this more clear, is the process of aging. Let's consider that we are not simply getting older, but that we also cognitively and psychologically react to this process. Against this background, Buddhism holds that we can increase or decrease our suffering depending on how we react to it. For Buddhism, this is the point of intervention as the *third noble truth* claims that suffering can be overcome by ending craving, since the latter is understood as the only aspect in the chain of the conditioning links (*nidāna*) that we can influence.⁸ For our concrete example this could mean that we either could revolt against the process of aging, as we crave to stay young, or that we could accept the process as an inevitable part of life. Generally, Buddhism suggests the so called Noble-Eight-factored path⁹, the *fourth and last noble truth*, as a way to end suffering. It is a detailed description of a middle way that seeks to avoid extreme asceticism and extreme indulgence. The path should be realized by applying self-techniques that are not only focusing on cognitive reflexion, but use the whole body as a tool to confront the Buddhist teachings with the own meditation and life experiences. A prominent technique of Theravāda-Buddhism is the so called *Vipassanā-meditation* (or insight meditation). It wants to provide the means to understand and deconstruct views of the world and oneself, egoistic desires, fears, doubts, aversion and restlessness (Sangharakshita 2004; Analāyo 2003). It seeks to rise mindfulness to a level at which the meditator is able to realize at any time, why she/he thinks, speaks and acts in a particular way at a particular time (ibid.). The Buddhist understanding of mindfulness encompasses not only awareness, but also compassion and loving-kindness. This is due to the principle of *karma*. According to the latter, any action has a consequence. Particularly, any good actions are assumed of having good consequences and bad actions of having bad ones (Harvey 2013: 39f.). Against this background, *Vipassanā-meditation* promotes compassion and loving-kindness, since both qualities are deemed to reduce suffering. Importantly, for Buddhists, the law of *karma* not only applies to relationships between humans, but also between humans and non-humans. This is the reason, why Theravāda-Buddhism does not know the nature-culture-dualism. On the contrary, Western relations to nature are identified as causing major harms. The Theravāda-Buddhist Bhikku Bodhi recently wrote, when referring to the pathologies of contemporary capitalism that all problems are interconnected and “the objective manifestation of our subjective desires, which reflect the distorted relationship towards ourselves, others and nature“ (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012: 250; translation by CMS).

⁸ Another way how to interfere into the series of conditioning links is by avoiding spiritual ignorance, which refers to the religious doctrines.

⁹ The path consists of: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right mental unification (Harvey 2013: 81).

The non-dualistic conception of Buddhists relations to nature entails particular ethics. For instance, Theravāda-Buddhism calls to take responsibility for one's action, speech and thought, as they are deemed to always have consequences. This also applies for our behavior towards non-humans. In that regard, Harvey writes: “Such teachings, of course urge a kindness and non-violence towards all forms of life. Humans are part of the same cycle of lives as other beings, and are not separated from them by a huge gulf” (Harvey 2013: 38f.). For some Theravāda-Buddhists, such as the well-known monk Buddhadasa, non-humans are an important medium for (self-)transformation, which can't be used if we exploit them (Swearer 1997: 25ff.). Consequently, right livelihood is of great importance in Buddhism. It involves a way of living that does not bring harm to other beings but is conducive for the cultivation of one's own faculties and abilities (Harvey 2013: 267f.). Hence, Theravāda-Buddhist thoughts seek to build mental infrastructures that are different from Western ones as the exploitation of (non-)humans is directly opposite to a lifestyle, which is conducive for the ending of suffering. However, in Buddhism non-humans are not assumed to be treated as persons as it is the case in animism. Notably, the non-dualistic perception of the world is undermined by a hierarchy that is structured according to organic complexity. The less developed a being, the less *karmic* negativity causes its killing (Harvey 2013: 39). Hence, most Buddhists are not vegetarians, although Buddhist countries lack the mass slaughter houses of the West (Harvey 2013: 273). In addition, lower complexity of beings involves a position in lower rebirth realms. Humans are placed by Buddhist thought in a middle realm. They are assumed to suffer enough to be motivated to seek exiting the rebirth cycle. At the same time, they are free enough to aspire it (Harvey 2013: 39). Hence, a position in a middle rebirth realm is understood as a good opportunity to strive for the entering of *Nirvana*. Plants are not included in the rebirth cycle at all, although they are deemed of having “a very rudimentary consciousness, in the form of sensitivity to touch” (Harvey 2013: 33). Because of this hierarchy, it might be better to talk of a nature-culture-continuum instead of a non-dualistic perception of the world. This fits with Descola's interpretation of a gradual continuity instead of a dualism between nature and culture (Descola 2011: 140).

Lastly and importantly, in Buddhist thought, one of the three reversible forms of relating to the world, that Descola suggests, is stressed. “The primary ethical activity which a Buddhist learns is giving, *dana*, which forms a basis for further moral and spiritual development” (Harvey 2013: 267).

Although, I am currently not able to attribute Theravāda-Buddhism to one of Descola's prototypical ontologies, it became clear that the non-dualistic conception of relations to nature are paralleled by the suggestion of a moral conduct, which promises to develop less exploitative behavioral patterns towards nature and humans. In particular, giving is stressed as a reversible form of relating to the

world. However, the analyzed Buddhist school also knows a hierarchy that suggests to rather speak of a nature-culture-continuum. It is certainly necessary to interrogate in much more detail the practical manifestations of this particular mix of non-dualism paired with the existence of a hierarchy of (non-)humans according their complexity. Maybe this particular feature of Buddhist thought is the reason, why its attribution to one of Descola's prototypes appears difficult. Moreover, it might be an important factor for the easier spreading of Buddhism in the West. But this likewise needs further research as the neutrality of mindfulness meditation is certainly also conducive to linking up Buddhims to the rationality and the positivism of Western thought. At first sight, *Vipassanā-meditation* seems to be a promising technique for the transformation of Western mental infrastructures as it provides the possibility of integrally reflecting on the causes and consequences of ones thoughts and actions, while also attempting to foster compassion and loving-kindness towards all beings.

Conclusion

The present article has investigated some cultural conditions for the prominence of infinite growth in Western societies. In particular, it has dealt with the nature-culture-dualism that could be identified with Christoph Görg and Philippe Descola as a major form of identifying and relating to the world. It has been found that the dualism allows the spreading of the relationship pattern of production, which enables a exploitative behavior towards non-humans. Moreover, it could be shown that the pattern spread to the social sphere. The relation of production marginalizes other forms of interacting with the world that are less exploitative (such as the reversible relationship-type of giving). The nature-culture-dualism also promoted a deep rooted ethnocentrism that contributed to the perception that other ontologies are inferior to the proper one. In sum, we could note that the nature-culture-dualism was and still is conducive to the development of Western mental infrastructures and the perception that the ecological crisis is a crisis in nature and not a crisis of our relations to it. Hence, it seems to be desirable to overcome the dualism in order to transform problematic ways of relating to the world. Such an endeavor would link up with attempts to challenge the hegemonic character of economic growth. Against this backdrop, the Latin American Buen Vivir and Theravāda-Buddhism have been briefly analyzed as both are characterized by a non-dualistic perception of nature. Both indeed allow behaviors (or the teaching of behaviors) that are less exploitative towards (non-)humans. A short discussion on the question how to practically transform mental infrastructures resulted in the assumption that institutionalized possibilities of physical and cognitive reflection and rehearsal of one's actions and thoughts is most likely required to foster self-transformation. In this context mindfulness seems to play a pivotal role. Against this

backdrop, *Vipassanā-meditation*, that roots in Theravāda-Buddhism, could be identified as an interesting self-technique. In sum, much more research on the relationship between mental infrastructures, societal relations with nature, the nature-culture-dualism and self-transformation is needed. This will require increased efforts in analyzing many different ontologies and in critically relating them to the Western way of perceiving to the world and interacting with it.

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