

Buen Vivir and Beyond

Searching for a New Paradigm of Action

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A Language of opposition, once turned into a principle of governance changes its appearance. On the one hand, the social activist necessarily bases her intervention on the vision of a better state of affairs. Hence, her intellectual work is grounded in counter-narratives of what a different, alternative world should look like with the ultimate aim of transforming reality towards this alternative. However, by engaging into the actual game of power politics, the counter-language of critique runs the risk of getting contaminated and corrupted. Acting in the “falsches Leben” (Adorno 2003, engl.: false life) - in this case a globalised capitalism, an environment abused by resource exploitation and deep-reaching power gaps between nations states – there exists a dialectic between counter-narratives, such as those of *post-development* theories, and their operationalization. This happens in many Latin American countries, even those led by so-called progressive regimes.

This dialectical turn is not only a result of global power politics, we claim, but also a product of a hegemonic mind-set of the majority of peoples that (still) want neoliberal development despite of its negative impacts. As a first step, we will analyse the gap between the representation of Uruguay as a country of great performance in human development and a phenomenology of its current social state. As a second step, we present *Buen Vivir* as an alternative paradigm of social transformation and then critically look at Bolivia’s government that claims to follow this principle. By way of conclusion, having considered the gap between alternative visions and actual modes of governance - we will reflect upon strategies of transgression beyond the present paradigm.

1. “Human Development” and Conviviality in Uruguay

In this section we analyse recent trends in Uruguay, one of the Latin American countries with very good performance in terms of human development on the one hand and growing violence and social disintegration on the other hand.

According to the UNDP 2011 Report, it occupies the position 48 in the Human Development Index, heading the list of countries with high human development. In Latin America only Chile and Argentina have a very high human development occupying positions 44 and 45 respectively (UNDP 2011, 15).

During the last years Uruguay has improved significantly its socioeconomic indicators. The reductions in poverty, extreme poverty and unemployment during a five-year period show a very positive trend. Poverty, measured by the income method, went from 34,4% of the total population in 2006 to 18,6% in 2010. Extreme poverty, in the same period, moved from 2,7% to 1,1%. And unemployment was reduced from 10,7% to 5,50% (CNPS 2011, 16). These numbers, in years coinciding with the global financial crisis, are extremely positive for a small economy in the Southern Cone.

In terms of economic indicators, the last five years have also seen a constant growth of the GDP. In 2010, Uruguay's GDP grew 8,5% with respect to 2009. The sectors which contributed more to this growth were restaurants and hotels, and transport and communications. On the expenditure side, the expansion was associated with the growth of domestic demand, in particular the strong increase in private consumption (11.4%). The consumer goods that registered higher growth were automobiles and appliances, 67.6% and 46.3% respectively. Meanwhile the sale of new cars rose 39.5% in the first two months of 2011 (UNDP 2011, 31).

At the very same time, in a country historically ahead of its neighbours in education achievements, the indicators in this field are showing a worrying trend. According to a report presented by UNICEF in 2010 in relation to Secondary Education, only 36 out of 100 youth 25 to 29 years old have completed that level of education, and that is only

8,5% more than the percentage completed by people currently between 50 and 59 (UNICEF 2010,15-17). As the authors analyse, these numbers suggest that Uruguay has made very little progress in terms of expanding education opportunities for the new generations, failing therefore the expectation of most societies that the young will reach higher levels of education than the older generations. Uruguay has also remained behind other countries in the region. In 1990 the country occupied the fourth place in number of youth 20 to 24 who had completed Secondary education. During these last two decades the other countries in the region made significant progress and Uruguay was relegated to the 10th place. Furthermore, in 2009 8,6% of the youth 15 to 20 were not attending any educational centre, were not working, had not completed the first cycle of Secondary Education (first three years) and these percentages were higher among the low income populations (UMEC 2010, 18). One could continue to add data about the underperformance of the country in terms of education. But to finalise with this aspect, it is important to see some numbers that show inequalities within the system. The number of youth under the poverty line who have completed the first cycle of education is less than half of the youth who are not in that condition, 33,5% and 71,7% respectively. If looking at the completion of the whole secondary level, then the number of poor youth who have completed that cycle is six times less than those not poor, 6,4% and 36,4% respectively. When looking at ethnicity only 38,8% of youth of afrodescendent origin 21 to 29 years had completed the first cycle of secondary education compared to 67,4% for the rest of the population belonging to that age group. And for the second cycle completion is 11,9% to 35,4% respectively (UNICEF 2010, 27-30).

Another worrying trend in the country is the growing violence, and in particular domestic violence. Comparing the first semesters of 2010, 2011 and 2012, all crimes against the person have seen an increase in the first six months of this year. Homicides decreased by 19% from 2010 to 2011 and increased by 66% comparing the last two years. Injuries decreased by 2% from 2010 to 2011 and increased by 10% this first semester. Rape decreased by 13% comparing 2010 and 2011 and increased by 32% in 2012. And domestic violence, which had remained without variation between 2010 and 2011 increased 35% between 2011 and 2012 with a total of 10.761 cases in the country. It

had increased 130% between 2005 and 2011. Last year more than 30 women died as a result of this type of violence (Minister of the Interior 2012).¹

There is a growing debate among government representatives, opposition, academia and civil society around the topics mentioned above and that have emerged as those of main concern: violence, education and lack of conviviality, though this last word has never been cited explicitly. The ruling party, a coalition historically aligned to the left, has made it clear in various ways that there is an official concern and in June this year it presented to the population a package of measures under the name: “Measures for peaceful coexistence”. They were announced at a press conference following the national broadcast of the president, Jose Mujica, on radio and TV in which he asked himself, “What is happening to us”? In his speech he said: “Life is almost a miracle, a short term miracle. And it constitutes the most basic of all values. Therefore, life must be defended, it must be cared for. It would seem that in this special time, when we are a little bit richer, when we are full of new material things, full of little motorcycles, perhaps because of so much wealth in the day to day, we are forgetting that the core value is the defence of life”.

The package of measures announced in June refers mainly to punitive instruments to deter crime (increase in the number of years of imprisonment for certain crimes and amendments to the Code of Children and Adolescents in what refers to the rules that apply to juvenile offenders) and others to protect or compensate potential victims as well as some related to the use of drugs. A law is being currently debated in parliament for the legalisation of marihuana accompanied by procedures by which the state will be in charge of its production and distribution and of a register of consumers. Critics of this law say that the measure is proposed as part of reducing crime rather than as a public health programme. They say that it should be seen as the regulation of consumption and not the legalisation in as far as the registration would be compulsory.

¹ Uruguay has a population of 3.356.584 according to the 2011 Census. According to this census 1.244 people were homeless in September 2011 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2011).

Although the president's speech focused on the value of life and how different this one is from the value of material things, no measures –or proposals for society to debate upon - relate to the current model of development followed by the country. This model, like it has historically been in Uruguay and in most parts of the world, relies on economic growth. For the case of Uruguay it focuses mainly on the intensive exploitation of natural resources with eight out of the eleven major export areas depending on natural resources (UNDP 2011, 27).

The contradiction between the sensitivity expressed by the President in terms of valuing life –and living together- and the continuation of the very same economic policies, can be understood under the politics of naming by which the importance of non-material aspects of human life, of reciprocity, of mutual caring are highlighted while the hard policies resulting from the political decisions of the cabinet remain focused on measures oriented towards economic growth. One could interpret that either there is no political will for transformation or we are seriously confronted by a lack of imagination. This last interpretation seems more plausible and it relates to the challenges posed by economism² by which even progressive governments in the South have centred their efforts and commitments to improve the life conditions of the population only within the economic sphere.

2. “Buen Vivir” as an Emergent Alternative and as a Principle of Governance

“Buen Vivir” or “Vivir Bien” is a principle of indigenous origin in Latin America that is now widely discussed as an alternative to mainstream development associated with growth and global capitalism. The wording assembles the translation of different expressions of a similar idea and social practices within indigenous communities, for example expressed through the term *küme mongen* by the Mapuche in Chile, with *shiir waras oby*

² Understood as „an exaggeration of the economic sphere's importance in the determination of social and political relations” (Ashley 1983).

the Shuar and of *sumak kaway* by the Kichwa in Ecuador (Gudynas 2011a, 442 f.). These heterogeneous expressions highlight the multiplicity of the concept, which cannot be reduced to a decontextualized definition of its characteristics (Freire 2012, 247). It is a principle in construction, as the social ecologist Gudynas points out (Gudynas 2011b, 1, qu. in. Fatheuer 2011, 20). However, certain methodological strategies and *topoi* are recurrent themes of *Buen Vivir* discourse that distinguish it from the hegemonic development discourse: One of the principle aims of this concept is to decolonize the knowledge system of Western neoliberal development. This process of mental decolonization shall lead to the re-enactment of (well) Being - instead of living in a state of alienation caused by colonialism for most indigenous citizens (ibid. 21). *Buen Vivir* seeks to interrupt the anthropocentric and teleological model of linear development in terms of growth, industrialization and modernization. Epistemically, it aims at a plurilog among different systems of knowledge, in particular with emphasis on indigenous forms of knowledge production (Acosta 2010, 6). As an alternative to the neoliberal growth model, *Buen Vivir* seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between mankind and nature and a social equilibrium within societies. Therefore, as a political project, an individual on its own cannot achieve it. Moreover, it requires acting in concert with others in a community with reciprocity as key element and the aim of living well, but not necessarily living better than others. Hence, it demands that human well-being should not be grounded in the exploitation of others nor should it destroy our natural environment.

The discourses around *Buen Vivir* are also linked to the concept of *Pachamama*, an idea that gained public attention at the alternative climate summit in 2010 in Cochabamba. It is demanding the rights for and of the Mother Earth. According to this concept, a society should take account of the actual social and ecological costs of using its resources for the well being of its members and enable the natural environment to regenerate itself. In contrast to neoliberal production, this kind of economy should be based on self-reliance, a socially responsible use of resources and the production of long-living products that can be recycled and used over and over again (Cordaid 2012).

“The over-consumption by some groups, for example, the very rich, has to decrease. In that sense, there will indeed be less growth. But, on the other

hand, some sectors do need to continue to show growth, for example, education and sanitation.” (Ibid.)

Hence, *Buen Vivir* as a counter-discourse to development does not aim at a return to a golden (indigenous) past, but can be understood as an intellectual and political project to reconstruct societies in a manner in which people can live well with one another and within their natural environment. But how is *Buen Vivir* transformed into a principle of action? How do we make this semantic work within the actual power constellations without subverting its content?

2.1 The case of Bolivia: Mainstreaming or co-opting *Buen Vivir*?

Since winning the elections in 2005, Evo Morales and the MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo-Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos* [engl. *Movement Towards Socialism – Political Instrument for the People’s Sovereignty*]) wanted to indigenize Bolivian politics on a symbolic³, rhetorical as well as juridical level and made explicit reference to the concept of *Buen Vivir*. In 2009, *Buen Vivir* was elevated to be a constitutional aim of the Bolivian state (Bolivian Constitution, art. 8). In line with *Pachamama*, a law was set up for the protection of the environment and made nature a legal entity in whose name rights can be claimed and violated. This law demanded the establishment of an Environmental Protection Agency (span. *Defensoría de la Madre Tierra*) that identifies and defends rights in the name of Mother Earth. In the name of this very *Madre Tierra*, Bolivia opposed the climate compromise from Cancun at the summit of 2010 for failing to reach a sustainable solution that would limit global warming to two degree Celsius. Bolivia became famous on the international scene as the new protector of the rights of nature.

However, by contrast, in article 335 of the same constitution, industrialization and commercial use of natural resources are stated as a major interest of the state. In the

³ For example through an ancestral ceremony of mass weddings, in order to “depatriarchalize” the colonial and neoliberal family (Canessa 2012, 15).

governmental plan for 2010 until 2015, the government of Morales demanded the exploitation of many natural resources, particularly of Lithium and hydrocarbons, in order to finance national welfare and in order to construct national industries based on these resources. President Morales justified this strategy as follows:

“To live well means to live in harmony with everyone and everything, between humans and our Mother Earth; and it consequently implies working for the dignity of all. And nowadays it is more important than ever to know how to share, to know how to distribute wealth equitably. What belongs to the people is for the people. *To democratize the economy*. That is why we nationalize natural resources: in order that these resources return to the Bolivian people.”
(Morales in: Canessa 2012, 14; emphasis added)

Buen Vivir in this interpretation does not contradict economic development, but simply demands that it is done in the name of the Bolivian people and that the profit gained is shared democratically among them to guarantee a dignified standard of living. Hence, in contrast to its international image, the national discourse within the government of the MAS aims at a politics of industrialization, resource extraction (*neoextractivism*), and monocultures (Canessa 2012, 34).

This strategy that reflects the “triangular” of the Rights of Nature, Development, and *Buen Vivir* - equally aimed for in Ecuador - prompted a lot of criticism by defenders of the idea of *Buen Vivir* for betraying this very principle:

“The speeches of Rafael Correa and Evo Morales refer to *Buen Vivir* as of Andean tradition, but the only thing Andean is the rubber stamp, because when they unwind and materialise their policies, their practice is completely civilizing in line with mainstream development”. (Freire 2012, 201; translated by A.A.)

According to the critics, these policies neither act against development nor against modernizing growth while they assume and occupy the name of *Buen Vivir*.⁴

⁴ Gudynas emphasises that this contradiction has already been part of the 2009 Bolivian constitution: ““The tensions with the classical views of development slipped into the Bolivian Constitution in those articles which state that one of the goals of the State is to industrialise natural resources. While this goal may be understood in the context of the historical claims to break the dependency of exporting raw materials, the problem is that it leads to a tension with

On the other hand, leftist and socialist intellectuals defend MAS' strategy by fearing that sticking with a traditional concept of *Buen Vivir* stressing only its impact on Mother Earth would be too naïve in the current state of the world: Firstly, *Buen Vivir* cannot work on a micro-scale of a nation state alone and secondly it might prevent struggles for social rights through a mystifying discourse on global social justice (dubbed by Lambert as the "Pachamanising of Thought") in the name of an invented tradition (Lambert 2011):

"The eccentricity of this movement's proposals (F. D./A.A.: of proponents of *Buen Vivir*) is exasperating, when it assumes that indigenous cultures are the natural repositories of an intelligent and shrewd substratum that is reluctant to be colonised. Something that forms the basis of the *ayllu* in the Andean worldview is transformed into the main criticism of capitalism and Western civilisation. (...) Pro-Mother Earth concepts are limited in their understanding of territorial dispossession, drugs trafficking, the internal armed conflict, the violent appropriation of environmental resources, and the contradictions within the excluded social sectors. But they are, above all, inadequate when it comes to understanding the nature of our countries' dependence on the hegemonic centres of capitalism." (Jaramillo 2010)

The author cautions that national elites and transnational actors might defend their privileges and their power in ignorance and disrespect of Mother Earth. These factors might complicate the operationalization of *Buen Vivir* in industrialising countries - in particular for those with high social inequalities (Schiller-Vacaflor 2011, 14).

Besides these macroeconomic aspects there are also epistemic barriers to making *Buen Vivir* a principle of governance: Since *Buen Vivir* is a contested signifier itself, there is the need to define its content for the political space in order to activate it as a political vocabulary. Assuming that *Buen Vivir* is an indigenous concept leads to the question of who is the *indigenous* for whom and by whom this principle is legitimized and filled with

the goals of protection of Nature. When it is stated that industrialisation and marketing of natural resources is a priority of the State' (art. 355), the doors are open to all kinds of contradictions with those who claim the protection and integrity of Nature." (Gudynas 2011b, 5; translated by A.A.)

content? Indigenous people that engage against neoliberal reforms are not necessarily doing so as indigenous peoples (Postero 2007, in Canessa 2012, 12). By contrast, there might be indigenous groups, completely in line with the present economic model. Conflicts of interest between high- and lowlanders, coca growers and landless people, peasant and city dwellers in Bolivia can be bypassed by the all-inclusive official constitutional terminology of the “original peasant indigenous” - but not resolved. A national language that glosses over these internal divisions and opposing interests⁵ and that incorporates *the* indigenous as central agents of governance might create new exclusionary lines that it rhetorically hides. As a result, indigenous lowland organization, Ayllu organization, and feminist groups in Bolivia have been manifesting their opposition to the Morales government (Schilling-Vacaflor 2011, 11-12). These groups feel marginalized within or co-opted by the government and the MAS:

“Even the president Evo Morales, of Aymara origin, wants to modernise and develop Bolivia, not realising that this would imply taking the country into materialism and economism that has caused so much harm to humanity and nature.” (Freire 2012,219; translated by A.A.)

As we have shown so far, the implementation of the concept of *Buen Vivir* in the governance of Morales and the MAS created contestations over the term, contradiction among the agents of *Buen Vivir* and accusations of co-optation by those who felt excluded or misrepresented by official “indigenized” politics.

In the process of being transformed from a vocabulary of critique of the current poverty/development paradigm to a principle of governance, the principle of *Buen Vivir* became part of a power game about interests of social groups and ideological visions of what a good society should look like.

⁵ „In Bolivia today there are broadly speaking two indigenous discourses: one sees indigenous peoples and values as the foundation of the nation state and seeks to create and ecumenical indigeneaty for a majority of Bolivian citizens; the other seeks to respect cultural difference in its multiple forms and protection of marginal peoples from the state” (Canessa 2012, 33)

3. Conclusion: A New Politics of Desire

Firstly, the response of the government in Uruguay to the difficulties of living together has not moved away from a development model based on continuous growth and the exploitation of natural resources that aims at promoting consumption as a fit all solution. Secondly, in the case of Bolivia, the discourse of *Buen Vivir* – responding to this impasse - was equally incapable of shifting emphasis away from growth, development and resource exploitation to a new kind of conviviality. Both analyses have shown how limited our imaginaries of a different model of economic and social organizations have evolved so far and how they remain embedded within the paradigms of global capitalism.

What limits us and our societies to radically shift the political paradigm – particularly in a period of crisis like the one we are going through?

We have strong evidences that capitalism creates social inequalities and destroys our livelihoods in an unsustainable fashion (Wade 2004). However, measures of radical change do not easily find a majority vote. Moreover, many people in the “global South” seem to want development now (Sachs 2010): Two decades after *Post-development* theorist announced the end of this paradigm (Sachs 1993), young citizens in industrialising countries continue to strive for consumer goods, high tech tools and a modern society. The politics of desires of capitalism remains prevalent.

One important battlefield of today, we hence argue by way of conclusion, is the battlefield of our imaginaries, of our epistemic horizon and our desires. There are sociological studies that show that happiness does not correlate to the GDP of a country and economic growth in general. By contrast, wealth – beyond a certain GDP – rather correlates with crime rates, drug trafficking, and corruption. Moreover, it tends to be accompanied by a sense of permanent dissatisfaction, insecurity, anxieties, and the burden to keep a certain standard of consumption not necessarily linked to a good quality of life. Individual happiness as a main promise of modernity and capitalism has not been kept in many parts of the globe (Bauman 2010, 11).

Consequently, what is needed for an age of *Buen Vivir* is a new “anticipatory conscience” (Bloch 1986), that leads us to new models of thought that bridge the paradoxes we confront in the *post-post-development* era and that function as principles of action - and not only as guidance for critique - in industrialising countries that look for social models for tomorrow in more equitable and sustainable ways. This anticipation, imagining “other ways of doing things”, needs to move in a non-economic sphere, as this one has blocked the imaginary for alternatives. As Jeremy Seabrook argues, we need to think of options where money does not play a central role any more and where we can seek “our release, where possible, from it”, through “all that we can offer each other without the mediation of money”, “regaining as many freely services and commodities as possible”, rediscovering “the numberless delights and distractions with which we can provide for ourselves and one another by liberating these from the captivity of the markets” (Seabrook 1990, 32-33). This transformation of our collective mind-set might be a precondition for deep-reaching social change that moves beyond the economic paradigm of neoliberal capitalism, reiterated by governments using the concept of *Buen Vivir* as a legitimising discourse.

One initial anchor might be to analyse more accurately social practices of the (symbolically termed) “global South” (Santos 2007) anywhere: What can we learn from popular kitchens, free shops, rental bike stations in metropolitan spaces, and car sharing as emergent alternatives to a growth-based consumer society and that are worthwhile models to follow in order to attain a “good life”? Experimental social practices, not revolutionary on their own, may cause a shift of consciousness that seems necessary for citizens to commit themselves for social transformations: What do we desire? What does our life quality depend on? How do we relate to our social environment?

“Glocal” practices can attain a sense of *sufficiency* instead of *efficiency*, they can create esteem for *common goods* that foster communication, care and affective ties among citizens – important conditions for living-well. Although they confront the limits of being embedded in a global capitalist system based on growth and labour exploitation, they may offer transitory practices to bridge the gap created by the paradox we live in:

between yearning for alternatives and sticking epistemically with the present. Hence, they shall be analysed as offering new practical narratives that may function as guidelines for governance. By doing so, we might be able to fill the semantics of *Buen Vivir* with “new ways of doing things” instead of reiterating the past.

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