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Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, 'Good Living': An Introduction and Overview¹

This short contribution (for the long version please click here) to Buen Vivir and/or Sumak Kawsay refers to the context and discussion in Ecuador. It is important to emphasize that Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay are not quite the same, and for each numerous sub-discourses and practices referring to both can be found. Taking up 'Andean values', Buen Vivir has been broadly defined by Catherine Walsh (who has for long been scholarly active in Ecuador and sensitive to issues of decolonialism) as:

In its most general sense, buen vivir denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. This notion is part and parcel of the cosmovision, cosmology, or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala. (Walsh, 2010: 18).

Thanks to its eager and vivid promotion by public figures, such as the former Ecuadorian energy and mining minister and economist, Alberto Acosta, who also published and edited key conceptual works on Buen Vivir, it was soon picked up by renowned scholars of the critical Left, post-development and even the (quite mainstream) human development movement (see Escobar, 2010b; Gudynas, 2011; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2011; Deneulin, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012). In addition, Acosta served as chairing president of the *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* (National Constitutional Assembly, convened to elaborate the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008) in 2007/2008, until breaking up with the previously elected

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President Rafael Correa. According to various sources, Acosta himself is responsible for having reclaimed the notion of Buen Vivir into the Constitution (Capitán-Hidalgo et al., 2014). He did so, after the CONAIE had started a campaign in front of the assembling center, including claims such as *interculturalidad* (interculturality) and *plurinacionalidad* (plurinationality) – two main pillars of Buen Vivir and the Ecuadorian state nowadays (see CONAIE, 2007). Both concepts need to be seen in the context of the decades-long struggle around multiculturalism, neoliberalism, recognition of indigenous rights in (post-)colonial states and indigenous (self)representation in the Americas (see Sieder, 2002; Almeida Vinuesa, 2005; de Souza Filho, 2007). Plurinationality (creative interweaving of cultures) opposes the Western idea of multiculturalism (cultural coexistence) on decolonial grounds. Decolonial ideas (e.g., Mignolo, 2002; Walsh, 2002, 2004), which, going back to Frantz Fanon and others, have been further developed *inter alia* in Ecuador roughly during the period between 2000 until 2008 and the beginning of a 'Buen Vivir boom' of publications. They represent the intellectual 'glue' between essentialized Andean values, represented as Sumak Kawsay, and the critical, anti-imperialist and anti-modernist rhetoric of Buen Vivir.

Toward a typology of discourses

Given recent contradictory politics in Ecuador and Bolivia with regard to preservation of nature and plurinationality, a discursive splitting of Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay has recently been further discussed (Oviedo, 2014a), although the same proposal was immediately criticized (Gudynas, 2014). It is thus important to look closer at the underlying conceptions of both. Hence, I also argue for more precision in general when referring to the Buen Vivir concept, 'cosmovision',² world view, political program, "ética cosmica" (Claros-Arispe, 1996) or "pachasophy" (Estermann, 1999, 2012, 2013). (At least) three main types of this vast field of discourses and practices have been differentiated (Hidalgo-Capitán, 2012), however they remain interlinked in several publications by scholars, governments and activist:

² Note at this point that the notion "cosmovision" has its roots in German philosophy (Wilhelm Dilthey) of the 19th century and has been transported to Latin America/Abya Yala/Amaruka in colonial times (Oviedo 2014: 270). Although occasionally used by indigenous scholars ('cosmovisión'), the colonial connotation of this term – for long time neglecting the existence of non-European philosophy, knowledge or scientificness with important implications until present (e.g., draws the constitution of Ecuador of 2008 a distinction between 'scientific knowledge', on the one side, and 'ancestral wisdom', on the other side) – should not be disregarded.

1. Buen Vivir as a political (state-led) socialism of the 21st century (Ramírez G., 2010); that is, a blending between neo-Aristotelian, Christian and Andean values (mainly protection of the environment), linked to all sorts of claims from 'do-gooders', into a political state program. It remains, however, largely within the framework of Westerncentric development, especially human development;
2. As a “utopia to be constructed” (Acosta, 2010a), in form of a post-modern collage combining viewpoints of various international movements of peasants, feminist, socialists, ecologists, pacifists, theologians of liberation, unionists, etc (A L Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2014: 35–36). A crucial point here, is the demanded reconstruction of the national economic system toward local practices of production, transport and consumption – a common thread little discussed in Buen Vivir discourses type (1) and (3). However, here I focus less on this type of Buen Vivir, despite its importance as constant background because of overlapping ideas and values with both others. Both should be differentiated from:
3. An 'indigenist' form of living and thinking (as opposed to indigenous) that adds important spiritual, ontologically relational – or 'internal-external' – dimensions, based on individually and collectively acquiring a practice (more than a knowledge) of all-connected consciousness. This form of relational being is seen as in constant exchange and reflection with the social and natural environment (see Oviedo, 2014). In order to avoid essentialist and essentializing accounts of indigenous being and living – a discourse well-known as “lo andino” from anthropological studies on the *ayllu* in the Andean region³ – a distinction is frequently drawn between 'pensamiento (thinking) *indigenista*' and 'pensamiento *indígena*'. The discursive assumption here is that the first supports '*indigenismo*' (or '*indianismo*'), a “political ideology that defends indigenous claims within

³ By 'lo andino' I refer to a “construct that assumes Andean peoples (writ large across space and time) possess a distinctive (even unique) and coherent set of interrelated cultural proclivities: a common fund of perceptions, understandings, values, symbols, and social, spatial, and material practices. This 'congealed Andean essence' is ascribed to Andean peoples whole cloth and, at the same time, deployed to explain Andean societies past and present.” Included in such a view are elements such as the “organization of Andean political economies according to the socio-environmental logic of the vertical archipelago, competitive/complementary dual organization, the function and value of communal labor shaped by principles of reciprocity, personal relationships between the human and animate physical world that are expressed in kinship terms, and, not trivially, a presumption that the indigenous peoples of the Andes possess an almost preternatural capacity for resilience in the face of social and environmental trauma” (Chase and Kosiba, 2007: 1).

the framework of nation-states” (A-L Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2014: 30, Footnote), based on a century-long endured suppression and attempts to extinction. One has not necessarily to be indigenous to support it as *indigenista*, and in turn not all indigenous people are *indigenistas* – but both refer to distinctive values, (re)presented as 'indigenous'. It is questionable if such a distinction is really able to avoid essentialist elements, especially with regard to constant emphasizing of indigenous/non-indigenous providence of authors in collected works such as Hidalgo-Capitán et al. (2014): considering 'strategic essentialism' is certainly relevant here (see Lucero, 2006; Altmann, 2014).

However, this third account described above is commonly differentiated from Buen Vivir (as state program) and called Sumak Kawsay (sometimes translated as 'to live altogether in harmony⁴ and balance's, cf. *ibid.*: 271). Some works bear a forceful critique of the 'Buen Vivir politics' – regraded as a post-modern mixture of everything – the Ecuadorian state has co-opted:

“El Buen Vivir en la Constitución Política del Ecuador y el Vivir Bien en la Constitución Política de Bolivia son una mezcla o un 'champús' como la que gusta actualmente a la posmodernidad para hacer un 'menjunje' de todo un poco. Es una combinación del Buen Vivir platónico, con ciertos postulados cristianos y humanistas, ciertos conceptos de los paradigmas ecologistas, socialistas, y finalmente añadiendo ciertos principios generales del Sumakawsay, a todo lo cual le llaman el 'Buen Vivir Andino', consumando su irrespeto y desvalorización a la sabia y milenaria tradición andina.”⁵ (*ibid.*: 276).

En-countering modernity

Sumak Kawsay positions itself as totally divergent, regional, local, community-related: based on the basic idea of everyone having one's vegetable patch, home, access to clean potable water, forests and adequate self-sufficiency, the *runa* (self-identification for Kichwa indigenous persons) needs to acquire and maintain inner strength (*sámai*), wisdom (*sabiduría*), well-balanced conduct (*sasi*), capacity for

⁴ Note here that the Western understanding of 'harmony' is entirely different to the 'Andean' one (which refers to animacy of all things and beings who are connected through energies by default); every translation seems to run necessarily into trans-cultural difficulties.

⁵ All Spanish translations are mine: “The Buen Vivir in the political Constitution of Ecuador and Vivir Bien in the Constitution of Bolivia are merely a mixture or 'hodgepodge' as currently postmodernism likes to make a 'concoction' a bit of everything. It is a combination of the platonic Good Living, certain Christian and Humanist principles, certain concepts from environmentalist, socialist paradigms, and finally adding certain general principles of Sumakawsay. Altogether it is called the 'Buen Vivir Andino', consummating its disrespect and impairment of the wise and ancient Andean tradition.” (*ibid.*).

comprehension (*ricsima*), the ability to envision the future (*muskui*), perseverance (*ushai*) and compassion (*llakina*). The ethical dimension of Sumak Kawsay stresses a series of values, without which 'the good living in plenitude' is neither achieve- nor maintainable. Viteri (2003: 66-71), one of the earliest publishers on *Alli Kawsay* or *Sumak Kawsay* who lately changed sides and now promotes Buen Vivir for the Ecuadorian government, lists as such interconnected values: 'support' (*yanapana*), generosity (*kuna*), the obligation to receive (*japina*), reciprocity (*kunakuna*), advice (*kamachi*) and 'listening' (*uyana*). All that is reflected in the four principles embodied in the Andean cross – the *chakana* – reciprocity (*ranti-ranti*), oneness (*pura*), complementarity (*yananti*) and connectedness (*tinkuy*) (see Macas, 2010: 29–31 ; quoted in Hidalgo-Capitán et al. 2014: 37).

Sumak Kawsay, as social concept and normative order, draws on a fundamental distinction-correlation to 'Mal Vivir'/Llaki Kawsay (translatable as 'ill living'), which refers to an overly individualized, materialized and disenchanting way of living; of someone who has lost the connection to the right values and has replaced them by those of the modern capitalist system (cf. Viteri, 2003: 78-93). In this sense, Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay embodies a conservative or even traditionalist core; one that fits only uneasily to the progressive depiction of the concept by non-Andean authors at the international level.

However, the goal of Sumak Kawsay is not to 'overcome' 'ill living', since there is no perceived importance in aspiring to 'live better' – but rather to balance both always existent sides in a refined way. The key to do so, is practicing consciousness, i.e. listening, responding and correlating with mind, heart and body. In opposition to Western concepts of exclusivity, categorization, competition, subjectification, etc., Buen Vivir puts emphasis on key values such as solidarity, generosity, reciprocity and complementarity. Orthodox forms of mono-economy, based on the exploitation of natural resources are thus rejected. For Sumak Kawsay to gain political influence (cf. Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2014: 32), it is required to build *chaka* ('bridges') to Western forms of knowledge-making (e.g., scientific one). These bridges aim at not less than generating a novel type of society, state and civilization, beyond modern divides of individual-collective, human-nature and subject-object:

“No se trata de integrarnos al progreso científico (...) para equipararnos y continuar con el proceso civilizatorio (...), sino (...) de salir de esos presupuestos y de establecer otra 'visión y misión' de los seres humanos sobre la vida. El problema no es solamente el pos-desarrollo, el pos-capitalismo[,] sino la pos-civilización (pos-patriarcalismo, pos-materialismo, pos-economicismo, pos-historicismo, pos-antropocentrismo, pos-racionalismo, pos-politicismo, pos-cientificismo, pos-cosificación, pos-secularización,

y todos los reduccionismos y separatismos creados y sub-creados por el paradigma civilizatorio)⁶ (Oviedo, 2012: 240; quoted in Hidalgo-Capitán et al. 2014: 50).

Buen Vivir politics: the new Ecuadorian modes of governance

Beginning during the late 1990s, after the decades of structural adjustment, financial crisis, austerity and a general political-economic agenda linked to what has been called the “Washington consensus” (see Gudynas, 2013), in several Latin American countries first social struggles and indigenous mobilization, then debates, and later on institutional and governmental shifts have been triggered to question national governments, development and the role of states (cf. Parandekar et al., 2002). Many of these shifts aim at re-empowering national governments and at directing their revenues from mainly exporting natural resources toward public investment in infrastructure, health, education and security. In Ecuador, for instance:

“voters approved by referendum in September 2008 a new constitution which commits the Ecuadorian government to establish an economic, social and political system oriented towards the realization of good living. This includes the guaranteeing of all economic, social, political and civil rights as well as the right of Nature. The Constitution is the result of long historical processes of indigenous mobilization to demand the recognition of their specific cosmovision and the inseparability of humans from nature [...]” (Deneulin, 2012: 1).

The overall goal of such state-led ' economic, political and social conduct toward good living' is defined as Buen Vivir – however it's actual content, the way to bring it about, and also its often portrayed 'indigenous origin', remain, as we have seen, debatable. Ideally, the state adoption of a constitution oriented toward Buen Vivir has significant economic, social and political implications. “Under a buen vivir regime, economic exchanges are submitted not to the logic of profits but to the logic of human flourishing and respect of nature.” (ibid., 3). Not accumulation of material wealth remains the basic value of the economic system, but solidarity, complementarity and reciprocity (cf. Acosta, 2010b: 23). Material goods are to be produced and exchanged in view of enabling people to live in dignity and sustaining harmonious relations between people and their environment

⁶ “This is not about integrating us into scientific progress (...) in order to equip us to continue the process of civilization (...) but instead (...) to get out of those claims and establish another 'vision and mission' of human beings about life. The problem is not only the post-development, post-capitalism [,] but the post-civilization (post-patriarchal, post-materialism, post-economism, post-historicism, post-anthropocentrism, post-rationalism, post-politicism, pos-scientism, pos-objectificationism, post-secularization, and all reductionisms and separatisms created and sub-created by the civilizing paradigm).” (ibid.).

(Deneulin 2012, 3). A “solidaristic economic system” (ibid.) supports a market economy, with a plurality of markets at the local level, but not a market society submitted to one global market (Acosta, 2010: 25). Overall, Ecuador has taken some effort to effectively improve the infrastructure, social, health, education and security sector – but it is still largely dependent on exporting natural resources.

In order to alter the national economy, Buen Vivir is spelled out in quinquennial National Buen Vivir plans, which have replaced former national development plans. These are elaborated by the supra-ministerial SENPLADES (*Secretaría Nacional de la Planificación y Desarrollo*) and aim at changing power structures and the economic system on the longer run (Ecuador will be running out of crude oil in approximately 25 years). Such, partly certainly utopian, targets require to be assessed continuously to render the high public investment accountable. For this reason, Buen Vivir plans contain up to 150 so-called 'Buen Vivir indicators'. In addition, Ecuador has become the first country in the world to work on the implementation of a national human rights indicators' system (since 2009), which should be coupled with Buen Vivir indicators one day. It should be added that the goal of Buen Vivir in the current Ecuadorian government's perspective is to shift the resources-based economy toward one of high-tech production, knowledge and services. The university project 'Yachay' ('wisdom' in Kichwa) in Northern Ecuador, to name just one example, aims at creating a sort of 'Latin American Silicon Valley' in biotechnology, the largest campus on the continent.

Overall, 'Buen Vivir politics', as they are pursued by the government, can be characterized as utterly centralized, hierarchic and technocratic. They aim at maximum control, stability through social and public management-type planning and accountability, while regarding every opposing force as threat. Accordingly, Correa (and his administration) have been described as “technopopulist” (de la Torre, 2013). The use of modern means of communication and representation⁷ is widespread and intentionally employed by government members. This is also reflected in the high number of rather young, (typically abroad) well-educated, publicly employed persons, who have partly been attracted to return to their home country through governmental programs after the economic crisis-induced mass migration in the 1980s and 1990s. A large part of the recently established urban Ecuadorian middle class is directly or indirectly employed through government activities – and has been largely subsidized (fuel, domestic gas) in recent years

⁷ For instance, TV shows, social media, urban lifestyles, etc.

(Dávalos, 2013). While a reform of the national penal code has been demanded for long, the result turned out to heavily criminalize every possible threat for the state, while hardly considering the more obvious threat of the state for individuals (e.g., in cases of torture or genocide). Accordingly, and also because of criminalizing defenders of human rights and environmentalists (CEDHU et al., 2011), the number of people in prisons (themselves in very poor condition) have exploded in Ecuador in recent years (Dávalos, 2014; Garces, 2014).

Conclusion: a word of caution

Buen Vivir remains a politically elusive term, charged with programmatic aspirations of various proponents; one that is (almost) always re-framed and re-defined by justice struggles of likewise numerous social movements. Proponents, more allied with the '*indigenista*' movement tend to claim a fundamental rupture between Buen Vivir, on the one side, and Sumak Kawsay (or 'Sumakawsay', to underline the connectedness), on the other side (see Oviedo, 2014). For them, there is no direct need to seek justice and 'development', since everything proceeds in all-connected couples of polarization between beings and energies.⁸ Maintaining, stabilizing, balancing, etc. are instead values put forward in Sumak Kawsay. Naively collapsing Buen Vivir (a post-modern form of 'biosocialism') with Sumak Kawsay, the ancestral way of being, would eventually equal to perpetuating the 500 years-long exploitation of the indigenous on epistemological grounds (Oviedo, 2014).

It is thus particularly important to treat all publications on and about Buen Vivir accordingly; Buen Vivir discourses have become a tricky minefield to engage with, also because actors and authors themselves shift between pro- and contra-governmental positions.⁹ Leading questions for any reading of Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay should therefore be: who are the authors? What are their goals and political as well as academic roles? What is the purpose of their publications?

Despite manifold daily struggles in real life, the idea and discourses of Buen Vivir has gained popularity in academic and activist circles around the globe. It has been examined in the context of UNDP's human development approach (e.g., Deneulin, 2012), it has been linked to political ecology and debates around sustainability (e.g., Thomson, 2011; Vanhulst and Beling, 2013); it has been discussed in the contexts of novel forms of state-building and legal systems (Ávila

⁸ The famous '*pacha*' meaning 'pa' - eng. 'two' - and '*cha*' - eng. 'all-permeating energy', cf. Estermann, 2013.

⁹ For example, in the cases of the well-known Ecuadorian economists Pablo Dávalos and Alberto Acosta.

Santamaría, 2011a, 2011b). Practical workshops on Buen Vivir have been organized¹⁰ and it has been broadly politicized as an alternative vision to development, to extracting natural resources, for defending indigenous rights (in particular their primordial rights to self-determination, cf. Schulte-Tenckhoff, 2012) and for supporting the essential pillars of the state doctrine of Buen Vivir, 'plurinational' rights, such as multilingual education (Acosta, 2010b; Acosta and Martínez, 2009; Agencia Lationamericana de Información (ALAI), 2008; Houtart, 2009; Maldonado, 2010; Yumbay et al., 2010).

Joining this ongoing and, under the pressure of global crises, intensifying struggle under the flag of Buen Vivir or Sumak Kawsay requires caution. According to *indigenistas*, particularly if one does not know and live according to 'cosmoconsciousness'. In essence, both Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay have voiced serious critiques of mainstream development – and became integrated as viable alternative visions into national political-economies. Their particular value is to point to two sides commonly neglected in development studies: (1) some more inward-related aspects of development linked to (2) their relational connectedness to other humans as well as their natural environment in a more metabolic thinking across generations.

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¹⁰ For example, in Halle (Germany) in autumn 2013: see: <http://www.buenvivir-in-halle.de/>

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