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# The institutionalized *Buen Vivir*: a new hegemonic political paradigm for Ecuador

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## Abstract

*Buen Vivir* has recently emerged in Latin America as an alternative societal model to the historical liberal (or neoliberal) and Marxist ones. The article focuses on its Ecuadorian variant and, more specifically, the institutionalized version embodied in the 2008 Constitution and the policies of the Citizens' Revolution governments. This version is the particular result of the convergence of three different currents and has become the hegemonic ideology in the country. The article describes its main thematic axes and appraises its originality, as well as the theoretical and practical contributions.

**Keywords:** *Buen vivir*, *Sumak Kawsay*, post-development, Ecuador, Citizens' Revolution, XXI-century socialism.

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## Historical context of the emergence of *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador

In the 80s and 90s, Ecuadorian governments implemented a set of neoliberal policies which included tariff reductions, a downsizing of the State, privatizations, labor flexibility, and further development of the oil and mining sector which, combined with high levels of corruption, resulted in a massive rise of poverty and very high levels of social unrest (Marchán 1992; Vos 2000; Larrea 2004). Alternative models to neoliberalism slowly emerged during those years as a process of collective social innovation: proposals were developed within indigenous organizations, NGOs, Catholic sectors attuned to the Liberation Theology, feminist, ecologist and anti-capitalist movements, leftist parties and anti-globalization forums.

They were collected and systematized by a new set of intellectuals, some of them coming from the emerging class of university-educated Indian *intelligentsia*, others from the leftist currents influenced by the poststructuralist and post development schools (De Sousa Santos 2011). It is worth highlighting the leading role of the National Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador (CONAIE). Its political wing, the Pachakutik party, ephemerally came to power in 2002 in an alliance with a movement of progressive former army officers. The definitive regime change came with the electoral victory of Rafael Correa and the so-called Citizens' Revolution in 2006, and the subsequent drafting of a new Constitution at the town of Montecristi that included and sanctioned many of the proposals developed in previous years, institutionalizing them under the name of *Buen Vivir*, a mistranslation of the Kichwa expression *Sumak Kawsay*.

*Buen Vivir* can be considered a particular expression of a more encompassing paradigm that features other ideological variants across Latin America, which stem from the singularities of every local context (Gregor Barié 2014). The same, we contend, can be said of the Ecuadorian *Buen Vivir* itself. Academic analyses on the subject (Capitán et al. 2014; Vanhulst 2015; Cruz 2018) agree it is a multifaceted paradigm. Cruz (2018), in fact, would rather talk of *Buenos Vivires* (plural).

This alleged polymorphic nature seems to be the logical result of the emergence of *Buen Vivir* as a phenomenon collectively constructed by a wide variety of social actors. However, this apparent diversity can be reduced to three main theoretical currents that somehow converged in a consensus institutionalized in the 2008 Constitution, which has become the hegemonic ideology in Ecuador.

The article will first identify the main currents within the Ecuadorian *Buen Vivir* and analyze the relations that exist among them, as well as the process whereby they converged into the constitutional version. Then, it will identify and describe its main themes. In order to achieve these goals, we have undertaken a thorough review of the existing literature, which includes most of the works written by the authors politically engaged with *Buen Vivir*, as well as the more neutral academic studies. The article also uses our fieldwork in indigenous communities in Nabón (Azuay) and Dr. Carpio's inside knowledge of Ecuador's political processes acquired during the years he worked as a political consultant.

In spite of Dr. Carpio's direct connection with some of the political exponents of *Buen Vivir*, it is not the aim of the article to advocate for any of its currents. This is an academic paper that aims at having as neutral a stance as possible in political science.

## The *Buen Vivir's* three souls

We agree with other studies (Capitán et al. 2014; Vanhulst 2015; Cruz 2018; Altmann 2020) that, under the *Buen Vivir* label, three distinctive ideological currents can be singled out. Although there are some overlapping and reciprocal influences, these currents can be ordered,

to a certain extent, on a historical timeline and considered consecutive phases in the development of the institutional *Buen Vivir*:

1) The *Sumak Kawsay*: this is a Kichwa expression whose correct translation would be “full life” but it has been often translated as “good living” (which literally means “buen vivir”) and confusingly used by many authors (Chuji 2009; Dávalos 2011; Acosta 2012) and institutions (SENPLADES 2009) as a synonym for *Buen Vivir*. However, rather than being the same thing, *Sumak Kawsay* can be better understood as an “indianist” pre-existing and parallel version of the institutional *Buen Vivir* (Macas 2010; Capitán et al. 2014). *Sumak Kawsay*, similar to the Bolivian *Suma Qamaña* (an Aymara expression with a similar translation) (Medina 2001), is the product of a revisitation of the worldview, ethics and social practices of the aboriginal Andean cultures by a new emerging class of Indian intellectuals, some of them academics and many others coming from the realm of social movements (Tibán 2000; Vásquez 2002; Viteri 2003).

In the case of Ecuador, the concept was further refined during and after the drafting of the Constitution, with contributions by a younger generation of authors (Chuji 2009; Macas 2010; Chancosa 2010; Freire 2011; Maldonado 2014; Kowii 2014). It is a roadmap to end once and for all the internal colonialism characteristic of Latin American republics, a project of self-determination through which indigenous peoples claim the right to rule themselves by an alternative model that is communitarian, pacifist, anti-materialist – in the sense of putting the bare necessities as the economic priority –, inward-looking towards the local territory, and in animistic ecological homeostasis with it. It is a reinterpretation of the traditional indigenous social practices in the light of postmodern/post-capitalist currents which Indian intellectuals have been absorbing, either consciously or unconsciously, from their broader milieu.

This influence is particularly visible in the gender dimension, with *Sumak Kawsay* advocating a radical agenda of gender equality (Chancosa 2010) that contrasts with the patriarchal nature of traditional indigenous cultures. The indigenous component, nevertheless, gives *Sumak Kawsay* several characteristics the other currents lack: a strong ethnic dimension and an holistic understanding of social relations as a system of reciprocities between people and the environment mediated by a spiritual *ethos* and identity, personal and emotional bonds.

2) The post-development current: nourished by the work of non-indigenous intellectuals (Gudynas 2011; Endara 2014), where the contribution of Alberto Acosta (2008, 2010, 2012), former speaker of the Constituent Assembly, stands out over the rest. Like *Sumak Kawsay*, this current is also the product of cross-pollination between approaches of indigenous and Western origin, only this time it operates in the opposite direction. In a Latin American tradition, that goes back to Flores Magón and Mariátegui, it takes *Sumak Kawsay* as a sort of ideal template for its national political project, but it also acknowledges the impossibility of implementing it in the complex political economies of contemporary Latin American states, with their non-Indian majorities (and even within Indian communities themselves, because they are already deeply transformed by and dependent on this political economy). These authors are not in the least implying that the Indian populations must assimilate and disappear in a new national melting

pot. On the contrary, most of them are in favor of *Sumak Kawsay*, but they also realize that the model cannot be imposed on the non-Indian part of society and, therefore, that other alternative formula must be proposed at the national level.

The influence of the indigenous element is undeniable, but the current's exponents added many other sources to it: "Aristotelian philosophy, Marxism, ecologism, feminism, co-operativism, humanism [...]" (Acosta 2012, 28). In some cases, there is simply an overlap between the indigenous worldview and other principles. The search for harmony between human beings and nature, for instance, is rooted in many philosophical systems at different times and places, such as the Aristotelian concept of the "good life" (Acosta 2012). Some of the most distant influences of this current are found in Eastern political ethics, such as Taoism or *Swaraj*, but the greatest influence is, undoubtedly, the one exerted by ecosocialism (Martínez-Alier 1988; Leff 2002), post-development (Escobar 1992; Latouche 2009; Tortosa 2011), and post-colonial or decolonial theories (Lander 2000; De Sousa Santos 2011).

For this current, *Buen Vivir* is a paradigm that feeds on the deconstruction of the modern episteme (De Sousa Santos 2011) and *breaks equally with the anthropocentric logics of capitalism as a civilization and the various "real" socialisms that have existed until now* (Acosta 2012, 8). It is an alternative to the "*coloniality of having' that intends to reduce the quality of life to a mere issue of consumption levels*" (Acosta 2012, 8). It is an "epistemology of the South" (De Sousa Santos 2011) that can be applied to all societies (Acosta 2012).

3) The technocratic *Buen Vivir*: this is the version promoted by the cadres of the Citizens' Revolution (2007-2017) as a concrete policy development of the Constitution's provisions (Larrea 2010; Ramírez 2010), and it has a continuation in the current Moreno administration. It has also been considered as the Ecuadorian version of the "21<sup>st</sup>-Century Socialism" (Moulian 2000; Barreto 2007). Openly presented to society as grounded on the principles of the other two currents, state policies followed, in fact, a developmentalist template which actually sought to build, through planning and regulation, a redistributive Welfare State (Dávalos 2014). As highlighted by the former undersecretary of SENPLADES (National Secretariat for Planning and Development), it is up to the state to define what *Buen Vivir* is (Larrea 2010), and this entails its operationalization in *public policies aimed at modifying the accumulation, redistribution and distribution schemes [...] in order to overcome the commodities export-oriented model and democratize access to the means of production* (Ramírez 2010, 55).

This approach is criticized by exponents of the other currents and by social and indigenous movements in Ecuador (Fernández et al. 2014; Unceta 2014; De la Torre 2016). All of them accuse the Citizens' Revolution's administrations of having utilized *Buen Vivir* as a tool of political marketing (Fernández et al. 2014) to legitimize a *realpolitik* agenda that, although can boast some undeniable achievements (Unceta 2014), is predominantly developmentalist, extractivist and even authoritarian (De la Torre 2016). The most critical ones (Caria and Martín 2014; Díaz 2018) talk of this *Buen Vivir* as an "empty signifier," as discussed by Laclau and Žižek, an ideology void of any real content.

The most important dissents among the three currents are born from the characteristics and dynamics of the actors promoting each of them: indigenous peoples (current 1), white and mestizo left-wing intellectuals and social movements (current 2), and the state political and technocratic apparatus (current 3). However, the deleterious potentiality these differences could have had for Ecuadorian society were partially avoided through the forging of an institutional version that craftily managed to articulate them in a single framework: the Montecristi Constitution, a legal text that gathered a broad (although incomplete) consensus within Ecuadorian society, to the point of finally becoming a sort of hegemonic ideology shared by a large number of actors, Indians and non-Indians alike.

Through the likes of Alberto Acosta and other influential exponents of the white-mestizo *intelligentsia*, the post-developmental approach had a stronger clout in the process of “constitutionalization” of *Buen Vivir*. Inside the constitutional crucible, *Sumak Kawsay* was reinterpreted as an idiosyncratic version, mainly aimed at the Indian population within their self-administered communities and territories (although some of it can also be applied to certain urban sectors who have recently undergone a partial process of “re-indianization” [Altmann 2013]), of a more overarching postdevelopmentalist paradigm within which *Sumak Kawsay* can exist without renouncing its core principles. As a matter of fact, even many indigenous intellectuals (Chuji 2009; Macas 2010; Maldonado 2014) agree that *Sumak Kawsay* can’t be applied without adjustment outside the Indian communities.

The 2008 Constitution explicitly declares in its preamble – and several other times along the text – that it upholds the principles of *Buen Vivir* and *Sumak Kawsay* alike. As far as the third current is concerned, most of its developmentalist agenda was also explicitly included in the Constitution and even articulated to the other two (Title VI is significantly labelled “Regime of Development”), in what can be considered a very crafty exercise of ideological squaring of the circle. The *Buen Vivir* version promoted by the Correa and Moreno administrations can thus be seen, at least in theory, as one of the possible policy embodiments – the only one having taken place so far – of the constitutional mandate which, like any political praxis stemming from such a general legal framework, is likely bound to diverge from it (due to the unpredictable dynamics and contingencies of any form of power, the actual limitations of social engineering mechanisms and the particular agendas of the leaders steering the political helm).

We will now describe the constituent parts of this constitutional *Buen Vivir*. The tensions between the three currents will be further analyzed in the conclusions section.

## ***Buen Vivir*: a multidimensional systemic paradigm**

The institutional *Buen Vivir* presents itself as a paradigm with a double ideological root (Indian/post-modern poststructuralist) that is legally enshrined in the 2008 Constitution and has been operationalized through policy instruments like the National Plans for *Buen Vivir* (PNBVs).

As a theoretical construct, it is a complex system made up of a series of mutually interdependent subsystems that can be grouped for analysis into the main following ones:

## The System of Diversities

Made up of four elements that reinforce and give feedback to each other:

### Plurinationality

In itself, the notion of plurinationality does not imply a specific political formula: countries such as Belgium, Switzerland or Canada are plurinational states, where their different nations are granted collective rights to assure their coexistence and autonomy within the same state framework, and each one has its own particular model. In the Ecuadorian case, plurinationality has a profoundly de-colonial sense (Acosta 2009; Walsh 2009; De Sousa Santos 2010). It was the indigenous movement, in a joint endeavor involving intense dialogues and feedback with other continental indigenous organizations, who introduced the concept in the agenda (Schavelzon 2015). In their view, the Plurinational Ecuadorian State must be one that *recognizes the indigenous peoples' forms of social and political organization, their judicial systems, their traditional health practices, [and] establishes a coordinated and formal architecture of competences and functions between the state and the Indian political institutions* (Maldonado 2014, 214).

### Collective Rights

*Buen Vivir* incorporates a new generation of rights for the minorities that are considered nations, deepening and developing those included in the ILO 1969 Convention. Collective rights are not in contradiction with individual ones (De Sousa Santos 2009; Caicedo 2012), and their subjects are human groups with a historical differential identity and their own social, economic, political and legal systems. Based on this concept, the Constitution extensively develops these rights for the indigenous peoples (a total of 21 specific rights, art. 57) and extends them to Afro-Ecuadorians (art. 58) and Montubios (art. 59) as a general provision.

On the other hand, though, other forms of cultural diversity are left out of this recognition, such as ethnic groups of immigrant origin (there is a significant community of Asian-Ecuadorians) or gypsies, who are not considered “historical” peoples of Ecuador. Thus, the Constitution reflects the much greater power indigenous peoples wield in the political arena as compared to other ethnic groups, a power that stems from the strength of their organizations, their discursive legitimacy as the aboriginal inhabitants of the country and their demographic weight.

Among the 21 rights granted by article 57 to the indigenous peoples, the most innovative ones are numbers 7 (prior consultation on prospective activities in their territories), 10 (right to apply

customary indigenous justice), 12 (right of protection and development of indigenous knowledge, technology and medicine), 14 (right to a fully developed bilingual intercultural education system) and 16 (representation and participation in state bodies and the design of public policies).

We wish to pay special attention to the so-called Indigenous Justice, as it is a very significant illustration of the inclusion of *Sumak Kawsay* into the institutional *Buen Vivir*, but also of the limitations of its consensus approach, because it is a dimension in which several principles seem to be colliding.

The application of Indigenous Justice has bumped into three obstacles, which stem from the non-systematized nature of its legal corpus, jurisprudence and procedural mechanisms, as well as from the absence of specific legislation regulating the enormous casuistry it generates (Bajaña-Tovar 2019; Ocampo and Sánchez 2016; Flores 2013), such as:

1) Imprecise definition of the practices and concepts that should be classified as “indigenous”: only traditional ones or also present and future legal innovations?

2) Lack of delimitation of the type of offenses and the territorial scope to which it should be applicable: to indigenous individuals anywhere or only in the peasant communities having traditional authorities? To non-indigenous individuals when they commit an offense in an indigenous community, or against an indigenous person?

3) The inexistence of objective criteria to elucidate in which cases the indigenous rules and procedures may be against constitutional provisions and human rights.

Conceptually, Indigenous Justice seeks the reintegration of the offender into the community. In the indigenous worldview, the offender is someone whose soul got sick and, therefore, needs healing rather than punishment. In the words of one informant: “The prison will make the offender even sicker and he will not be able to return to the community as a whole person” (workshop on Indigenous Justice held by the authors in Chontamarca (Cañar province), July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

The actual application of justice, however, entails practices that, from other cultural perspectives, can be perceived as infringing human rights. Procedures such as forcing the defendant to stand half-naked before the community, splashing him with ice-cold water or whipping him with nettles, have been perceived as savage, irrational or primitive, even as a form of torture, by a part of the white/mestizo society, many of whom generally agree with most of the *Buen Vivir* principles, rekindling the historical cultural war within Ecuadorian society (Jinete and Ospina 2014). It is a conflict that the institutional *Buen Vivir* has not yet been able to solve because the successive governments have so far failed (whether purposefully or not is matter of debate) to undertake the necessary reforms in order to functionally articulate Indigenous Justice to the Ecuadorian legal corpus.

In the current state of affairs, the Constitution, article 171, sanctions that Indigenous Justice must be in accordance with its provisions, but this is a very vague statement. In the absence of more specific legislation, the cultural war over Indigenous Justice has resulted in a stream of lawsuits before the Constitutional Court that are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, hindering and slowing the process of institutional consolidation.

## Interculturality

*Buen Vivir* substantially modifies previous concepts of interculturality (Naranjo 2014; Walsh 2009), extending it to collective forms of diversity such as “regional, gender and generational” (SENPLADES 2009, 298). It goes beyond the recognition and protection of cultural differences for non-hegemonic groups to promote the inclusion of these cultures in all dimensions of the social system, especially the public sphere. Even more innovatively, it advocates cross-pollination between cultures, that is, an inverse process of acculturation (at least partial) of the white-mestizo society into the cultural values and practices of the subaltern groups. This is expressed in depth in the first PNBV, through the proposal of policies such as the following:

To include the different cultural worldviews in the transversal design and execution of public policies [...] (among others, the introduction of the traditional indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian medicine in the National Health System). To include in the curriculums at all levels of education contents that [...] revalue the indigenous cultural heritage [...] as well as the contributions of the Afro-Ecuadorian culture [...] To create “pluri-worldview” and multi-disciplinary think tanks and research centers (SENPLADES 2009, 300)

A key piece of the intercultural strategy is the strengthening of the Bilingual Intercultural Education System, which is called to fulfil a new mandate, beyond the mere safeguarding of the “identity security” of indigenous peoples (Kowii 2014). *Buen Vivir* proposes a Copernican turn to white-mestizo society: to recognize the indigenous cultural background as an inseparable part of the Ecuadorian identity, to take the blame for its historical negation, and to undertake a process of “indianization.”

## Participatory Democracy

*Buen Vivir* takes into account the debate on the limits of representative democracy as an effective tool to build equitable societies (Wainwright 2005). The 2008 Constitution dedicates its fourth section to design direct democracy mechanisms that, without completely superseding the representative ones, bridge the conventional divide between political class and civil society, for this separation is considered a breeding ground for corruption and the co-optation of the state by private interests (Viteri 2008).

At the national level, a varied array of control mechanisms were introduced: the accountability of public officials and the citizens’ power to remove them from office, popular consultations and referendums and, most significantly, the Council for Citizen Participation and Social Control, a world-wide political innovation, a Fourth Branch of the State conformed by a non-partisan collegiate body elected by universal suffrage, to audit and control all state entities (Calderón 2015).



At the local level, indigenous collegiate community leaderships (SENPLADES 2009) are recognized, as well as mechanisms such as the “empty chair” (a position reserved for a representative of the civil society in any of the now called Decentralized Autonomous Governments - provinces, municipalities (*cantones*) and municipal districts (*parroquias*) – with executive decision-making powers, but also administrative, civil and criminal responsibility (art. 311 of the Organic Code of Territorial Organization).

## The System of Harmonies

*Buen Vivir* calls for a more harmonious relation between society and nature, based on the three main concepts as follows:

### Biocentrism

*Buen Vivir* aims at overcoming the modern Western instrumental, materialistic and anthropocentric concept of nature – the idea that nature is a passive entity that is there to be controlled and subjected to our will (Inoue and Moreira 2016) –, introducing a constitutional innovation in two ways: legally, because it understands nature as a subject of rights in itself (as compared to the modern legal tradition for which only those capable of having duties can also enjoy rights (Gudynas 2010; Shiva 2011); and culturally, because it introduces the indigenous animistic worldview in the environmental legislation.

The Constitution acknowledges the culturally-construed dimension of the concept of nature (there are as many “natures” as cultural perceptions of the natural environment [Inoue and Moreira 2016]), referring to it both as the physical environment, in the Western sense, and as the *Pachamama* (the Mother Earth, the indigenous transcendental animistic entity), without incurring into a contradiction. One of the implications is the establishment of the concept of Ecological Justice (arts. 72 and 73) that requires, in addition to compensation to the affected populations, the “restoration” of the violated environment by those found guilty of ecological damage (Martínez 2011).

### Reterritorialization

A territory is a fraction of nature subjected to “processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization” by a particular political economy (Herner 2009). *Buen Vivir* applies this concept in a decolonial way (Valladares Pasquel and Boelens 2019) to explain how the relatively harmonious territory built by indigenous societies was first “de-territorialized” and later unharmoniously “re-territorialized” by capitalism, through land privatization, agribusiness,

deforestation, large-scale mining and infrastructure works, spawning social inequalities and suffering (Acosta 2009).

Initially, the victims' reaction focused on the simple reclaiming of the land through agrarian reform, but in the 1980s a new actor, the CONAIE, changed strategy, adopting a more ambitious political goal: the fight for the territory, which "is not simply the agricultural land, but the very root of their identity" (De Sousa Santos and Grijalva 2012). *Buen Vivir* proposes a new "re-territorialization" that rescues the territory from the alienating effects of capitalist developmentalism (Bonilla et al. 2016). This goes beyond the indigenous-centered approach to also include the white-mestizo urban spaces. Cities are also "territories" whose inhabitants have built strong local identities and ways of life that bind them in common projects and are also threatened by different processes of capitalist deterritorialization (urban macroprojects, gentrification, etc.).

## Decentralization

The centuries-old centralism, historically justified by the elites as a necessary tool to articulate the diversity and vastness of the territory inherited from the Spanish Empire, is considered an obsolete burden. Centralism goes beyond the political dimension: it is a cultural praxis that permeates all the nooks and crannies of the territorial architecture, reducing its potential for action (Buendía 2009). Decentralization entails substituting that culture for *a model of individual and social behavior based on self-responsibility and subsidiarity [...] that is currently unknown in Latin America* (Boisier 2005, 48).

*Buen Vivir* decentralization takes on a different meaning from that of some processes of neoliberal re-functionalization, warning that the latter opens the door to a kind of downsizing of the state (Coraggio 2004). *Buen Vivir's* decentralization is a scheme of harmonious articulation between different levels of territorial administration to extend rather than reduce the overall state powers and competences. It is an architecture where high levels of agreement are sought between regional and national objectives and administrations; it implies the participation of citizens from the local level to control and transform the traditional central powers that worked so far to maintain the excluding structures of "maldevelopment" (Boisier 2005; Carpio 2006; Carpio 2015).

In order to build this bottom-up architecture, the Constitution devolves governing competences to the smallest administrative units, the municipal districts (*parroquias*); it allows the creation of indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian autonomous territories with competences akin to provincial administrations; it increases resources and autonomy to municipalities (*cantones*) and provinces, granting them the capacity of mutually associating in bigger umbrella entities while at the same time avoiding the formation of super-regions which could undermine the territorial balance. Finally, it gives the national government the adequate competences for a non-intrusive coordination of the whole territorial architecture (Buendía 2009; Lalander 2011).

## Social and Solidarity-based economy

Completely dismantling the capitalist relations of production in Ecuador would be highly complex and extremely hard to attain, since it would require convergent processes at different levels, including the global scale, and an authoritarian set of initial policies in order to impose the agenda on the very likely opposing capitalist class. *Buen Vivir* learns from the shortcomings of the past Marxist/communist experiences to propose a project aimed at smoothly carrying out a transition towards a post-capitalist world, articulating new economic formulas with the capitalist political economy without hostilely confronting it (Acosta 2012).

In this transition phase, the promotion of a social and solidarity-based economy focused on small and medium-scale cooperative, family or community enterprises plays a paramount role (Acosta 2012; Coraggio 2011). Its function is to supply local markets while at the same time remaining selectively linked to the national and world economy and their big private and state corporations. Capital is not absent from the social economy, and it may even be very necessary, but its main logic is based on collaborative work and the satisfaction of basic needs rather than individual (or collective) capital accumulation (Coraggio 2011). A concrete form of social economy promoted by the PNBVs are the peasant-indigenous practices of solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity linked to *Sumak Kawsay*, fair trade schemes, popular finance programs, the so-called feminist or care economy, and production and marketing cooperatives (SENPLADES 2009).

## The System of Sovereignties

For *Buen Vivir* the concept of sovereignty is not limited to the political dimension. It revolves around a more general capacity of individuals and groups to make decisions according to their own interests and not those of external agents (Martínez and Acosta 2010). The 2008 Constitution places special emphasis on the different dimensions of economic sovereignty (Chapter 4 of Title VI mandates the state to work in this direction), sanctioning that economic policy must be aimed at reducing Ecuador's enormous dependence on foreign capital, technologies and imports. It does not necessarily defend an autarchic approach, but it calls to strengthen Ecuador's own productive fabric through protectionist measures and an economic policy not dictated by foreign interests.

*Buen Vivir* aims at replacing a model based on neoliberalism, extractivism and financial dependence with another where the State regains part of the control over the economy, steering it towards more added-value-generating sectors through energy independence, innovation, imports substitution, technological development and access to productive credit, free of foreign or domestic political patronage (Martínez and Acosta 2010). This is the dimension where the influence of the third current, the technocratic and *realpolitik* vision of *Buen Vivir* is more evident.

The influence of post-developmental ideas, however, cannot be completely dismissed, for *Buen Vivir* also goes beyond the economic dimension of sovereignty to include the rights to a culturally meaningful food supply or the feminist claims for the recovery of women's control over their own bodies.

Below, we look at those specific sovereignties more closely:

## Food sovereignty

Ecuador was the first country to integrate this concept within its constitutional provisions, granting the state the right to define food policies. The constitutional mandate calls for the promotion of food, which is “preferably produced locally and in accordance with Ecuador's diverse identities and cultural traditions” (art. 13). Food sovereignty contributes to *Buen Vivir* because it protects human health by assuring the provision of a fresh, free-of-additives produce, strengthens local economies and identities, fosters agro-ecological production, reduces export-oriented industrial monoculture and, consequently, dependence on a volatile global market (Escobar 2011, Hidalgo et al. 2013).

The achievement of these goals implies substituting imported products with nationally-produced ones, and reducing the current concentration of the food market in the hands of a few big enterprises. Land, water, seeds, phytosanitary products, commercialization, transport, must be managed by putting the general wellbeing of the population first, not the interests of big corporations. In this sense, *Buen Vivir* is in clear opposition to genetically-modified crops (Bravo 2017).

## Financial sovereignty

*Buen Vivir* aims at reducing dependence on multilateral credit agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. As mechanisms to achieve this, it proposes a strong public bank (Mosquera 2013) and a Latin America-wide financial architecture, with a central bank and common currency for all countries in the region (Páez 2010) within the framework promoted by the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) group of countries (Hart-Landsberg 2009).

## Energy Sovereignty

Articles 15, 284 and 304 of the Constitution proclaim energy sovereignty and a fast transition towards renewable sources as an essential axis in the *Buen Vivir* system (Montesdeoca 2011), but it doesn't specify the formula to achieve this goal, and several have been proposed: a decentralized model in which each territory and community walks towards self-sufficiency, and a centralized one in which all energy resources are nationally produced and owned (Di Pietro 2018).

## Sovereignty of the body

*Buen Vivir* is a form of decolonial feminism (León 2008; Carrión 2010; Vega 2014; Varea and Zaragocin 2017). One of its core objectives is to achieve full equality of rights for any person, regardless of their sexual orientation or identity, putting an end to the historically patriarchal state and its hetero-androcentric society. This will only be achieved when there is no appropriation or marginalization of anyone's sex or sexuality, of anyone's bodies, by those who have a male body and a heterosexual orientation.

However, the *Buen Vivir's* most disruptive proposals in this regard were never included in the Constitution or the PNBVs. These are only limited to general provisions for the protection of gender and sexual orientation equality similar to those of any other contemporary democratic state. The most innovative ideas came from social movements such as the National Assembly of Popular and Diverse Women, among whose proposals the following are worth highlighting: a state salary for housewives; regularization of domestic workers by Social Security; public credit institutions only for women; gender parity in all public and private organizations; laws to persecute symbolic violence against women and the LGBT in the media; legalization of sex workers; specialized courts and police precincts against gender violence (Carrión 2013).

## Conclusion

The Ecuadorian *Buen Vivir* has been presented as one of the most original societal paradigms in the history of the Latin American continent. It has been described as a decolonial (Cruz 2018; Varea and Zaragozin 2017), post-development and post-capitalist (Gudynas 2011; Acosta 2010; Endara 2014) project stemming from an epistemology of the subaltern (De Sousa Santos 2011). This paper contends that these adjectives can only be fully applied to the *Sumak Kawsay*, which some authors erroneously make synonym to *Buen Vivir*.

As far as the institutional *Buen Vivir* embodied in the 2008 constitution is concerned, the post-development and decolonial dimensions were somehow watered down in the quest for a middle-ground consensus aimed at accommodating most of the social actors that participated in the fight against the pre-Citizens' Revolution's neoliberal regime. Although the constitutional *Buen Vivir* takes some remarkable steps in that direction (plurinational and intercultural state, Pachamama's rights, Indigenous Justice, social and solidarity-based economy), it cannot be called a truly decolonial and post-development paradigm.

Altmann (2020) has recently suggested that *Buen Vivir* is nothing more than the result of an "appropriation" of *Sumak Kawsay* by the state and the white/mestizo leftist *intelligentsia*. Intellectuals directly linked to the Citizens' Revolution, like Acosta and Gudynas, saw *Sumak Kawsay* as a tool to build their anti-neoliberal paradigm and undertook a process of "epistemological

colonization” in which its indigenous notions were mixed up with others from different sources, without worrying about coherence among them.

There are other arguments pointing in the same direction: this mainstream *Buen Vivir* can be seen as a formula that tames some of the deepest decolonial dimensions of *Sumak Kawsay*, a kind of antidote to deactivate the threat posed to the never-relinquished idea of a unitary national identity by the CONAIE indianist movement, considered by many within the white-mestizo *intelligentsia* as ethnocentric and “backwardly racist,” whose aim it ultimately to establish a separate “Republic of Indians” (Altmann 2013; Ayala 2014). Those fears are exemplarily incarnated in the cultural war triggered by the implementation of Indigenous Justice. The pragmatic argument that *Sumak Kawsay* cannot be structurally imposed to the non-Indians becomes an alibi for asking the Indians to give up part of their notions and ideas to fit an overarching project for the sake of the entire nation.

Seen in this light, the institutional *Buen Vivir* might even be considered a form of colonial and modern paradigm. The very notion of economic sovereignty still entails colonial legacies that relate to anthropocentric possibilities of control over nature. And there are yet other ways in which this *Buen Vivir* is still a normalizing scheme, ironically, with the consent of the indigenous populations themselves: the 2008 Constitution sustains an essentialist and very modern idea of plurinationality, not recognizing collective rights to ethnic groups, such as the Gypsies or the Asian-Ecuadorians, who lack a “pure” or “historical” identity linked to the land and the past. This is yet another form of hegemony that ideologically defines who fits in a state and who remains politically subaltern.

Likewise, the institutional *Buen Vivir* is still quite far from qualifying as a post-development paradigm because it reintroduces the notion of development and growth through the exculpating artifice of making it “sustainable,” “solidarity-based” or “value-added.” In other dimensions of its ecological agenda, its lack of concreteness renders it ineffective. Its advocacy of renewable energy was left, maybe purposefully, undefined by the Constitution and the subsequent legislation, and a centralized, state-promoted energy policy has prevailed so far.

Most analysts agree that *Buen Vivir*’s implementation has been quite limited, its most original principles reduced to the function of “empty signifier” (Caria and Martín 2014; Díaz 2018). The Citizens’ Revolution policies have been indistinguishable from other historical forms of Welfare State developmentalism (Basabe-Serrano 2013; Unceta 2014; Laforge 2016; De la Torre 2016; Escárzaga 2016; Bravo 2017; Chiasson-LeBel 2019).

The originality of *Buen Vivir* is not in its material achievements, but in the ability of its narrative to resonate within a very large political audience, both within Ecuador, Latin America, and globally, precisely because of the powerful and fit-for-all appeal of its hybrid postmodern philosophy, made of indigenous eco-utopian principles that can be somehow reconciled with the Western techno-industrial utopia of progress. And this ability makes it an extraordinarily effective tool of political mobilization. Those are probably the reasons why its discursive principles have permeated Ecuadorian and other Latin American societies, so much in need of an ideological

cement to shore up its past and present divisions, to the point of becoming part of the regional *zeitgeist* of this second decade of the millennium.

Although it has experienced a relative setback in the past few years, with the coming to power of more conservative governments in the region, at least in Ecuador, some of these principles are currently an inescapable narrative, a sort of political aesthetics, for any social movement or political party, even conservative ones (Chiasson-LeBel 2019). In this sense, and in spite of its shortcomings, *Buen Vivir*, by becoming a mainstream ideology in Ecuador, has shown that a society built on alternative pillars to neo-liberalism is, at least, thinkable, imaginable, thus dismantling the neoliberal myth of the inevitability of the “end of history” (Knutsen 1991). That is its great contribution to history.

It is difficult to predict what its future will be in the new scenario that opened after the removal of Correa from the political scene in 2017, or what forms it will take, if it does, in other countries. For the moment, we can only conclude by pointing out that *Buen Vivir* will have to avoid a double threat in order to retain its status as a mainstream ideology: on the one hand, it must keep advocating for the convergence and articulation with the most inclusive, plurinational currents of *Sumak Kawsay*, avoiding being hijacked by those actors who, coming from the field of Indian nativist nationalism, seek to impose an agenda based on an essentialist vision of the indigenous past; on the other, it must avert the selling out to the *realpolitik* logics, where it faces the dangers of being diluted in a simple developmentalism scheme, or even being co-opted by venal or pseudo-progressive political interests.

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