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# **Andean Intercultural Ecosocialism in times of *Buen-Vivir*?**

## **A Red-Green-Culturalist Approach**

Pre-publication version <sup>1</sup>

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### **Introduction**

Amidst an increasingly rejected neoliberalism from the 1990s onwards, nationally organized and internationally connected Indigenous movements strengthened their political positions in Bolivia and Ecuador. Against this backdrop, new left-leaning Andean governments had to invent new formulas for how to bring Indigenous peoples speaking with their own voices under their banner, that is, incorporating them into a unified force. A dominant re-orientation was to introduce a radical model of resource governance, sometimes equated with ecosocialism (Löwy 2014), arguably respecting the rights of nature and the Indigenous peoples, and challenging traditional notions of development understood as economic growth. This approach was incorporated in the new constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009) and was applauded worldwide by ecoactivists and other social movement advocates of social justice and group-differentiated rights. Some observers projected an ecosocialism with a new twist, that overcame the dichotomy between red and green (see Fernandes in this issue), merging not only class struggle and environmental concerns, but also Indigenous knowledges and the Indigenous moral-philosophical conceptualizations of *Sumak Kawsay/Buen-vivir*<sup>1</sup>. For some years, *Buen-vivir* evolved into a red-green-culturalist epistemic-ontological platform, and consequently, an attractive political, strategic and potentially unifying asset for the left.

This study examines how the historical dilemma of creating a unified leftist force has been addressed in contemporary Ecuador, and to a limited extent in Bolivia — that is, in settings marked by politically influential Indigenous movements. In our view, the new constitutions, and particularly the rise of *Buen-vivir* as a political buzzword, fostered a historical opportunity for the

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left to create a common platform giving equal recognition to both universalist and particularistic identities. The new constitutional texts demonstrated that traditional generations of citizenship rights (civil, political and social) had finally coalesced into a uniform call that also included the specific rights of nature/*Pachamama* and the collective rights of Indigenous peoples (Lalander 2014, 2017; Lalander and Lembke 2018). At the discursive and institutional levels, at least, the stage was set for leftist unification.

As it seemed at the time, a common leftist-Indigenous agenda with strong ecological overtones had thus emerged, emphasizing the mid and long-term ambition to leave “the oil in the soil, the coal in the hole, and the gas under the grass.” A window of opportunity had been opened for *Andean Intercultural Ecosocialism*, a notion chosen by us to portray a red-green-culturalist project brought into fruition by means of a common adherence to *Buen-vivir*.

Nevertheless, within a few years it was apparent in both countries that the prospect for a unified agenda was not within immediate reach. What primarily ended this historical opportunity, however, was not the revitalization of long-term ideological contradictions among and between the principal actors. The upshot was rather a deliberate governmental political turn to policies that would jeopardize the prospect for a red-green-culturalist liaison: neo-extractivism<sup>2</sup> and the advancement of the so-called Citizens’ Revolution (*Revolución Ciudadana*), both of which were accompanied by a seeming governmental unwillingness to turn the country in a pluri-national<sup>3</sup> direction.

### **A Hobsbawmian Approach to Particularism-Universalism**

In 1996, Eric Hobsbawm wrote a short text on the challenge of identity politics for left-wing political movements. Although a great number of identity groups had been historically supported by the left, their particularistic worldviews clashed with the universal ambition of the leftist project (Hobsbawm 1996: 42–44).

The political project of the left is universalist: it is for all human beings. However...identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only. This is perfectly evident in the case of ethnic or nationalist movements... The nationalist claim that they are for everyone’s right to self-determination is bogus. That is why the left cannot base itself on identity politics. It has a wider agenda (Hobsbawm 1996: 43).

According to Hobsbawm, the universalistic principle is thus paramount within the overall leftist project. In other words, the project cannot be defined as the sum of multiple identity-based groups giving priority to their own particular rights and cultural expressions. Although such groups frequently have joined the left, such alignments have often been made for short-term tactical reasons. Since their collective identities are negatively defined (us versus them), these groups are accordingly not ready for an unconditional submission to universalism (1996: 40).

We take issue with this claim, arguing that certain universal rights hinge on forms of particularism that should enjoy a priori recognition. Indigenous peoples across the world know that universalism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they may adhere to the principle of respecting and defending universal human values, thus accepting that any order aiming at upholding equal rights must be culturally neutral. On the other hand, their experiences tell them that universalism is rooted in a specific historical hierarchy known to them as neocolonialism. For an Andean left who has taken on the mission of rolling back the heritage of colonialism, aligning with Indigenous movements thus requires some form of particularization of universalism. In this study, the particularization of universalism refers to the process in which the state and dominant non-indigenous society increasingly promote the recognition of indigenous collective rights as a necessity for guaranteeing equal right for all citizens.

Similarly, for Indigenous movements that aspire to join forces with the left, a universalization of particularism is warranted. In this study, the universalization of particularism refers to the process in which ethnically defined peoples include the universal dimension of equal citizenship rights into their political agendas. At stake is not the triumph of universal unity over particularistic diversity or vice versa, but unity in diversity. Moving in that direction not only requires a dismantling of coloniality. It requires the construction of a new social contract, forged within intercultural arenas where top-down state policies intersect with bottom-up societal calls for change.

### **Universalist and Particularist Perspectives of *Buen-vivir***

As previously argued, the rewriting of the Ecuadorian (and Bolivian) constitutions gave legitimacy to a project based on universal and particularistic ideals, on the one hand, and a confluence between

leftist, ethnic and environmental ideas, on the other. More concretely, what took place was a rapprochement between leading Indigenous organizations and the leftist governments of Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia). Because of that alignment, the notion of *Buen-vivir/Vivir-bien* evolved into an important component of the new constitutions and in national politics. *Buen-vivir* is a difficult term to define. In fact, it is a concept in permanent construction and dispute<sup>4</sup> (Le Quang 2017). This fact has given rise to at least three currents of thought on *Buen-vivir*: Indigenous-culturalist, post-development-ecologist, statist-socialist (Cubillo-Guevara, Hidalgo-Capitán, and Domínguez 2014; Le Quang and Vercoutère 2013; Le Quang 2017; Villalba-Eguiluz and Etxano 2017). Despite the evident differences that exist between each current, there is a certain consensus in understanding *Buen-vivir* as an umbrella concept that brings together the set of knowledge and practices that imagine and pursue life forms other than Western modernity, the capitalist system and the discourse of development. *Buen-vivir* is inspired by the cosmo-visions of the original peoples of Latin America, with special emphasis on the communion between human beings and nature (Walsh, 2008). At the same time *Buen-vivir* suggests that the ideal of a way of life is one that is “in harmony with oneself, with society and with nature” (Cubillo-Guevara, Hidalgo-Capitán, & García-Álvarez 2016: 36). Under a social change approach, the *Buen-vivir* can be understood as an intercultural political project (Vanhulst 2015) where, theoretically, three principles can converge (Cubillo-Guevara et al. 2016): sustainability, demanded by ecologists (green); identity, demanded by the Indigenous peoples (culturalist); and equity, demanded by the less favored classes (red). For the governments, the notion was ambitiously defined, encompassing red, green and culturalist ambitions. In the Ecuadorian case, this convergence was further accentuated in the *National Development Plan for Buen-Vivir* (PNBV) for 2013-2017.

Some stressed that the rapid ascendance of the notion had turned *Buen-vivir* into an ambivalent political term (Bretón-Solo, Cortez, and García 2014). The PNBV, for example, advocated a mix between individualism and collectivism/communalism, thus signaling a shift away from a strict Hobsbawmian version of universalism. At the same time, the plan put forth a rather traditional view in which communalism was essentially equated with Western-based nationalism and socialism. Accordingly, the initial post-constitutional impression that the government and the Indigenous movement would approach each other by means of a double discursive transformation — a particularization of universalism and a universalization of particularism — was soon brought into question. As it seemed, critics argued, the governments had brought an Indigenous

terminology into the day-to-day political jargon, though adapting it to a model still largely constructed on universalism above particularism.

We argue that *Buen-vivir* gradually developed into a “floating signifier” (Laclau 2005). That is a signifier used, interpreted and defined differently by different and rivalling political actors in their political endeavors to (re)construct identities, struggles and antagonisms — a signifier floating in between different dominant political projects in search of how society ought to be structured. Indeed, this elasticity even convinced the government that it could stick to it while simultaneously encouraging an incremental turn towards a “highly extractivist and modernist model based on bureaucratic and technocratic logics” (Alonso-González and Macías-Vázquez 2015: 315). Accordingly, in the aftermath of the constitutional enactments, the interpretation of *Buen-vivir* took different pathways, causing an increasing polarization between universalistic and particularistic interpretations. For the Indigenous movements, the governments had turned *Buen-vivir* into a concept roughly equal to welfare policies for the poor. In their view, the governments had inserted it into a discourse which propagated for a continuous attack on nature. As it seemed, *Buen-vivir* had lost its galvanizing potentiality.

In our view, the problem *was not* that *Buen-vivir* increasingly came to serve as a floating signifier. Many political concepts acclaimed by the left have first emerged in floating forms. Only with time have concepts like democracy and citizenship acquired more fixed meanings, through popular resistance and governmental reforms. In fact, floating signifiers may possess an important and adequate function when it comes to joining apparently contradictory epistemological-ontological perspectives into a common political movement. *Buen-vivir* had that capacity, particularly after having been incorporated into central paragraphs of the new constitutions.

The problem was instead that the leftist governments (Ecuador and Bolivia) in political practice and rhetoric started to desert from the project of *Buen-vivir*. As an immediate counter-response, the Indigenous movements, in turn, largely abandoned their efforts to approach the government. From being an open-ended concept with great potentiality to serve as a tool for leftist unification and for Andean intercultural ecosocialism, *Buen-vivir* bifurcated into two diametrically different interpretations: one emphasizing universalism above particularism, one stressing particularism above universalism.

## **The Citizens' Revolution and Neo-extractivism**

As argued in the introduction, a window of opportunity for a unified left had been opened as a result of the constitutional incorporation of Indigenous moral-philosophical conceptualizations and traditions. However, only a few years after the triumphant ascendance of *Buen-vivir* as the *leitmotif* for a red-green-culturalist project, the concept had seemingly lost its unifying potential. Focusing on Ecuador, we argue that loss of strength of *Buen-vivir* is associated with a dual governmental reorientation: toward a political novelty known as the Citizens' Revolution and toward an increasing focus on progressive extractivism.

The Citizens' Revolution emerged as the centerpiece of the political program of the PAIS-Correa administration. It rested on the duality of class and individual citizenship (citizenization<sup>5</sup>) and called for social de-sectorization, that is, the identification of everybody as citizens by means of abolishing social stratifications along the lines of ethnicity, religion, gender, etcetera. With its individualist and modernist ambitions, the revolution aimed at constructing state-society relations that were not rooted in ethnic, religious, gender-based cleavages (e.g. Ospina and Lalander 2012). In this sense, it collided with the constitutional affirmation of the pluri-national state and the recognition of the collectivistic practices and traditions of ethnically defined peoples. An important purpose was also, allegedly, to weaken an Indigenous movement that had acquired significant mobilizing capacity and discursive coherence. With its attack on collectivism, pluri-nationality and local autonomy, the Citizens' Revolution added to an already-infected relationship between the Correa administration and the Indigenous movement. Leading representatives of the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement interpreted citizenization as an attempt by the Correa-PAIS political movement to divide their organizations and co-opt their leaders (Ospina and Lalander 2012). For them, a new and progressive ethno-ecological vocabulary had largely turned into constitutional cosmetics, including the notion of *Buen-vivir*.

Turning to the second reorientation of the Correa administration, toward progressive extractivism, it is worth repeating that the constitution was initially cherished worldwide for recognizing the cultural particularities of the Indigenous communities and for its commitment to protect nature, even declaring nature as a subject of rights. It soon became evident, however, that the implementation of the red-green-culturalist agenda was severely circumscribed by powerful economic and political interests related particularly to key strategic sectors of the national economy, such as hydrocarbons and mining. In previous research, this contradiction has

metaphorically been referred to as a straitjacket for progressive governments. Although the constitutionally recognized ethnic and environmental rights may have been anchored in good intentions and serious political commitments, they were increasingly perceived as, at best, long-term political visions. The new message was instead that their immediate realization would hamper the ability of the governments to carry through necessary and progressive welfare policies by means of revenues derived from extractive industries (Lalander 2014). Today, Indigenous movements, energized by constitutional promises, are increasingly placing themselves at loggerheads with the *realpolitik* of extractivist-based welfare policies which, in their view, not only threaten fragile biosystems but also local cultures and societies.

As an additional consequence of this reorientation towards an exceedingly extractivist model, representatives of the Indigenous movement began voicing the concern that *Buen-vivir*, alongside other Indigenous principles such as pluri-nationality and interculturality, had been symbolically appropriated (co-opted) by the government (Ospina and Lalander 2012), so as to serve as developmental neologisms in a discursive apparatus legitimizing extractive policies and citizenization. As the route towards pluri-nationality and intercultural ecosocialism was increasingly truncated, two separate interpretations of *Buen-vivir* surfaced. Whereas the Indigenous movement turned to connotations rooted primarily in particularistic and ethnically-centered understandings of political relationships, nature and mankind — simultaneously somewhat downplaying welfare universalism and Hobsbawmian leftism — the government preferred to interpret *Buen-vivir* as a mere appendix to social rights. *Buen-vivir* became, in the official discourse, something that could be achieved, at least in the short-run, by an extractivist reorientation.

The marginalization of traditional Indigenous grievances as a result of a Citizens' Revolution financed by expansive progressive extractivism is perhaps best exemplified by looking at the conflicts that emerged between the government and its transnational allies, on the one hand, and Indigenous communities, on the other. In the table below, we have selected three well-known cases to exemplify these conflicts (Table 1).<sup>6</sup>



**Table 1. Cases of conflict due to extractive policies in Ecuador**

<i>Public Policy</i>	<i>Constitution 2008</i>	<i>Cases (examples)</i>	<i>Conflicts</i>
<b>Mining Policy</b>	Art. 57, 71-74, 317, 408.	<i>Quimsacocha</i> Project; <i>Mirador</i> Project.	Collective/Indigenous rights; agricultural degradation; human displacements; water degradation; diseases.
<b>Hydrocarbon Policy</b>	Art. 57, 71, 74, 317, 407-408.	<i>Yasuní</i> -ITT (oilfields).	Rights of nature; Rights of Indigenous peoples and peoples in voluntary isolation; biodiversity; environmental pollution.
<b>Agribusiness Policy</b>	Art. 60, 281-282, 318, 411.	Monocrops of Banana; Sugar Cane; African Palm; floriculture.	Land-grabbing; access to water; small-scale versus large-scale agriculture.

Prepared by the authors

For our purposes, it is important to repeat that the notion of *Buen-vivir* was, following the constitutional rewriting, inserted in two distinct lines of argument, the first seeing it as the end goal of policies giving primacy to extractivism, the second associating it with the very resistance against such policies. A line of demarcation had emerged between universalistic citizenship-based and particularistic ethnicity-based versions of *Buen-vivir*. In *Mirador*, *Quimsacocha*, *Yasuní* and various sites of agribusiness expansion, the left was divided as was also the notion of *Buen-vivir*.

### **Concluding Reflections: *Buen-vivir* as an Andean Intercultural Ecosocialism**

Thus far, we have argued that *Buen-vivir* represents a concept and discourse that seemingly managed to capture the idea of a harmonious red-green-culturalist co-existence. To a certain degree it also captured the optimistic idea that a window of opportunity had finally been opened for true and meaningful post-liberal politics. Still, as soon as *Buen-vivir* had gained broader public legitimacy, it was increasingly inserted into a particular statist reorientation toward citizenization and extractivism. Hence, what eventually ended a historical opportunity for leftist unity was not primarily inherent ideological contradictions but a deliberate governmental turn to policies that undermined the red-green-culturalist agenda. In addition, we must consider that closing the circle between theory and practice has been a weakness for the Ecuadorian left that appeals to interculturality<sup>7</sup>, since both the political project of *Buen-vivir*, as well as state action, have

coexisted under restrictions in a modern/colonial capitalist system. The challenge is to learn from the experience of the last ten years and to continue with the theoretical improvement of the concept of *Buen-vivir* as well as with the discussion of revolutionary ecological politics (see Ravensbergen in this volume).

Drawing on a Hobsbawmian approach, we have identified two current interpretations of *Buen-vivir*. The first stresses that the agenda must be inserted into a general framework prioritizing universalism above particularism, while the second claims that the road towards universalism and societal equity requires a recomposition of state-society relations in accordance with a formula giving initial preference to particularism above universalism. In our view, neither of these interpretations answer to the call for unity in diversity — an ambition that must be in the forefront of leftist unification. Before the partition of *Buen-vivir* into two distinct significances, (unity above diversity and diversity above unity,) the notion harbored such a potential symbiosis. Today, the initial vision of a joint, harmonious, red-green-cultural project has been torn apart by increasing state-societal animosity. This essay does not give preference to either the universalist or the particularist version of a red-green-culturalist agenda, though it suggests that the division into two distinct *Buen-vivir* interpretations assisted in closing a unique window of opportunity for leftist unification.

A central problem with *Buen-vivir* is accordingly that it has so far been *too* floating. At the same time, some degree of floatingness is unavoidable and even necessary, considering the different epistemic-ontological standpoints of involved actors. In a previous study, Mathieu Le Quang and Tamia Vercoutère (2013) proposed a beneficial fusion of *Buen-vivir* and ecosocialism. We hold that acknowledging the complexity of the red-green-culturalist quandary requires a systematic juxtaposition of ecosocialism and *Buen-vivir/Vivir-bien*, paying attention to both tensions and compatibilities between them (Lalander and Lembke 2018).

Our idea of Andean Intercultural Ecosocialism follows this line of reasoning. It proposes a way to overcome the polarization between universalism and particularism through a vision anchored in eco-socialism and a position rooted in two processes: 1) a decolonial reconstruction of universalism, moving away from monocultural, Eurocentric and neoliberal understandings of state and nation, and, simultaneously, 2) a universalization of particularism, that is, an expansion and de-indigenization of *Buen-vivir*. Moreover, in combining class, ethnicity and ecologism, Andean Intercultural Ecosocialism is perceived as a societal project rather than a statist one.

The inclusion of *Buen-vivir* into the constitutional text could have been a step towards a redefinition of universalism, thus fueling the possibility of a new national identity from below. Such an interpretation of *Buen-vivir* would still embody a certain elasticity, (it would float,) but it would be far from empty and far from a tool to co-opt and disarm an Indigenous movement. In this context, some questions remain. Could diversity be an element in a project seeking the reconstruction of national identity? How floating or elastic must a concept like *Buen-vivir* be in order to serve as a unifying notion within such a project? Our conviction is that a floating signifier may serve as a tool in opposed political doctrines, but that it may also be used as a vehicle for bringing former combatants into a broader (leftist) political movement.

Finally, for such a movement to materialize in Ecuador, we argue, *Buen-vivir* must be inserted into an overall project seeking unity in diversity. If adhering to such a project, the state and the Indigenous movement may jointly address the complex process of inclusive nation-building from below.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Buen-vivir* (Spanish) and *Sumak Kawsay* (Kichwa) are the conceptual labels used in Ecuador, whereas in Bolivia the corresponding concepts are *Vivir Bien* (Spanish) and *Suma Qamaña* (Aymara). Regarding the translation of *Sumak Kawsay* into *Buen-vivir*, we should mention that several academics and Indigenous intellectuals have criticized this simplification. For more details of the semantic differences between *Sumak Kawsay* and *Buen-vivir* see Lalander and Cuestas-Caza 2017; Cuestas-Caza 2018.

<sup>2</sup> In this text, we define extractivism as “the extraction of natural resources, in large volume and intensity, mainly to be exported as raw materials” (Gudynas 2015 13).

<sup>3</sup> In this text, pluri-nationality refers a concept that seeks to overcome the condition of racism, exclusion and violence that characterizes the modern nation-state. Pluri-nationality seeks recognition and extension of the rights of ethnic minorities (self-determination, collective rights, territory, self-government), while seeking the redefinition of the social contract, through unity in diversity (Chuji, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> For further interpretations of the different versions of *Buen-vivir*, see e.g. Cubillo-Guevara, Hidalgo-Capitán and Domínguez 2014; Bretón-Solo, Cortez and García 2014; Domínguez, Caria, and León 2017; Lalander and Cuestas-Caza 2017; Lalander and Lembke 2018.

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<sup>5</sup> In this study, citizenization refers to the establishment of a political order in which individuals - not collectives - are key political subjects and primary recipients of state distributed rights.

<sup>6</sup> Due to space limitations we will not go into details in the empirical cases (see, for example, Ospina and Lalander 2012; Sánchez-Vázquez, Leifsen, and Verdú-Delgado 2017; Silveira et al. 2017).

<sup>7</sup> In this text, interculturality refers to the construction of harmonious inter-ethnic relationships in societies characterized by diversity, while simultaneously acknowledging the historical and current existence of racism and discrimination. Such inter-ethnic coexistence is perceived as something that in the long run strengthens society (Walsh 2008).

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