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BETWEEN POLICIES AND LIFE: THE POLITICS
OF BUEN VIVIR IN CONTEMPORARY ECUADOR

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Abstract

The emergence of *Buen Vivir* as a political project can be thought of as the result of the confluence of two processes: (i) the cumulative struggles of highly organised indigenous movements against the implementation of neoliberal policies and (ii) the emergence of a popular centre-left government implementing public policies through state institutions. The emergence and rise of *Buen Vivir* has been the result of political action. It is possible to identify definitions stressing and highlighting different aspects according to the interests, goals, and visions of the actors supporting them. The objective of this paper is to identify what elements are put at the centre of these definitions in order to draw political boundaries between forces.

Introduction

Buen Vivir¹ is generally defined as forming part of the Andean indigenous cosmology representing, in broad terms, a particular vision of society, relationship with nature, entailing a radical questioning of colonialism, the dominant development model, and modern institutions². In brief, Buen Vivir expresses a harmonious relation between humans, on the one hand, and humans and nature, on the other. Authors such as Gudynas (2011) and Thomson (2011) argue that the idea of Buen Vivir exists, with slight differences in meaning, in several indigenous groups in Latin America (Kichwa, Aymara, Mapuche, and Guaraní groups). Nonetheless, it is in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia where Buen Vivir has recently obtained a distinct symbolic, political and also legal status. In both countries the call in 2006 for a Constituent Assembly by popularly elected governments was supported by different sectors of civil and political society mobilised around a public debate on the type of social, political and economic relationships upon which the social order had to be constructed. As a result, Buen Vivir was incorporated as the guiding principle of the new national constitution (in the case of Ecuador in 2008 and Bolivia in 2009), being in turn translated into categories of policies, goals, and rights. This inclusion has been widely regarded as a historical moment and an unprecedented opportunity for change (Escobar, 2010; Walsh, 2010). For the first time an idea rooted in indigenous knowledge facilitated the convergence of multiple debates (stemming from indigenous cosmologies, competing academic models of development, and so on) in the production of an alternative discourse challenging the dominant neoliberal model of wealth creation and political governance.

¹ Buen Vivir (Spanish, usually translated as “living well” or “collective well living) is a hallmark of Andean culture. *Sumak Kawsay* (Kichwa) is the indigenous name for what is known in Spanish as Buen Vivir. ‘*Sumak*’ means ‘beautiful’, ‘good’, ‘tenderness’, and ‘perfect’. The meaning of ‘*Kawsay*’ is ‘to dwell’ and ‘to live with others’ (Albó, 2009, Salgado, 2010). Its antonym is *Waqcha* (Kichwa) meaning ‘orphan’ or ‘abandoned’. These terms denote a strong relational component.

² Acosta, 2008; Medina, 2008; Tortosa, 2009; Cortez, 2009; Fernandez, 2009; Albó, 2009; Hernandez, 2009; Gudynas, 2009; Chiroque Solano and Mutuberría Lazarini, 2009; Salgado, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Misoczky, 2011; Giovannini, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012.

In the particular case of Ecuador, the inclusion of Buen Vivir into the national constitution was the result of more than two decades of social and political struggles mainly led by the indigenous movement. However, in 2005, the last popular uprising put Ecuador in the spotlight. After two decades of popular revolts, street blockades, and elected presidents overthrown of their positions, the last of the popular uprisings brought the ‘*forajidos*’ (the outlaws) to the Ecuadorian political and social scene. They represented the majority of people in Ecuador regardless of their political, social, class, ethnic, or cultural membership. The *forajidos* proclaimed the end of the neoliberal era in the country. More than a decade of structural adjustments, privatisations, dollarization of the economy, rise of poverty and inequality, and a massive wave of migration had left the country in a profound crisis. As in many countries of the region, in Ecuador neoliberal economic policies were implemented with little consideration of social costs (Abouharb and Cingranelli, 2006). But whilst for more than a decade people manifested on the streets (mainly led by the indigenous movement), it was in 2005 when the people demanded the end of the neoliberal model of governance in the country. This demand has triggered a process of uneven transformation encompassing new forms of governance, economic structuring and social mobilisation, in which continuities as well as ruptures with neoliberalism can be identified (Ferrero, 2014; Goodale and Postero, 2013). This process reflects Ecuador’s response to neoliberal hegemony and its attempt of articulation of alternatives to it.

The above mentioned processes of change have been introduced in a context of increasing tensions between government and indigenous movements mainly in relation to the exploitation of natural resources. The rise of Rafael Correa³ who won the presidency in 2006 and was re-elected in 2013, together with new social forces

³ Born in Guayaquil in 1963 and having received higher education abroad, until the beginning of the new millennium the economist Rafael Correa was a political outsider. After teaching in one of the most elite universities of Ecuador, the *Universidad San Francisco de Quito*, Correa positioned himself as part of a new generation of economists seeking alternatives to the dominant neoliberal orthodoxy. He served for a brief term (three months) as minister of economy during Palacio’s government (2005-2007), by which time he had secured public recognition backed by a new and eclectic citizen movement comprising intellectuals, NGOs members and activists. This group later formed the political movement *Alianza Pais* (Country Alliance).

seeking to reorganise the political arena accompanied an apparent decline in the fortunes of the indigenous movement. Some scholars argue that this decline was due to the lack of representativeness of indigenous discourse in a new political and social situation (Becker, 2008; Simbaña, 2009; Ospina Peralta, 2009). The movement's political and organisational fragmentation and its increasingly narrow focus on ethnic issues, plus a low political performance of the indigenous political party Pachakutik led to public discredit and loss of leadership in the public arena. Correa and *Alianza Pais* (Country Alliance) put forward the idea of a *Revolución Ciudadana* (citizen's revolution). The emphasis was placed on universal rights. Ospina Peralta (2009) explains that Correa's strategy was to draw on a discourse which represents universalism instead of corporatism. By contrast, indigenous organisations manifested their opposition to the idea of a "citizen's revolution", which has a homogenizing and universalizing effect.

It was in this context that the idea of Buen Vivir was subjected to a systematic semantic dispute which in turn, I argue, reveals a process of rationalization that ultimately determined political actors' strategic differentiation. Groups of intellectuals, grassroots activists, indigenous organisations, civil society organisations, international networks of academics and members of political parties were among the multiplicity of social agents re-designing the principles, nature and meanings of Buen Vivir. In effect, Buen Vivir became radically disputed and, in doing so, it instituted in practice a real space for democratic deliberation proper. It was in this space of deliberation where Buen Vivir became the symbol of an alternative to neoliberal mainstream sought by the Ecuadorian people. Since then Buen Vivir has been used to represent the alternative to the neoliberal model, to development and its idea of progress and modernisation, to the capitalist system and even modernity as a whole. It is in this scenario that Buen Vivir emerged as a socio-political and identitarian concept (Altmann, 2015). Whilst its existence can be traced back before the Constituent Assembly in different publications written mainly by indigenous intellectuals (Viteri, 2002; Acosta, 2002; Sarayaku, 2003), it is at the Constituent Assembly that this idea becomes the representative of broad demands for change, and

a central political concept around which different discourses have been woven (Hidalgo-Capitan and Cubillo-Guevara, 2014).

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to trace and identify what elements are highlighted and put at the centre of these discourses in order to draw political boundaries between competing forces. Different political forces have tried to appropriate the idea of Buen Vivir since its gestation and inclusion in the national constitution. The power struggle developed since the Constituent Assembly shows that there is no common understanding on Buen Vivir. On the contrary, it is possible to identify a number of definitions stressing and highlighting different aspects according to the interests, goals, and visions of the actors supporting them. In the struggle over meaning, actors claim the ownership of this idea, the truthiness of their definition, and discredit the definition given by opponents. This makes Buen Vivir a porous and malleable concept, a symbol of the struggles at stake in contemporary Ecuador which redefine areas of inclusion and exclusion of the political sphere. Each group (especially those who are identified with the left spectrum) uses it with an agenda-setting purpose according to their own interests, defending the authenticity and legitimacy of their own definition while at the same time attacking the definitions given by political opponents.

The paper is organised in two main parts. The first part discusses the early definitions of Buen Vivir given mainly by indigenous intellectuals and the ones appearing in legal documents. The reactions and consequences arising from these definitions are then analysed. The second part deals with the subsequent strategic rationalisation of Buen Vivir by different agents. The argument here is that the battle over the meaning and ownership of this political concept serves to define political boundaries between different stakeholders who are in dispute for occupying places of power in a process of renewal of the political scene in Ecuador. This paper pays detailed attention to the most relevant agents on Buen Vivir in contemporary Ecuador. It particularly pursues a socio-political analysis of the relation between the indigenous movement and the government of Rafael Correa as representative of the State in Ecuador, which is here

named as *the Political Process of Buen Vivir*. This permits to avoid the temptation of considering only one collective as the exclusive agent of history and the embodiment of its truth (Coronil, 2007).

The work of distinction between alternative discourses of Buen Vivir has been done mainly drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with indigenous movement organisation's representatives, governmental officials, political movements' representatives, environmental organisations and academics. These interviews were carried out by the author through fieldwork in Quito between June and December 2014. In relation to document analysis, the analysis of official documents deriving from the State was mainly focused on official reports published by governmental organisations such as the two national development plans (2009-2013 and 2013-2017). There were also analyses of important laws (Mining Law, Hydrocarbons Law, and Water Law). In relation to content analysis, mass-media outputs, primarily Ecuadorian national and local newspapers and television news programmes were used⁴.

1. Buen Vivir as political banner: first definitions

Analysts of Buen Vivir explain that the 'good life' can only be reached with others through the praxis of solidarity, reciprocity and communion. 'Living better' is rejected as a common goal as 'better' implies, for the indigenous philosophy, 'in comparison with others'- and most of the time, at the expense of others (Medina, 2008). Buen Vivir expresses a harmonious relation between humans, on the one hand,

⁴ Sampling was mainly based on dates (2005 –rise of Rafael Correa as political leader - to the present). Coding was mainly made in terms of subjects and themes. I had online access to Ecuadorian newspapers: **El Universo**: one of the most important newspapers in Ecuador. Ideology: liberal – right wing. Since 2010 in open confrontation with Rafael Correa who filed a libel complaint against the three owners of the newspaper and one journalist. The newspaper was sentenced to pay Correa US\$ 42 million in damages. The same year Correa pardoned the newspaper. **El Comercio**: second biggest newspaper, it covers news mainly from Quito, Guayaquil and Cuenca. Ideology: liberal. Opposite to Correa's government, it supports the presidential candidate Guillermo Lasso (right wing- former banker- currently he occupies the second position in opinion polls). **Ecuador en vivo.com**: online newspaper. Ideology: progressive, left-wing. It is a strong supporter of Alberto Acosta and Unidad Plurinacional de las Izquierdas. **El Telégrafo**: state-owned newspaper, it is a strong supporter of the Citizen Revolution and Rafael Correa's government. I had access to Ecuadorian radios: Radio El Telégrafo, Radio La Prensa, CRE Satelital 560 AM, Radio Sucre, Coordinadora de Radio Popular Educativa del Ecuador; and TV Channels: Gama TV, Ecuador TV, Cablevisión, Ecuavisa, Telesur TV.

and humans and nature, on the other. It forms part of a cosmology that interrelates ‘beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living’ (Walsh 2010: 18). The multiple dimensions of life cannot be conceived in any other way than intertwined; Buen Vivir encompasses all without hierarchies. Salgado (2010) explains that ‘according to the Andean culture’s view, the final objective of human activity is not power or money accumulation, but the nurturing of a tender, harmonious and vigorous life – a Sumak Kawsay- both for humanity and Mother Earth: the Pachamama’ (Salgado, 2010: 200-201).

Since its inclusion into the Ecuadorian (2008) and Bolivian (2009) national constitutions, Buen Vivir has become the focus of a discourse permeating the most prominent political narratives, dominating debates on counter-hegemonic projects in the region, and it has stimulated an ever-growing body of work by academics, journalists and activists. The writing of a new national constitution was a demand raised by indigenous and worker’s movements, leftist parties and activists in the previous two decades. In 2007 a national referendum⁵ (approved by 80 per cent of Ecuadorian voters) finally led to the call for the Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly summoned 130 delegates. *Alianza Pais* (Movement Country Alliance, the political movement led by Rafael Correa) obtained the majority of seats (74) whilst leftist parties (including the indigenous political party Pachakutik) obtained 10 per cent of seats. Even though indigenous and leftists’ organisations secured only minimum representation in the Assembly, their demands were the symbol of the anti-neoliberal struggle and overwhelmingly set the agenda of the assembly, such as the acknowledgement of Ecuador as Plurinational; the control, regulation and restriction of the extractive economy (Ecuador’s economy is heavily dependent on oil extraction, mining activities and the exportation of primary goods: mainly cocoa, coffee, banana and flowers); the implementation of land redistribution, among others. The writing of a new constitution⁶ was seen both by Correa’s

⁵ The referendum took place on 15th April 2007. It consisted of only one question: “Do you approve the convocation and installation of a plenipotentiary Constituent Assembly in accordance with the electoral statute attached hereto in order to transform the institutional framework of the state and to draw up a new constitution?” http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6315000/6315555.stm

⁶ So far, Ecuador has had 20 national constitutions (SENPLADES, 2010: 27)

government and civil society actors as a historic moment marking the possibility of re-founding the State (Escobar, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Houtart, 2010; Gudynas and Acosta, 2011; Hidalgo Flor, 2011; Misoczky, 2011; Thomson, 2011; Dávalos, 2012).

In recent years a group of authors including Mignolo (2000, 2003), Quijano (2000), Grosfoguel (2005) Escobar (2007, 2010), Walsh (2008), Blaser (2009) and de la Cadena (2010) have been working on the idea of *decoloniality* to understand and explain changes, transformations and future horizons in Latin America. The so-called decoloniality approach has been particularly interested in the examination of Buen Vivir due to the epistemological and ontological rupture in relation to Western epistemologies brought about with its emergence (Acosta, 2008; Gudynas, 2009; Gudynas and Acosta, 2011 Thomson, 2011). Due to its indigenous roots and its philosophical and spiritual underpinnings, the concept of Buen Vivir is placed by these analysts at an ontological level from where alternative epistemologies (to dominant Western ones) can be developed. This positioning allows them to define it as the representation of an alternative to modernity, and as a decoloniality turn.

The primary premise here is that European colonization and the making of the capitalist world-system have been constitutive elements of modernity in Latin America (Blaser, 2009). Following Quijano's work (2000), Escobar (2007) and Walsh (2008) explain this in terms of a 'coloniality matrix' formed by four dimensions: (i) coloniality of power; (ii) coloniality of knowledge; (iii) coloniality of being; and (iv) coloniality of nature (see Maturana and Varela, 1987; Latour, 1993; de la Cadena, 2010). The result of the application of the 'coloniality matrix' in Latin America is a capitalist, Christian, colonial and modern framework of society at the expense of alternative worldviews and cultural models. Buen Vivir represents here the latter, and its inclusion in the national constitution symbolises the possibility of breaking with the former. Authors working on the concepts of Buen Vivir and decoloniality propose situating the analysis on the borders of modern epistemology, what Mignolo (2000, 2005) calls 'border thinking' locating itself 'in the very borders of systems of thought reaching towards the possibility of non-Eurocentric modes of thinking, and counter to

the great modernist narratives (Christianity, liberalism, and Marxism)' (Escobar, 2007: 180).

After the Constituent Assembly in Ecuador (2008), mainstream publications on Buen Vivir followed the reasoning proposed by the cluster of authors working from the decoloniality approach. In most of these publications it is more common to find the concept of Sumak Kawsay (in the original Kichwa language) instead of Buen Vivir (its Spanish translation). These analyses⁷ work on the meaning of Sumak Kawsay with a strong normative component. A unified and single definition tends to be presented (although it is acknowledged that the idea of the 'good life' can be found in different indigenous cosmologies – Guarani, Ashuar, Mapuche). In most of these studies the concept of Buen Vivir is presented in an essentialising manner conceptualizing 'the indigenous' as a homogenous unity and indigenous knowledge as preserved in a state of 'purity' (not contaminated by modernity). There is little contextualisation about those who define and mobilise this particular definition on Buen Vivir, the socio-political history of these groups, and how they interact and participate in the political process.

In turn, official documents such as the Ecuadorian constitution and the development plan *Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir, Construyendo un Estado Plurinacional e Intercultural 2009-2013* (National Plan for Good Living, Building a Plurinational and Intercultural State 2009-2013) presents Buen Vivir as the main goal of development.

Article 275. The development structure is the organised, sustainable and dynamic group of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems which underpin the achievement of *the good way of living (sumak kawsay)*...*The good way of living* shall require persons, communities, peoples and nationalities to effectively exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities within the framework of interculturalism, respect for their diversity, and harmonious coexistence with nature (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, Title VI, chapter I; italics in the original).

The constitution introduces the *Buen Vivir* regime. This regime has two main components: the first one is the *Socio-Political* (articles 340-394) related to issues of

⁷ Acosta (2008); Medina (2008); Tortosa (2009); Cortez (2009); Fernandez (2009); Albó (2009); Hernandez (2009); Gudynas (2009); Chiroque Solano and Mutuberría Lazarini (2009); Salgado (2010); Walsh (2010); Farah and Vasapollo (2011); Giovannini (2012); Oviedo Freire (2014).

inclusion and equity. This component resonates in areas such as health, education, social security, culture, leisure, social communication, local knowledge, and human security (article 340). The second is the *Environmental* component (articles 395-415) related to biodiversity and natural resources: nature and the environment, biodiversity, natural assets and ecosystems, natural resources, soil, water, natural heritage, urban ecology, alternative energy (Cortez, 2009; Gudynas, 2011).

Article 395... The State shall guarantee a sustainable model of development, one that is environmentally balanced and respectful of cultural diversity, conserves biodiversity and the natural regeneration capacity of ecosystems, and ensures meeting the needs of present and future generations (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Title VII, Chapter II, Section I).

In addition, the constitution specifies the ‘rights of the good way of living’: water and food security; a healthy environment (‘Energy sovereignty shall not be achieved to the detriment of food sovereignty nor shall it affect the right to water’⁸); information and communication; culture and science; education; habitat and housing; health; and labour and social security⁹.

In relation to the environment the constitution assumes a biocentric perspective: nature is thus conceived as the subject of rights. The legal recognition of *Pachamama* (mother nature) has been generally regarded as an unprecedented advance.

Article 71. Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary process (...)

Article 72. Nature has the right to be restored (...)

Article 73. The State shall apply preventive and restrictive measures on activities that might lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems and the permanent alteration of natural cycles (...)

Article 74. Persons, communities, peoples, and nations shall have the right to benefit from the environment and the natural wealth enabling them to enjoy *the good way of living* (...)¹⁰

In relation to the acknowledgment of Ecuador as a Plurinational country, important disputes took place at the Constituent Assembly between the indigenous movement

⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Title II, Chapter II, Article 15.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Title I, Chapter 7

and Correa's government over the definition of 'Plurinational'. The declaration of Ecuador as a Plurinational State has been the primary demand of the indigenous movement (Lupien, 2011; Jameson, 2011). This demand was based on the assumption that a more inclusive political system implies the recognition of its plurinational nature. Conversely, representatives of *Alianza Pais* 'wished to leave the term vaguely defined; essentially ensuring that it would remain on the level of rhetoric without any significant substance or concrete implications' (Becker, 2011: 54). The current situation in Ecuador shows the prevalence of the latter.

In 2010 the *Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir, Construyendo un Estado Plurinacional e Intercultural 2009-2013* (National Plan for Good Living, Building a Plurinational and Intercultural State 2009-2013) was approved (SENPLADES¹¹, 2010). *Buen Vivir* is represented in the National Plan as conceptual rupture; a new paradigm of development 'post-petroleum' (SENPLADES, 2010: 45); a radical change; a new social contract; and as the base of social, economic and democratic justice (SENPLADES 2010: 56). *Buen Vivir* is transformed into a set of policies, e.g., '[t]o promote a sustainable and territorially balanced endogenous economy for Good Living to guarantee rights. This economic system must seek productive transformation, diversification and specialization, based on the promotion of diverse forms of production' (SENPLADES, 2010: 86); and goals, e.g., '[t]o reduce chronic malnutrition by 45% by 2013' (SENPLADES, 2010: 78). Radcliffe (2012) argues that with the inclusion of *Buen Vivir* as guiding principle of the national development plan the intention is to establish a welfare regime system in Ecuador.

Ecuador...historically failed to provide systematic support for poor citizens, relying instead on informal-familialist systems where low levels of social spending compounded families' reliance on extended unpaid hours of household labour, informal sector work and international migration...Against this background of inadequate public social policies, SK [Sumak Kawsay] implies that a distinctive welfare regime might be created, although the programmatic and institutional bases are not yet completely in place (Radcliffe, 2012: 243).

¹¹ SENPLADES: *Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo* (Secretariat of National Planning and Development).

Ecuador gained regional and international recognition for the inclusion of *Buen Vivir* in the national constitution (Escobar, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Santos, 2010). This unprecedented achievement was produced by the convergence of popular mobilisations with the emergence of a new political leader. Whilst a newcomer to the Ecuadorian political scene, Correa promised (and implemented) radical economic and political transformations such as declaring Ecuador's national debt illegitimate; promoting social investment and State control of the economy (by 2007 Ecuador's national debt was USD 10 billion); rejecting to sign free trade treaties; denying permission to the US to use the airbase of Manta; and calling for a Constituent Assembly. The implementation of these measures was sufficient to gain popular support¹² as they had been the demands mobilised by different agents in the country for more than two decades (Becker, 2011).

In addition, the *Revolución Ciudadana* has brought important changes: national tax collection reached its highest peak in 2011 (USD 9561 million)¹³, and the renegotiation of contracts with multinational companies operating in Ecuadorian soil has boosted the state budget (Ramirez, 2014). There is an increasing public investment in areas such as health and education. Poverty rates based on income have fallen from 71.3 to 50.9 per cent in rural areas, from 49.8 to 28.6 per cent at a national level¹⁴, and from 38.75 to 17.4 per cent in urban areas (from 2003 to 2011) (SENPLADES, 2013).

Since the Constituent Assembly and the rise of *Buen Vivir* many contradictions and disagreements on the definition and implementation of these transformations guided by the idea of *Buen Vivir* have been made apparent. The most controversial ones are related to extractive activities, which the Ecuadorian economy is still heavily dependent on. Critics of the economic policies of the government have labelled this as “progressive neo-extractivism” (Gudynas, 2010), pointing to the important reforms made in terms of the new role of the State in the economy and greater fiscal pressure

¹² Rafael Correa won both his first and second presidency with 57 per cent of the vote.

¹³ SENPLADES (2010).

¹⁴ *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* (INEC, National Institute of Statistics and Censuses).

to the wealthy, whilst maintaining at the same time the traditional model of development based mainly on extractive activities. The lack of diversification of the economy, the negative social and environmental impacts of extractivism and the high dependency on the global fluctuations of commodity prices are among the strongest critiques made mainly by social and environmental movements. On the other hand, the controversy over the limited popular participation in decision-making processes and the tense relation between the government of Rafael Correa and historical actors (such as part of the indigenous movement) has also been the source of new conflicts.

With Rafael Correa and his *Revolución Ciudadana* established in government and the new constitution written, a new phase of the political process in Ecuador can be clearly identified. This new phase was marked primarily by a process of strategic rationalisation of *Buen Vivir* in which each actor claimed a certain type of *Buen Vivir* associated to their interest to access to power. This in turn led to the antagonisation of different notions of *Buen Vivir*, mainly between the government, on the one hand, and the indigenous organisations, on the other. It is argued that the tensions between the different stakeholders involved have opened a new phase of the political process, which is named here as the *political process of Buen Vivir*.

2. Drawing political boundaries: the appropriation of political rhetoric

Taking into consideration the tensions, contradictions, and divisions triggered by this new process in recent years, publications on the matter started acknowledging the existence of different understandings on *Buen Vivir*. In contrast with the earlier publications mentioned above which were only centred on cosmological and legal definitions of *Buen Vivir*, the debate on the matter has moved on to acknowledge the existence of competing understandings of it (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, 2014; Gudynas, 2014; Oviedo, 2014; Viola Recasens, 2014). This paper builds upon these studies but adding the sociological analysis missing from them: while this cluster of publications avoids essentialising the concept of *Buen Vivir* by presenting a typology of definitions, little is mentioned on the stakeholders supporting and mobilising them, as if the discourses on *Buen Vivir* could be thought of

independently from the actors who support them. It is argued here that both an essentialising and a decontextualised understanding on Buen Vivir neglect the nuances and the dynamic of a political process defined in relation to the rationalisation of Buen Vivir, which in turn determines its ‘use’ in relation to gaining access to power in Ecuador. The political process is in constant transformation due to the practices of agents who define and negotiate their political and subjective positions in the process.

Both the indigenous movement and the government of Rafael Correa have been fundamental for the rise and consolidation of Buen Vivir as the proxy upon which different socio-political agents in Ecuador defined their positioning within the post-neoliberal turn dominating the country and the region. The increasing conflicts unfolded in the attempts to implement it have led to a bigger distance between these two sets of actors. Each of them defines this concept in different ways according to their interests, goals, and political battles, defending the legitimacy of the discourse they mobilise while discrediting the discourses held by political opponents. In this way, the definition and mobilisation of the discourses on Buen Vivir becomes a powerful tool to create and openly redefine subjective positions in the political and social arena in Ecuador.

Therefore, I argue that the emergence and rise of *Buen Vivir* as political discourse, carried out and highly contested by the above mentioned actors, has been the result, on the one hand, of a particular permeability of the state forced by demands, including the ones enacted by indigenous social movements, and on the other, of the contingent opening of the political structure. That is to say, it has been the result of political action.

The particular relation of social indigenous movements vis-à-vis the State in the context of the rise of Buen Vivir has given place so far to a dichotomous position and reductive representations: either Buen Vivir represents the celebration of radical emancipation, or it represents the co-option by the government and the State of the

idea in order to maintain the status quo (resembling old discussions within the left on ‘revolution or reform’). I argue that *Buen Vivir* is neither only politically co-option nor only essentially liberating. On the contrary, it embodies an ambivalent meaning in which power relations between indigenous social movements and the State are put in practice in a way that is transforming the political process in Ecuador. A group of authors working on indigenous social movements in Latin America, and more specifically, in Ecuador¹⁵ argues that it is at the level of the State where movements wage their principal struggles, and where the Indian Question¹⁶ is played out. In negotiating their positionality both actors deploy strategies, construct solidarities and alliances, and negotiate meaning. This is what, I argue, constitutes the political process of *Buen Vivir*.

The struggle deployed around the idea of *Buen Vivir* can be thought of as a struggle over meaning and the imposition of a dominant discourse. Therefore, by identifying distinctive definitions of *Buen Vivir*, the objective is to spot what elements are highlighted and put at the centre of the definitions by each of the political forces in order to draw political boundaries, which can separate and determine *us* and *them* between political actors. The following sections draw on interviews carried out by the author through fieldwork.

2.1 Pluralist Sumak Kawsay – *the indigenous movement*

The first discourse identified is the Pluralist Sumak Kawsay. This discourse structures the idea of Sumak Kawsay around the construction of a Plurinational State, which at the same time is deemed as the only mechanism to guarantee the process of Sumak Kawsay. Here, the construction of a Plurinational State is formulated as the distribution of power and control over territories among fully recognised nationalities in a unified State. This has been a long claim of the indigenous movement, which at the same time form the backbone of their political project (CONAIE, 2012). In it, the

¹⁵ Radcliffe, 2001; Gerlach, 2003; Otero, 2003; Postero and Zamosc, 2004; Andolina *et al*, 2005; Pallares, 2007; Clark and Becker, 2007; Lucero, 2008; Becker, 2011; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010.

¹⁶ I follow Postero and Zamosc (2004: 5) in the definition of the Indian Question as ‘the crucial issue of what kinds of rights indigenous people should be granted as citizens of democratic nation-states’.

CONAIE (the most important indigenous organisation in Ecuador – Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) identifies the Plurinational State as the only mechanism for the operationalization of Sumak Kawsay. To define these ideas current leaders of the main indigenous organisations talk about power, redistribution, food sovereignty¹⁷, means of production, real participation in decision-making processes, and governance.

. ..the participation in decision-making processes on equal ground, in decisive matters for the country as national security, the financial issue, justice, strategic resources like water, oil; making join decisions would make clear the possibility of a Plurinational State... (Severino Sharupi, Indigenous Leader -Territories and Land, CONAIE - Interviewed August 2014. Author's translation).

I argue that the centrality given to the idea of the construction of a Plurinational State puts power as the heart of the discourse mobilised by this sector of the indigenous movement: political power, economical power, socio-cultural power. This sector of the indigenous movement selects and highlights key elements to define the character of this distribution of power: self-determination (economical, political, socio-cultural, judicial), control over territories, real participation in decision making processes and in the implementation of collective rights, redistribution of wealth, and the management of critical resources. Therefore, according to this, the construction of a Plurinational State implies, first, the inclusion of peoples and nationalities in spaces from where they have been largely and historically excluded: State organisms and institutions, and in decision making processes. Second, it implies the restructuring of State institutions in order not only to recognise the authority of existing communal governments but also to transfer financial, material and technical resources (decentralisation). This implies the recognition of indigenous cultural and communitarian organisation as well as the redistribution of wealth. Third, it involves the recognition and strengthening of distinctive cultures within the territory: their languages, identities, practices, traditions, knowledge, and education. And fourth, it includes indigenous collective rights in a different perspective. The grant of collective

¹⁷ Food sovereignty is an International demand articulated and promoted by Via Campesina (international peasant movement) that has been recently endorsed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation. Food sovereignty is related to land democratisation and communitarian distribution, small and community-led agro projects, and democratic access to water sources (Altieri Toledo, 2011)

rights (that is to say, the subject of these rights is a collective ethnic or cultural entity) has been a key aspect on indigenous struggles. Most of them have been nationally and internationally recognised, signed by national governments, and included in official documents (Van Cott, 2005; Yashar, 2005). But this is interpreted by many as ‘dead letter’ if they are not implemented or fulfilled. The struggle now turns from the recognition of collective rights to their actual implementation. And according to the interpretation of the indigenous movement, what is needed to fulfil them, following Gramsci’s definition as correlation of forces, is power.

There is self-criticism. We fight for the legal, which is included in the constitution. But we now know that it does not depend much on the constitution or on what is written to be fulfilled. It depends on who is power in the country. We have forgotten to build power in the country. We have the best constitution but today we see that that is breaking apart, modified, violated. As we focused on the legal we forgot to build power at every level where you can negotiate on equal ground (Edwin Mina, Indigenous leader, Youth section ECUARUNARI¹⁸ – Interviewed September 2014)

The Pachamama is used as a symbol representing (i) moral appeals, (ii) the spiritual and transcendental elements underpinning the human-nature relation, and (iii) the new civilizing contract envisaged by the promoters of this frame. Indigenous leaders and intellectuals talk about solidarity, reciprocity, harmony, and collective cooperation. In order to differentiate themselves from the use given by the State, they do not talk about Buen Vivir but about Sumak Kawsay. Buen Vivir represents for them the cooptation of a radical idea in order to legitimize the implementation of developmentalist policies dependent on extractive activities, which are perceived as particularly detrimental to the interests and lifeworlds of indigenous communities. Buen Vivir is mainly referred to as mere rhetoric, which is deemed as a tool for deception. This differentiation between Sumak Kawsay and Buen Vivir is used to trace political frontiers between governmental and indigenous forces. It emphasises the epistemological and ontological bases of Sumak Kawsay, which give its distinctiveness and power of rupture with mainstream definitions of development, democracy, the State, and so on. The mainstream understandings of the latter are deemed as colonial and Eurocentric forms of oppression, exclusion and exploitation. The Sumak Kawsay proposal aims to break with this.

¹⁸ Indigenous organisation ECUARUNARI (Awakening of Ecuadorian Indigenous People).

In the Andean cosmovision every being has a spirit, and all beings deserve respect in order to live in harmony and generate life. Sumak Kawsay seeks that, a coexistence to generate life. Sumak Kawsay is an attitude of respect towards the Pachamama and the understanding that I live because there are others who live in me, the forest lives in me, I live because that mountain lives in me, in my spirit, in my being. Politically, it is a big utopia to construct a new stage of civilization. It is not the wellbeing born out of the wealth of capital but is born out of the harmonic coexistence with the environment, is born fundamentally out of respect and of the understanding that we exist because there are others that make us (“Pocho” Alvarez – Interviewed July 2014 in Quito).

However, indigenous leaders have manifested in the interviews their concerns over the political use, effectiveness and representativeness of a frame that puts Pachamama and communitarian life at the centre. Some of the interviewees even made ironic comments on the use of nature to define Sumak Kawsay. At the same time, some of them raise the issue of indigenous living in the city and its impact in communitarian practices. They question the representativeness of a definition centred in communitarian life for those who, forced or out of choice, live now in the city, have an urban lifestyle, and are not longer peasants but workers. It was palpable during the interviews that the crucial question: *What does it mean to be indigenous in the 21st century?* is under discussion and revision among the indigenous elite.

On the one hand, there is an interpretation of Sumak Kawsay within the capitalist State. An example is when you see the sign ‘Oil is life’ in the Amazonia, that kind of Sumak Kawsay. Or you see big roads, motorways, the Panamericana, we can say that we are travelling in a better bus but at the end, who benefits from that? That is the expression of Sumak Kawsay from the government. But on the other, there is not a Sumak Kawsay from indigenous communities adapted to the current situation; there is one which is a sort of cultural interpretation, an antique; one that can only be thought in an isolated, forest environment. But we need to debate about a Sumak Kawsay adapted to the current situation, one which proposes a real transformation of the Ecuadorian society as a whole. This is something to be debated and constructed (Leonidas Izas, president of indigenous base organisation UNOCAN¹⁹ – Interviewed November 2014)

I argue that the emphasis placed on ancestral philosophy and communitarian practices strengthens the indigenous cultural identity to the point that risks not only to fall in the essentializing of their identity, neglecting in same extent the pluralist contributions to the debate on Sumak Kawsay (feminist, ecologist, socialist, and so on). But it also implies the partial loss of political representativeness within and outside the indigenous movement. Whilst the essentializing of Sumak Kawsay and

¹⁹ Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas del Norte de Cotopaxi (Union of Peasant Organizations of Northern Cotopaxi).

indigenous identity can be taken as a strategy to differentiate the indigenous movement from other sectors that might work especially in relation to the contradictions incurred by the government (Stefanoni, 2010); an emphasis on a philosophy barely known by the rest of society and if known with little connection of people's everyday reality, instead of working as an inspiration it can turn in the sectionalism of a struggle that until recent years was able to represent the common interest. The retraction of this indigenous sector to their identity is proving to test their political strength in a time when those in power have been able to articulate a representative (and general) alternative project.

2.2 Buen Vivir as Rational Social Transformation: the construction of the State – *Rafael Correa and Alianza Pais*

The construction of this discourse is connected to the recovery of State institutions responsible for planning and development. It is mainly mobilised by the government and its allies with a strong technocratic and expert influence. While the recovery and revitalization of State institutions are linked to radical and progressive processes of decentralisation, consolidation of local self-governments and citizen's participation²⁰, the emphasis is mainly placed on the reclaim of the central State as an institution of control, planning and management (SENPLADES, 2013). In other words, the central components of this frame are the construction, recovery and consolidation of State institutions as the pillars of the national project, reconnecting development with the State. Here the State is presented as the privileged arena to deliberate about the common good and national interests, recovering the control over the public agenda. The supremacy of partial interests (indigenous, ecologist) over a general (universal) one is interpreted as going against the national project (Ramirez, 2014).

²⁰ The legal foundations of this process of State transformation are included in official documents such as the *Codigo Organico de Ordenamiento Territorial, Autonomias y Descentralizacion* (COOTAD, Organic Code of Territorial Organization, Autonomy and Decentralization [Accessed online: <http://www.planificacion.gob.ec/sistema-de-informacion-para-los-gobiernos-autonomos-descentralizados/>]; the *Plan Nacional de Descentralizacion* (National Plan for Decentralization [Accessed online: <http://www.planificacion.gob.ec/plan-nacional-de-descentralizacion/>]).

At the heart of this project lies: (i) the construction of a sovereign nation (*'la patria es de todos'*, *'volver a tener patria'*²¹ which in many ways opposes the project of a plurinational country and the predominance of the local above the national); (ii) the elimination of poverty via the redistribution of wealth; and (iii) the guarantee of universal social security (which for some analysts can be thought as an attempt to establish a Welfare State in Ecuador). The project has one political horizon: the consolidation of the *Socialismo del Buen Vivir* or *bio-socialismo republicano* (Ramirez, 2010) informed by neo-Marxist thought like Socialism of the 21st Century (Dieterich, 2002) and approaches to development like Human Development (Deneulin and Shahani, 2009). The consolidation of Buen Vivir representing a 'national project of the left' is seen by the promoters of this frame as fundamental to the positioning of themselves as representing a radical change in relation to neoliberal times, away from fiscal austerity, deregulation and primacy of financial interests over the whole of the economy. Buen Vivir represents here an alternative to counteract the effects triggered by the crisis of the capitalist order. However, government officials are cautious in framing this project as a post-capitalist or post-neoliberal alternative *per se*. The need for foreign capital investment as well as the maintenance of old and new commercial agreements with global powers condition the scope of economic transformation in the country. Furthermore, the contradictions and orthodox measures taken by the government of Rafael Correa (restructuring and elimination of subsidies; the increase in oil and mining exploitation; a new loan from Goldman Sachs for 400 million dollars that brings the IMF back to examine the current state of Ecuadorian economy) show that the economic turn in the Ecuadorian case can be qualified more as a pragmatic one than a radical or post-capitalist alternative²².

...the inclusion of Buen Vivir in the constitution aroused hopes because the moment of the country determined it; we asked for alternatives to neoliberalism, to the political system, to development. But once you have the responsibility, you have to govern inside and outside the country. You have to set limits, powers, responsibilities, you have to negotiate. And it is then that as government you have to make a decision, how are you going to insert the country in global relations? How are you going to manage the finances? You cannot make a u-turn brusquely, it would be suicidal. Ecuador is standing as a sovereign country, eager to gain more autonomy and independence from super

²¹ Spanish *'la patria es de todos'* (motherland belongs to everyone); *'volver a tener patria'* (regain our motherland).

²²http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/07/140708_economia_ecuador_viraje_economico_correa_vp.shtml?ocid=socialflow_facebook.

powers, but we also need to understand that we are giving a political struggle in a world marked by global finances; something's got to give... (Ivan Carrasco Montalvo, consultant SENPLADES – Interviewed September 2014)

The economic dimension of this discourse is centred in the State as playing an important role in terms of investment, control and regulation. A strong fiscal discipline together with public investment is the pillar of the economic dimension of the Rational Buen Vivir. The main financial source for State investment as well as for social spending still is oil revenues. Government officials argue that it is only through natural resources exploitation that the economy can be diversified as high revenues would allow a higher investment in other areas of the economy²³. For the government this reason is strong enough to dismiss many of the contradictions between its rhetoric, policies and what is included in official documents and laws in relation to environmental protection, agrarian policies, and popular participation. These points constitute the main conflict with indigenous groups, among others.

Some of those who mobilise this discourse also point out critiques and shortcomings of this particular understanding of Buen Vivir. For example, in relation to popular participation a government official working in SENPLADES (*Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo*) says that among the 12 objectives outlined by the Plan del Buen Vivir (2013-2017) popular participation is there as a “*purely decorative element. There is no political will from above to accept real and critical participation. Participation is only allowed to those who say everything is fine*” (Anonymous – interview, August 2014). These critical voices coming from inside the government question how receptive is the current government is to critiques coming from those who do not completely agree (or openly disagree) with the fundamental pillars defended by Correa’s government. They suggest that deliberation is not open to dissent in the government.

²³ Ecuador is currently building 8 hydroelectric projects, and investing in the construction of the City of Knowledge, that is, the construction of new universities in the city of Yachay with an investment of U\$S 400 millions per year. These universities will be mainly focused on research and consultancy in order to develop new technology and the industry.

The delimitation of political boundaries in this case is traced between, first, the government of the *Revolución Ciudadana* and those who are strongly identified with the neoliberal past in Ecuador. The government of Rafael Correa questions the credibility and legitimacy of politicians of the *partidocracia* (party-bureaucracy), bankers, and corporatist groups (mainly trade unions and indigenous organisations) remembering their involvement in governmental decisions during the 80s and 90s. *Prohibido olvidar* (forbidden to forget) is the main phrase used by Rafael Correa to refer to those who question current decisions of the government (belonging either to the political right or left) having participated in the past in controversial and unpopular actions during neoliberal times (cases of corruption, association in coups, privatisation and financial deregulation are used to exemplify this). In line with this view, the government has recently released a campaign against the *Restauración Conservadora* (conservative restoration) accusing groups who criticise the government intending to destabilize the government.

The second political boundary is traced with those who strongly question the decisions of the government on environmental and economical matters. Young people forming *Yasunidos*²⁴ and ecologist groups are qualified as childish, traitors and enemies of the national project due to their opposition to extractive activities and their defence of the Yasuní-ITT proposal. The trace and use of these political frontiers questions the government's openness to plural and antagonistic positions as well as its willingness to allow a plurality of actors to engage in public debates and participate in decision making processes.

²⁴ The Yasuní is a national park located in the Ecuadorian Amazon and home of various indigenous peoples who consider the park a sacred place. In 1999 part of the park was declared 'untouchable zone' prohibiting its exploration and exploitation. The Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) is an oil field within the Yasuní park. It is estimated that the oil reserves in this area are between 846 million to 950 million of barrels which represents 20 % of the country's oil reserves (Rival, 2010; Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington, 2011). The Yasuní-ITT initiative proposed to keep the oil in the soil in exchange for international monetary compensation. If that agreement was not reach, Ecuador planned to start the extraction of oil from the ITT field, which finally happened in August 2013. *Yasunidos* is a group of young ecologists formed after Correa's government decision of exploiting the Yasuní ITT. They were responsible for the collection of signatures to call a referendum to allow popular participation in the decision over the exploitation of Yasuní. After collecting more than the signatures required by law (total of 756.623), the *Consejo Nacional Electoral* rejected most of these forms.

2.3 “Deep” Buen Vivir: ecology and post-development in action – *the Academics*

The promoters of this discourse are mainly academics, environmental activists and ecological organisations. The rights of nature granted by the national constitution are at the centre of this frame, which are closely linked to the rights of a diversity of social groups (indigenous, peasant, feminist, ecologist, socialist). The fulfilment of the rights of nature is used here to represent the path to a post-development era, a post-oil economy, and a post-capitalist society. Capitalism is defined as the most extreme version of alienation, economic exploitation, inequality, coloniality of power and environmental degradation. The way to subvert this order is to focus on the local, communitarian and small-scale projects which can guarantee: first, the use of natural resources respecting the natural environment; and second, real participation of the people in both the definition and implementation of Buen Vivir as an alternative to development and neoliberal policies. Promoters of this frame urge for a social and solidary economy, an agrarian reform which can guarantee food sovereignty, democratic access to land respecting collective ownership of territories, and the creation of incentives and financial credits given by the state to support small projects. In addition, tourism is seen as a key economic sector which could replace extractive activities in the future.

The government of Rafael Correa is considered by these groups a betrayer of the process of change initiated in 2006. The ‘pink tide’ governments of the region are ironically depicted as complicit with international powers, which together aim to control natural resources and promote the intensification of the extractive economic model and with it, a new model of colonization.

Conscious of the ambiguities and lack of clear definitions of the idea of Buen Vivir (or Sumak Kawsay), clear policies to achieve it and indicators to measure it, those who mobilise this discourse point out the innovative effect of Buen Vivir in relation to hegemonic, dominant and monolithic understandings on socio-political and economical development. They conceive Buen Vivir at the moment as an idea that

have to be constructed and re-constructed by the participation of a plurality of actors, but yet already showing its provocative power to deconstruct ‘hegemonic truths’. For this reason, and similar to the frame mobilised by the indigenous sector, Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay are separated in order to highlight the different implications of each phrase according to the actors who mobilise it, and the cooptation of the former by the forces in power in order to redefine and make it functional to conventional development.

As it happens with the frames mobilised by the indigenous sector, the advancements made by the government of Rafael Correa in relation to the role of the State in public investment and infrastructure are also recognised here. However, this recognition is quickly undermined. A common phrase used by the interviewees is: ‘we have to recognise that the government has done important things...BUT we cannot accept...’ In many ways, the ‘but’ employed belittle significant changes in the management by the State of the economy, institutional transformation, social inclusion and provision. It can be argued that this ‘but’ suggests that, for those who question the actions of the *Revolución Ciudadana* not only *what* the State does but *how* it does it matters. And in this ‘how’ lays the aspirations of many groups who conceive a different logic underpinning political, economic, social and cultural questions. In other words, what is important is not only the return of the State as a public arena of debate but equally, what State is built and who participates in it.

Final Remarks

The analysis of these discourses show not only that there is not one homogenous, monolithic and essentializing notion of Buen Vivir but that it is constructed and re-constructed in the process of power struggles between different forms. And more importantly, that the debate that tries to determine if this new period in Ecuador can be defined as post-neoliberal or not is to some extent sterile at this point in time. What becomes much more relevant is the strength of new and provocative ideas which are breaking a homogeneous and hegemonic understanding on economic,

social, cultural and political questions. In this sense it is apparent that Buen Vivir has already affected the politics of Ecuador. How effective these discourses are in promoting a whole new paradigm is something that time, organisation and the sum of actions and struggles will dictate.

Contrary to analyses which question the relation between social movements and the State that suggest that it is beyond the State where radical transformations can unfold, the situation in contemporary Ecuador suggests that the State represents the main locus of struggle. Notwithstanding the importance given to local experiences and projects, claims of autonomy and self-determination, the question of the State is crucial in the debate and the power struggle unfolding since Buen Vivir was first mobilised and included in the national constitution. The struggle is given not only to occupy places in the State but to define the very foundations of it. While this debate is not new in the country, the emergence of Buen Vivir as a political project has certainly revived it as well as produced new insights in the matter. And in this debate on the State (type, role, participation) questions on citizenship, development, and identity are to be answered.

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