

AN ONTOLOGICAL TURN IN THE DEBATE ON *BUEN VIVIR* – *SUMAK KAWSAY* IN ECUADOR: IDEOLOGY, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE COMMON

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Buen Vivir, a political paradigm at work in Bolivia and Ecuador that underpins the state and social regeneration after a prolonged and devastating period of neoliberalism, has become a hotly contested subject within academia and politics. Although it has been categorized as decolonial, post-neoliberal, and post-developmental, recent developments suggest that the Ecuadorian government is turning toward a highly extractivist and modernist model based on bureaucratic and technocratic logics. This article focuses on the debate spurred around *Buen Vivir*, arguing that it has been employed as a cultural representation by many academics, politicians, and social agents, thus foreclosing the possibility of engaging in more grounded and pragmatic discussions and hindering the articulation of alternative political configurations. Accordingly, it seeks to shift the debate from epistemological questions about the conditions of knowledge to thinking the nature of the world ontologically from the perspective of *Buen Vivir*.

Keywords: *Buen Vivir*; *Sumak Kawsay*; Ecuador; common; ideology; knowledge

Introduction

The word *transition* is inescapably linked with progressive movement – it implies a temporal movement toward something, rather than being a goal in itself. Of course, any social, economic, or cultural transformation requires a transition, to avoid the costly and painful measure of having everything rebuilt from scratch. As such, to achieve the socialist goal of *Buen Vivir* (BV, or good living) – especially within a society that was, until recently, neoliberal – there are some steps that need to be taken to catalyze a transition. In other words, the achievement of this goal will not depend so much on changing the relations of production, but rather the ‘mentality’ of the citizenship (SENPLADES (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo) 2013, 11).¹

BV has become a hotly contested subject within academia and politics, especially after the development of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions, which drew upon the ideas of BV. This BV developmental process was categorized as decolonial, post-

neoliberal, and post-developmental (Escobar 2010). From a political standpoint, the BV paradigm underpins the state and social regeneration after the prolonged and devastating period of neoliberalism. In the case of Ecuador, the Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir (PNBV, or the National Plan for Good Life) 2009–2013 (SENPLADES 2009) and 2013–2017 (SENPLADES 2013) associated BV with the transition to socialism, loosely exalting it as a teleological goal to be reached. The move beyond capitalism is grounded in the organization and construction of lifestyles and knowledge that will allow the coexistence of humans and nature, and the assumption of heterogeneous non-Western worldviews in an intercultural frame.

First, the plan affirms that ‘the government aims to employ extractivism to abandon extractivism’ (SENPLADES 2013, 76), disregarding the fact that the continuity of extractivism will reproduce the same prevalent socioeconomic and power logic (Gudynas and Acosta 2011). Second, it is unclear and analytically complex to understand how the government will transform the ‘citizenship’s mentality’ beyond the hackneyed issue of the change of the national productive matrix. The 2013–2017 Plan extricates culture from production: it seems that changing relations of production will automatically lead to BV, but it still supports cultural industries, albeit at a different level. Understanding the entanglements of culture and economy as dynamically co-constitutive and reciprocally determined, we can delve into the cultural underpinnings of Ecuadorian society and the discourse of BV. This not only implies the foregrounding of contradictions between the discourse and praxis of BV (the critical stance), but more importantly the exploration of the practical and theoretical ways of facilitating a transition toward mentalities and forms of life that deviate from Western individualizing patterns (the constructive stance). Third, the plans combine rhetorical discourses of individualism (efficiency, competitiveness, excellence) with communalism (nationalism, *patria*, socialism), with the assumption that the dialectic between the tendencies that lead to different production patterns, forms of life, and mentalities will be synthesized into BV, without falling into the vectors of identity or mere utopian discourse.

From an academic perspective, it can be argued that the debate has taken a clear epistemological bent, which stands in contrast to the lack of anthropological and sociological field studies (Bretón de Zaldívar 2013). The excessive emphasis on epistemological discussions is intrinsically linked with transcendental and dichotomous logics that prevail in Western thought, thus shifting the BV debate to a critical and moral plane that obscures the debate about alternative political forms. Consequently, it is necessary to conceive of academic work from an immanent perspective as a ‘transformative practice’ (Grossberg 1996) that opens up places and spaces of enunciation, criticizes and identifies inequalities and illegitimate practices, but also as a realm to imagine other worlds’ functioning as a mediator between practical modes of existence and theoretical reflection in order to inform actual praxis.

In this sense, Hardt and Mezzadra (2012, 78) and Escobar (2008) agree that social movements should lead a constituent process beyond the welfare state and neoliberalism to pose a *government of the common* as a cultural and epistemic alternative to the rule of capital. Considering that social movements are always minority and

cannot be equated with community or the common, and that states have materialized the neoliberal ‘perverse confluence’ of a parallel retreat from the public sphere and the assertion of the autonomy and self-responsibility of governable individuals (Dagnino 2004). It is essential to raise the issue of *communalizing the state* and preventing its expansion in alliance with capital. This implies going beyond a conception of the common as a material reality or resource to understand it as ‘alternative, non-commodified means to fulfill social needs, e.g., to obtain social wealth and to organize social production’ (de Angelis 2003, 1). This involves rethinking the problem of the limits of horizontal communalization before the emergence of hierarchical processes and structures, analyzing and developing inhibitory mechanisms of hierarchical power, and of the individualization of subjects, without resorting to nationalist rhetoric and ‘imagined’ communities. Given that such strategies do not arise spontaneously among human communities, they must be imagined, designed, and organized. In short, we must be wary of BV as an epistemological discursive strategy concealing a process of modernization whose logic is anti-commons. But, at the same time, we should profit from the progressive potential BV holds as a *discourse* of social transformation and decolonization in order to raise ontological and immanent struggles pursuing the objectives found in governmental discourse, redirecting them to other purposes.

Buen Vivir: Between Discourse and Reality, Ideal, and Practice

BV is part of the coding apparatus of the new power–knowledge assemblage of the Citizens’ Revolution. Both the extensive texts that make up the discourse of BV and the comprehensive body of literature generated around them have been established as a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour 2005), around which many debates are held. The totalizing character of the BV discourse is voluntaristic and utopian, rendering it ambiguous and self-contradictory (Bretón de Zaldívar, Cortez, and García 2014). This can be summarized in its emphasis on building a socialism based in ‘excellence’, an empty term of universal significance that can justify virtually everything (Merton 1973, 442). Like the undisputable and positive statements of intent contained in the BV, excellence does not allow objections: only mediocrity stays out of excellence. Moreover, the term is difficult to connect with indigenous knowledge, as its use comes from academia – where narcissism, high performance, competitiveness, and concern for reputation in networks of peers has operated for decades, thus being a field without need for discipline, as self-control has been self-imposed by individualized and socially segmented subjects.

Initially, most readings of BV were positive. Acosta considers it ‘a worldview differing from western patterns that emerges from non-capitalist community roots’ (Acosta 2011, 51; see also; Macías Vázquez and Alonso González 2013). Later critical readings, however, consider it to be a reactionary turn that diverts attention from the struggle against capital (Sánchez Parga 2011), a return to archaic knowledge (Mansilla 2011), empty new-age rhetoric (Stefanoni 2012), a trivialized slogan ‘equated with the implementation of welfare policies for the poor’ (Houtart 2011, 71–2), or rhetoric concealing industrialization or post-industrialization that clandestinely fosters

precarious work (Mezzadra 2012, 102). Walsh (2010) equates BV with the state, which defines the ‘good life’ in econometric and technocratic terms, and considers that it should be implemented by state bureaucrats, also reproducing contemporary individualism by satisfying basic needs only in individual terms.

Gudynas (2013, 184) states, meanwhile, that BV has three uses: propaganda; a restricted use as alternative to capitalism and socialism within the boundaries of modernity; and, most importantly, a substantive use as a critique to modern developmentalism and as a post-capitalist alternative beyond modernity. He criticizes the imposition of colonial and modern expert knowledge on BV, which allegedly misrepresents and misinterprets it, arguing that there is no attempt to understand BV on its own terms because it is being questioned ‘on the grounds of western economy, politics, and philosophy’ (Gudynas 2013, 187). At the same time, Gudynas (2013) claims that the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador are not implementing the BV program. In turn, Spedding (2010) considers it a Weberian ideal without a counterpart in ethnographic contexts in Bolivia, which lacks practical applicability.² If BV can, at the same time, be criticized for its indigenous roots *and* for lacking indigenous roots, one might ask how it is possible to understand BV within its own frames, and what those frames actually are. In reality, it is naïve and analytically misdirected to isolate BV as discourse from the practices and materialities where it is inserted and upon which it interferes. A similar essentialist isolation is promoted by authors like Medina (2006) or Oviedo (2008) who project an ‘archetypal, decontextualized, and mystical image of an “Andean Civilization” bearer of vitalist and relational ontologies which, in a mysterious fashion ... have remained uncontaminated by Western culture’ (Bretón de Zaldívar 2013, 80). Some authors have defined such a paradigm as *pachamamismo* (Viola Recasens 2014).

Bretón de Zaldívar (2013) equates BV with an invented tradition that was initially endowed with transformative potential for the development of other forms of life. He considers the postmodern BV, which is associated with 21st-century socialism, as a continuation of the Aristotelian *eudemonia* that has nothing to do with the Andean *Sumak Kawsay*. The Andean worldview is, for Oviedo, ‘the only source to understand this system of life and consciousness, not only political or economic’ (2012, 203–204). Most critiques reveal an epistemological concern to know *what* the BV *is*, while at the same time problematizing the locus of enunciation from which different subjects make their statements. With exceptions, and despite allusions to hybridity, dichotomous thinking and a lack of empirically grounded claims prevail. The Aristotelian notion of *eudemonia* is dichotomously separated from BV, given that many religious orders and colonial powers imparted the teachings of Aristotle to indigenous peoples for centuries, which may have led to the hybridization and syncretism of beliefs. Similarly, only ‘the Andean’ is preached as the legitimate locus of enunciation, but this still does not explain what BV means in real contexts, or how to assemble it with policies and projects on other scales. Rather, these policies and projects are built upon an essentialized and static image of Andean-Amazonian cultures (Bretón de Zaldívar 2013, 73).

Simbaña, a member of the indigenous foundation Kawsay, provides a historicist vision that is conscious of contemporary sociocultural hybridizations. This marks a

turning point in shifting the debate from the realm of knowledge-epistemology to the ontological realm of lifestyles. Starting from the community and not from discourse analysis, he believes that BV has become a moral discourse in its current conceptualization. However, its origins are manifold and range from humanistic and ecological thinking, Mariátegui's Marxism, *indigenismo*, and liberation theology (Cortez 2010). During the 2000s, it began to appear in the reports of international organizations such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and a number of NGOs. In Ecuador, BV is termed *alli káusai* and *súmac káusay* in studies of development ideas among indigenous peoples (Viteri Gualinga 2002), and in a text on education produced by Amawtay Wasi University in 2004. Subsequently, it became a political banner and an alternative policy proposal in the struggles against neoliberalism and NAFTA between 2004 and 2006. From this perspective, BV can be said to have been 'synthesized from the outside of the indigenous movement' (Simbaña 2013), especially from Bolivia. Thus, 'many [indigenous movements] were surprised to hear about Sumak Kawsay in the National Assembly' (Simbaña 2013) since the 2008 Constitution referred to 'community' but not to BV.

Therefore, there is a break between *Buen Vivir* as governmental discourse and Sumak Kawsay as something systematized both during anti-neoliberal struggles and from abroad. The locus of enunciation of the first remains 'empty', while the second is filled with meaning during struggles. In actual fact, Sumak Kawsay has a different use in indigenous traditions, where it was employed as two separate and holistic concepts to organize the life of the community and the family: 'it provided a "should be" of the group's organization, and even of the family and the individual' (Simbaña 2013). Accordingly, indigenous groups 'have never detached the issue of plurinationality, Sumak Kawsay, and community' (Simbaña 2013). Simbaña's ideas mark an ontological, immanent, and ethical turn in a field dominated by epistemological debate, transcendence, and morale, opening the door to discussing alternative modernities, other developments, and alternatives to capitalism from other worlds and knowledges. The anchoring of the debate in epistemological terms (i.e., in terms of representation) leads to the proliferation of critical discourses that oppose the regime's moral discourse with other sorts of moral criticism in the form of a counter-hegemony or a transcendental alternative. We argue that knowledge is not only about representation – understanding, explaining, and criticizing – but an ontological addition to the world. Therefore, the relationship between science and ideology should move beyond criticism – presupposing the falsity of something from a transcendental judgment to oppose another totality – toward the articulation of other forms of life from an immanent ethics.

Knowledge and *Buen Vivir*

Most analysis and criticisms of BV are epistemological in that they are concerned with both knowledge production and the accuracy of the representation of a given phenomenon. Accordingly, there are attempts to establish links between BV and its implementation in real contexts, its relationship with ancestral knowledge, or with alternative forms of development beyond capitalism and modernity. This form of

knowledge production is related to classical *ideologiekritik* or ideological criticism, which reverts to dichotomous thought and moralist judgment. As Latour argues,

if by ‘epistemology’ we name the discipline that tries to understand how we manage to bridge the gap between representations and reality, the only conclusion to be drawn about it is that this discipline has no subject matter whatsoever, because we *never* bridge such a gap – not, mind you, because we don’t know anything objectively, but because *there is never such a gap*. (2007, 98)

Epistemological questions are always situated between subject and object, opening a breach between the two and raising one essential question that haunts both realism and constructivism: is the statement situated ‘nearer the mind’s categories or closer to the thing to be known?’ (Latour 2007, 94). Accordingly, some analyses of BV look closer at praxis (government actions, political economies, or legislation) while others prefer to investigate discourse (Derridean deconstruction, ideological critique, or discourse analysis). This opens a gap between practice and discourse – some castigate BV as mere rhetoric or false ideology and focus instead on the practices of a given government, while others analyze BV as an isolated discourse or a floating signifier. As such, asking whether BV is ‘true’ or ‘false’ is unproductive, because it always functions in complex assemblages where desire, interest, knowledge, and power converge in the *construction of something new*.

Therefore, we wonder on what basis Gudynas affirms that BV is in a ‘*substantive sense* a critique of development and alternatives that are both post-capitalist and post-socialist, that is situated beyond modernity’ (2013, 184). Is it possible to understand BV and the knowledge it produces in its *substantive meaning*, i.e., unrelated to the larger assemblage of power–knowledge in which it is framed? From this perspective, BV becomes a Platonic idea: a transcendental, isolated, and replicable notion from which the rest of society can or should learn. Governments, for instance, sometimes situate the locus of enunciation in a vague and diffuse vacuum associated with ancient knowledge in search of rooting and legitimacy in origins. This is useful because ‘the image of origins as the source of political unity is clearly central: it is a translation of history into pragmatics’ (Herzfeld 2001, 70). Establishing a symbolic link with ancestral origins enables the State to gain rooting in a messianic and extemporal past. To critics, it provides a radically alternative locus of enunciation, either decolonial or anti-capitalist.

With nuances, classical definitions of myth could apply to the appropriations and uses of BV by the State and some critics: as an explanation of origins, a charter for the present, or an obliteration of social contradiction. The latter suits the role of BV perfectly in the case of the government of Alianza País, which has assumed and internalized national contradictions in its construction (between different ethnic groups, traditionalist *serranos* (Quito) and liberal *costeños* (Guayaquil), etc.). However, it also applies to alternative political projects that avoid dealing with the fact that certain reified political actors, sometimes represented as revolutionary subjects, do not fulfill their role, such as ‘indigenous peoples’, ‘social movements’, or ‘communities’ in general. The location of a certain discourse or event in the past is not legitimizing *per se*; rather, we should ask ourselves about the ‘competing forms of

agency' that give 'the past its legitimating authority' (Herzfeld 2001, 70). And more importantly, we should ask about the potential interest of State forces to divert the academic debate from the analysis of contemporary socioeconomic assemblages toward issues of representation and the past.

From another perspective, Walsh argues that BV

opens and defies modern epistemology – which makes us think that *we reach to the world from knowledge* – encouraging other epistemological logic which makes sense for the majority. That is: that *we reach to knowledge from the world* – pointing to what I have referred elsewhere as a decolonial epistemology and pedagogy. (2008, 146)

This perspective reproduces the nature–culture divide and the *teleportation scheme*. In this scenario, the great problem of knowledge is the attempt

to bridge the gap between two distinct domains totally unrelated to one another, mind and nature. Thus what counts most is to place the cursor along the gradient going from one of the limit – the knowing subject – to the other – the object known. In this positioning of the problem of knowledge, the key question is to decide whether we move forward – toward the unmoving target of the object to be known – or backward – in which case we are thrown back to the prison of our prejudices, paradigms, or pre-suppositions. (Latour 2007, 98)

From this standpoint, forms of knowledge production are always associated with experience and ontological production (Mol 1999). Knowledge can be better interpreted as a process of emergence through the creation of what Latour (2007) calls 'chains of experiences' that allow different viewpoints to be tuned, so that they converge in similar ways of seeing certain phenomena. Knowledge produces *subjects* and *objects*, rather than departing from one to the other. Linking lifestyles with ways of knowing is fundamental to articulating alternative perspectives and projects because

in order to achieve collective action members of a user group need to develop a collective identity which is founded on a shared understanding. The shared understanding enables members to contextualize their appreciation and expectations of the collective as it grows and evolves. (Mosimane, Breen, and Nkhata 2012, 347)

The gap between knowledge and the world does not exist, because 'knowledge is *added* to the world; it does not suck things into representations or, alternatively, disappear in the object it knows. It is added to the landscape' (Latour 2007, 100). Therefore, all the 'interesting questions concern *what* is known by science and *how* we can live with those entities but certainly not *whether* it knows objectively or not' (Latour 2007, 88). In fact, believing that certain subjects can move from knowledge to the world while others move in the opposite direction is not a decolonial view, but rather one that reifies the gaps generated by modern machines of stratification and differentiation of subjectivities. These are 'responsible for the production of systems of social difference and identities . . . systems of social categorization centrally linked to tropes of belonging of those selectively ethnicized, racialized, or unmarked' (Briones 2005, 18). Segmenting types of knowledge according to the direction of the knowledge acquisition pathway provides little advantage or support to those willing to

reverse state policies to permit members of threatened populations to determine their own future, and attempt, thus, to facilitate *in situ* preservation of indigenous knowledges. Those who are seen to possess knowledge must also possess the right to decide on how to save their knowledge, how to use it, and who shall use it. (Agrawal 1995, 432)

The epistemological debate about who can provide the most accurate representation of the Other then reverts to the traditional question of who can legitimately ‘speak for them’ (Spivak 1988). This is a theoretical impasse that puts indigenous peoples in an ‘ontological outside’ rather than in a ‘certain kind of externality’ of modernity (Escobar 2008). This obscures the constructive dialogue in ontological terms about how to build a positive alternative based on relationality between the different modes of existence of heterogeneous social actors. Epistemological debates tend to generate metacultural notions opposing ancestral and Western knowledge, according to which ‘certain aspects are naturalized and defined as acultural, while other aspects are marked as attributes specific to certain *others* or emphasized as *our own* characteristics’ (Briones 2005, 15).

To avoid this trap, ‘it may be more sensible to accept differences within these categories and perhaps find similarities across them’ because only when ‘we move away from the sterile dichotomy between indigenous and western, or traditional and scientific knowledge, that a productive dialog can ensue for the safeguarding of the interests of those who are disadvantaged’ (Agrawal 1995, 433). Reality and references to it – knowledge – are two vectors with separate modes of existence and without necessary correspondence. Does the fact that Spedding (2010) finds no correspondence of BV in indigenous communities diminish the strength of BV as a knowledge-power assemblage? Probably not. Therefore, it might be essential to shift the terms of debate from epistemology to ontology. From a non-representational standpoint, we should understand that signs are not direct representatives of the world but serve to establish connections between actors. That is, knowledge should not be understood as a representation adjusted to reality, but as a set of connections between various different elements. Interpretation, therefore, relies on our capacity to understand, explain, and create relationships between the different actors involved.

Ideology, Ethics, and *Buen Vivir*

Books against structuralism ... are strictly without importance; they cannot prevent structuralism from exerting a productivity which is that of our era. No book against anything ever has any importance; all that counts are books for something, and that know how to produce it. (Deleuze [1953] 2004, 192)

Epistemological debates not only revert to Western binary thought and idealism, but are also linked to a certain type of ideological critique associated with transcendental judgment (understanding, judging, and criticizing), and are therefore opposed to the immanence of the forms of life from which *something new* could arise. In addition, the ways of understanding the links between knowledge and production of subjectivity (subject–object), the relationship between social desire and the interests of social actors, and between ethics and morality, are all key issues to devise a convergence toward alternative political models. This specific articulation between

knowledge and ideology is rooted in the cultural turn in anthropology, poststructuralist analysis, and Marxist *ideologiekritik*, which partly explains why the editorial and academic assemblages have privileged critical over constructive stances in the social sciences.

According to Geertz, ‘the social function of science vis-à-vis ideologies is first to understand them – what they are, how they work, what gives rise to them – and second to criticize them, to force them to come to terms with (but not necessarily to surrender to) reality’ (1964, 72). Critiques following this path lead to an understanding of BV as ‘false consciousness’ in which ideology is understood as a subjective distortion of an external objective reality. Other criticisms closer to Althusser consider BV as a superstructure (representation) that covers the strategies and serves the interests of a dominant power group. According to Robinson and Tormey, for Althusser, interest ‘figures as a result of a direct, unmediated relationship between socio-economic positions and libidinal attachments’ (2010, 29). From a materialist perspective, both readings are problematic because they establish a gap between the subjective and the objective, between representation and reality. Robinson and Tormey further argue that Deleuze and Guattari complicate the idea of an unmediated relationship between socioeconomic positions and ideology, ‘adding the third figure of desire – socio-economic systems must obtain attachments of desire in order to function, in order to constitute “interests”’ (2010, 29). The addition of ‘desire’ (understood as the socio-individual will to establish new relations and connections) is significant for the development of constructive proposals. First, we can move from a transcendent morality to an immanent ethics not based on a totalizing pre-established counter-hegemonic ideal. Second, it shows that a transition to alternative politics that is able to transform citizens’ mentalities must be based on a deep understanding of cultural processes and their implications in the constitution of the desires and interests of people. Then, the key question becomes how to cultivate and support the project of creating *other subjects* who desire non-capitalist economies (Gibson-Graham 2006).

From a Transcendent Moral to an Immanent Ethic: A Politics of Multiplicities

Deleuzian desire operates in association with an ethic that seeks more and better encounters between different lifestyles (Boundas 2006), allowing us to overcome the impasse posed by the understanding of desire as lack put forward by the lineage of Hegel, Lacan, and Žižek. Conceiving desire as lack shifts the focus of analysis to the symbolic and representational realm (unsurprisingly, Žižek always favors the expressive over the material realm in his analyses: popular culture, literature, films, etc.). As philosopher Spangenberg notes,

Deleuze conceives of desire as a process. Instead of setting up a ‘lack’ as its mode and then seeking an object to fill this lack, desire unrolls a plane of consistency or a field of immanence. To put this differently, desire in the Deleuzian sense, doesn’t belong to a subject and it is not directed toward an object. (2009, 97)

As knowledge, desire cannot be conceived in a line between subjects and objects situated beyond the material vector. Clearly, the discourse of BV is articulated in moral terms that place *good life* in a transcendent realm beyond the material in a sort of teleology. BV is the *place to be reached* by changing the productive structures, developing the knowledge economy, and so on. This has to do with the moralistic turn of the regime and its discourse in Ecuador (King 2013).³ Morality involves a judgment based on a pre-established set of beliefs or transcendent principles, to judge always implies appealing to a higher being, always implies something superior to an ontology.

Moralism is intrinsically linked to representational thought, identity, and the politics of recognition, which are unable to think difference without subsuming it into a transcendent set of values. In moralism, ‘difference turns into an object of recognition and representation, and is subsumed under similitude, opposition, analogy and identity’ (Boundas 2006, 8). Epistemological, representational, and transcendental thought leads us to classification and criticism, and to a colonial and dogmatic image of thought – a place from which it is difficult to think about and make room for otherness and its expression; that is, to viable alternatives to the abandonment of modernity and the question of identity (Grossberg 1996). Instead, a Deleuzian ethical position does not resort to transcendental values. Consequently, ‘if there is just one univocal plane of difference, with no transcendent outside, then ethics and politics cannot adopt some separate position of judgment’ (Colebrook 2002, 34–35). Interesting questions do not ask *what something is*, but rather strive to relate a practice or discourse with a specific mode of existence: ‘In other words, you relate the thing or the statement to the mode of existence that it implies, that it envelops in itself. How must it be in order to say that? Which manner of Being does this imply? You seek the enveloped modes of existence, and not the transcendent values. It is the operation of immanence’ (Deleuze 1980). In other words, ‘Deleuzian ethics concerns encounters and relations instead of representations, and the moral law or moral judgments (such as in Kantianism) are replaced with an ethos of “living the good life” (such as in Stoicism)’ (Spangenberg 2009, 99). How to live the good life *cannot be represented*, it is to be found in the multiple forms of relationality and encounters that exist in heterogeneous modes of existence and social life. Thus, it is possible to adopt a symmetrical stance where proper and improper, right and wrong, and good and evil are not fixed from a transcendent position but are from the same plane. This implies an analytical and disciplinary turn, as putting modes of existence at the center privileges the role of qualitative subjects, like anthropology.

Furthermore, Deleuzian ethics is anti-essentialist, meaning that we do not know what to expect of a body or social actor, what it will become. This raises the criticism of orthodox Marxism, Lacanianism, postcolonialism, and all those who seek to face the dominant regime with an opposing counter-hegemony, a master-signifier, or another set of dominant interests or ideas – ideology. For Robinson and Tormey, Deleuze does not offer an alternative hegemony or ideology, as ‘ideology by its very structure requires the reproduction of the lacking subject; (counter)hegemony requires the reproduction of arborescent integration’ (2010, 22). The difficulty lies in seeking alternative projects that do not revert to the same logic and enable us to

replace the ‘hegemony of hegemony’ with an ‘affinity for affinity’ (Day 2005). In Ecuador, this implies a rethinking of ‘the whole nation as a human community’ to recompose ‘the relations between different sociocultural groups that coexist within it’ (Simbaña 2013).

Every hegemonic project usually reproduces mechanisms of interaction with the population based on the ascription of identity (‘you are entitled to this – income, subsidies, training, health care, culture – because you are that’), a logic that perpetuates the exclusion–inclusion dichotomy and hierarchical articulations. Similarly, the Ecuadorian State only ‘recognizes the culture and ideology of the ruling class while considering *others* as inferior and uncivilized, an obstacle to national unity, and a symbol of underdevelopment and backwardness to be overcome’ (Simbaña 2005, 207). Thinking of an alternative to this model implies, according to Lazzarato (2006), affirming the existence of relations external to their terms, which can be equated to what Delanda (1996) calls ‘social meshworks’. This implies that

relations are largely independent of the terms that effectuate them and that those terms may have multiple relations at the same time. That is, they can belong at the same time to one system and another, changing some relations without changing them all... Things relate to each other in a thousand ways, without a master relation that encloses them all, without a being that contains them all. (Lazzarato 2006, 19)

To devise an immanent, non-totalizing political project implies that there is no totality, no master-signifier, opposed to another, assuming ‘the impossibility of merging, abstracting, or subsuming the singularities and the multiplicity’ (Lazzarato 2006, 60). In other words, there are no contradictions or oppositions, but coordinations and disjunctions. Reappropriating BV from an immanent perspective thus involves thinking of how to implement it the present socioeconomic system as an alternative political project. This implies avoiding to conceive it as a ‘lack’ to be satisfied in an undetermined future, or to situate it in the transcendental realm – an *outside* from which it is possible to make judgments about how society and its constituent parts ‘ought to be’. In a way, this is what Hardt and Mezzadra suggest: ‘to take the Constitution and government plans seriously and try to fight for and develop them in reality working with social movements’ (2012, 76).

Desiring Otherwise?

The Deleuzian understanding of ideology opens gaps among interest, desire, and social position that avoid easy readings of sociopolitical contexts, as if every articulation of power results from one unmediated relationship between specific socioeconomic interests and a legitimizing ideological concealment. The space where desires, interests, and collective cultural patterns converge is fundamental to an understanding of BV, but also and more crucially to devise ways of articulating alternative socioeconomic and political constituencies, which will not arise spontaneously from a transformation of relations of production. Following Reich, Deleuze and Guattari seek to understand how is it that certain individuals want things that go against their socioeconomic interests as class or group. In fact, ‘those who have an interest ... are always of a smaller number than those whose interest, in some fashion, “is had” or

represented: the class from the standpoint of praxis is infinitely less numerous or less extensive than the class taken in its theoretical determination' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 344). Why, they ask,

do people in a wide range of contexts so often put the imagined antagonism with a small, often quite harmless or imaginary other, at the forefront of action and attachment, at the expense of stepping on their own 'interests' at a socio-economic level? (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 257)

These 'deviations' of interest prove difficult to explain within the classical Marxist framework and thus became the focus of poststructuralist analysis, including gender, nationalism, racism, or xenophobia. It is necessary to denature capitalist forms of desire arising from the creation of lacks and the individualization process to open up spaces of reflection around the articulation of alternatives. This is especially important for a project that considers plausible 'the project of cultivating subjects of economic difference, particularly subjects who desire noncapitalist economies' (Escobar 2008, 13). From an ethical-political immanent stance, the question is how to show that other modes of existence enable them to 'live better' and to make them become desired, avoiding the processes of individualization and modernization inherent to capitalist development. This is a key issue in Ecuador, as 'peasant organizations, in their struggles and mobilizations, have not developed mechanisms that undermine the systems of belief of the dominant society that could prompt effective changes' (Alfaro 2012, 71). At the same time, consumption of imported goods soar among the middle classes and 'good living' has become synonymous with shopping in malls (de La Torre 2013).

A fundamental contradiction in both analytical and constructive terms arises here: on one hand, between BV as discourse and governmental praxis, and on the other, between the potential articulation of an alternative political project and capitalist development. For us, every alternative and non-totalizing political constituency is underpinned by the strengthening of social affective and emotional ties and relations among subjects, which paves the way for the development of communalization projects that diverge from the mainstream. However, the modernization process is intrinsically linked to the individualization of subjects, involving

a weakening of the emotional relationship with reality, the increase in the use of metaphors or abstractions to explain reality, the development of a sense of linear time, a less intense bond with space as the source of identity, and a positive view of change. (Hernando Gonzalo 2002, 103)

According to Hernando, individualized subjectivity is less rewarding than relational subjectivity and deterritorializes the individual from their ontological environment. Also, more relational identities associated with communitarian ways of life tend to blur social differences (Alonso González 2014; Wilk 1983). Contrarily, individualized subjects tend to exacerbate differences, and search for ways to express them. This is done mainly through the consumption of objects functioning as 'symbols that can represent as many differences as there are now, which help to make visible the efforts of differentiation of those particularities defining identity' (Hernando Gonzalo 2002, 191). This situation is deepened by the process of structural separation (Bourdieu

1984), whereby the access of the poor to higher levels of consumption leads the upper classes to increase their consumption patterns in order to mark their distance from the former. The individualization associated with capitalist development is linked to the will-to-power and control over reality. Powerful and self-sufficient individuals become 'models' to be followed, as 'those who gain power and control in society have an individualized identity (which is why they achieve power, as we have seen), thus idealizing that form of identity as desirable, "progressive" and something towards which people should tend' (Hernando Gonzalo 2002, 211). Moreover, 'when one has not experienced a higher level of control, one cannot imagine it and consequently desire it, but when one has experienced it, one does not want to go back to a prior reality in cultural terms' (Hernando Gonzalo 2002, 211).

Since there are no 'natural' or spontaneous forms of organization that prevent the process of individualization in capitalist contexts, the problem turns out to be as important as shifting the relations of production. This is because individualization is intrinsically linked with the types of desire society tends toward, and the configuration of values of interests of people in terms of lack (of consumption goods that symbolize individualization). These economies of differentiation hinder any transition toward alternatives to modern development and capitalism. From a Marxist viewpoint, Hardt and Mezzadra (2012) consider that relations of production condition this model: continued oil extraction and mining perpetuates the integration of individuals in society as consumers rather than citizens, which represents a form of continuity with neoliberalism and modern developmentalism.

Undoubtedly, different government and social processes in place in Ecuador deepen individualizing trends by enthroning the values of competitiveness, meritocracy, efficiency, and consumption. New government plans not only deepen extractivism, but heavy industrialization (metallurgy, petrochemical, shipbuilding) and super-mining. This turn toward academic capitalism (Villavicencio 2013) or techno-populism (de La Torre 2013) is epitomized by the end of the Yasuní-ITT ecological initiative. Yasuní-ITT was a financial mechanism by which Ecuador would leave oil reserves untapped in the Ecuadorean amazon and would be compensated economically by the international community for avoiding the socio-ecological devastation that exploitation would imply. The conservative shift of the Ecuadorean government is clearer in the attempt of transition to a knowledge economy through the Yachai project – a deterritorialized macro cluster and advanced research center based on imported models – while the indigenous communitarian university Amawtay Wasi is forced to change or disappear.⁴ The government promotes not so much culture as internationally competitive 'cultural industries'. The public system of subsidies creates a patronage network while fostering consumption of imported goods. The support to the so-called 'popular and solidarity economy' masks a process of underemployment formalization and focalization of the lower classes, whose forms of life are not understood and promoted but rather 'normalized' following World Bank and modern bureaucratic criteria. In addition, different plans encourage the figure of the individual entrepreneur, for instance by promoting the conversion of small farms into export-oriented agribusinesses that intensify production with chemical fertilizers and genetically modified organisms.

Academic Work as Transformative Practice?

All these developments, along with the overall urban bent of the process, the prevailing centralist nationalism, and the repression of social movements, are deterritorializing populations and communities while eliminating social creativity and networking capabilities. Figures such as the traditional *ayllu* or contemporary *comunas* (traditional communitarian forms of organizing social life around common goods) are disregarded and subsumed under the state apparatus on unfavorable terms, encouraging their fragmentation through market and administrative mechanisms: for instance, not accepting the figure of comuna as a political, juridical, or economic figure (Personal Communication with Floresmilo Simbaña, 13 August 2013). However, due to the heterogeneity of the Ecuadorian government, there are also positive initiatives such as Ramírez Gallego's (2012) attempt to link BV with the availability of 'relational goods'. Those are defined as free time available to develop a good life, which Ramírez proposes to measure by heterodox econometric models. The idea does not stem from indigenous ancestral ideas, but from the aristocratic Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, which extricates nature from human beings, rural and urban, mind and body, and thus excludes huge masses of the population from good living (Bretón de Zaldivar 2013, 79). More importantly, it understands a good life as an *individual* project, and relational goods as free time available to *individuals*, thus deepening the individualizing character of BV. Can we reassemble *relationality* in other terms and redirect it toward other forms of knowing and entering in relation to produce subjects that desire other forms of life?

Similarly, this development strategy is based on certain social alliances that depend on the deepening of extractivism (Dávalos 2013). The growing middle-class consumer expenditure on imported goods is increasingly compensated by the social distribution of extractive rents through two main mechanisms: the widespread subsidy of fuel and cooking gas and the growth of the state bureaucracy. The economic team of the Ecuadorian government, mainly composed of liberal academics, has not been able to develop macroeconomic policies that could advance in the transformation of the productive matrix, as set out in the PNBV. Instead, the hyper-consumerism of the middle classes has led to a greater disruption in the rural–urban relationships and to an increase of internal imbalances. The outcome of alternative models such as the cooperative company Coopera in the region of Azuay have not been properly studied or understood. Coopera managed to establish virtuous commercial and meaningful relationships between small rural farmers and thousands of urban consumers in the city of Cuenca through a network of supply centers and restaurants. However, it finally collapsed in 2013, mainly due to its corruption, lack of proper management strategies, and financialization. Indeed, the oversized financial activity – primarily through consumer credit – overshadowed the productive economy without any governmental control and without any support or monitoring from scholars.

Instead of learning from this significant experience to improve the management of solidarity and popular economies throughout the country, the new PNBV reduces funding in this area while fostering investment in major infrastructure works and heavy industries (SENPLADES 2013). To a large extent, and according to our

interviews and meetings with scholars and government experts in different public institutions and ministries, they continue conceiving the solidarity and popular economy as a form of backward and preindustrial socioeconomic relationship. This has resulted in the attempt to turn these relationships into formal economic units instrumental to the process of state modernization: to be funded, these economies must be accountable to the central institutions in Quito, paying taxes and modernizing their accounting systems. In other words, to be supported, solidarity and popular economies must be transformed and incorporated into the wider economic structure. This neglects the different forms through which these economies generate wealth, and the different epistemological and ontological grounds in which they are based, an issue that cannot be reduced to ideas of backwardness, informality, or pre-modernity.

Scholars, and especially social scientists, could play a key role accompanying the processes of change working hand in hand with institutions and communities. They could rethink the development strategy and macroeconomic policies in line with BV while becoming theoretically aware of communitarian economies, functioning as practical mediators between rural productions and urban consumers and thereby fostering a transformation of the productive matrix based on the popular and solidarity economies. This would help to overcome monoculture economies, to promote endogenous development, and to avoid dynamics of extractivist accumulation, where the conception of BV comes down to the perpetuation of consumerism based on foreign exchange earnings from the export of raw materials. How, then, can we think of transformative academic work that meets the needs and challenges of BV, not so much building epistemological and ideological discourses, but articulating research with specific ontological realities? This article has by no means the answer to this question and is not the last word on BV, but we hope to spark a debate about the ontological grounds of the process and its significance beyond the hegemonic discourse assumed by the Ecuadorian state.

Living Good or Living Otherwise? An Ontological Turn to Thinking of Alternatives

To think of Sumak Kawsay as a different model, as a future-oriented proposal against capitalism, we should start from the communitarian. However, to have a more objective conception of community we should stop thinking of it as a rural, agrarian and isolated entity to consider it a complex system with several dimensions, some of which are hierarchical. The communitarian model must be inserted into a much broader context beyond the local. (Simbaña 2013)

Simbaña operates on an essential shift that our work emphasizes: to stop thinking of the social from the transcendence of BV, and to take the immanence of the common as the starting point. Starting from the common implies elaborating a notion of relational goods and relationality based on the collective rather than on the individual. The notion of relationality has been explored in anthropology to analyze the patterns of relations deemed possible and correct among people; that is, 'relations between relations' that 'allow individual agents to organize the otherwise chaotic indeterminacies of social existence' (Herzfeld 1992, 69). This can be equated

with the Andean ayllu, in which the territory ‘is not the “land” – factor of production – but rather precisely the totality of the system of relationships’ (Soto 2012). Thinking relationally involves abandoning quantitative and technocratic notions associated with modernity to account for the multiplicity of the social qualitatively in order to elaborate political alternatives without imposing transcendental and essentialist values. The common, understood not only as a resource but also as a potentiality and a form of organization (Hardt and Negri 2009), should rest in communities, ‘social networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and practices of human exchange that are not reduced to the market form’ (De Angelis 2003, 5). Affective relations and the identification between community resources and subjects are foundational elements for strengthening collective action, whose understanding ‘provide[s] the premise for interpreting, tracking, and directing change’ (Mosimane, Breen, and Nkhata 2012).

Leaving modernity entails abandoning the identitarian project associated with representation and moving toward an understanding of otherness and its metapatterns (Grossberg 1996); not to represent or mystify them, nor to ground legitimacy claims on some supposed origins, but to establish positive relational alternatives (between consumers and producers, territorialized communities, and social movements, etc.). In its epistemological and transcendental commitment, the debate around BV has treated indigenous peoples as cultural representations, curiously but significantly ignoring indigenous visions and the question of comunas. The hundreds of urban and rural comunas are neither unspoiled pre-modern havens where relationality, ayllu, and Sumak Kawsay subsist, nor revolutionary subjects, nor worthless places contaminated by modernity. Comunas are entangled in different processes of transformation that tend to fragment community life, such as public policy, urban migration, salaried work, abandonment of common work for private enterprises, etc. Debates are missing about the role and functioning of actually existing comunas beyond the abstractions of BV.

Since the ‘socialist State’ is not reverting the trend toward social de-communalization, it is essential to discuss on these grounds the task of how to ‘communalize the state’ (Hardt and Mezzadra 2012) from the ground, understanding the common as a form of organization, a ‘social practice of communing’ (Harvey 2012). This involves thinking how to ‘bridge the level of individual persons and that of the largest social entities (such as territorial states) through an embedding of assemblages in a succession of micro and macro scales’ (Escobar 2008, 288). As Harvey notes, the ‘collective organization of small-scale solidarity economies along common-property lines cannot translate into global solutions without resort to “nested” and therefore hierarchical organizational forms’ (2012, 69). Thus, we should problematize the concept of ‘hierarchy’ and its articulations, a subject traditionally avoided by the left. DeLanda’s (1996) flat ontology complicates the relationship between horizontality and hierarchy by providing historical evidence of how certain hierarchical articulations generate self-organizing structures (meshworks) and vice versa. Moreover, meshworks should not be considered positive or revolutionary, or hierarchies essentially negative and oppressive. It is necessary to analyze and imagine how different socioeconomic human constituencies give rise to certain articulations of desire and subjectivity.

This article has attempted to account for Ecuadorian BV along multiple axes and planes, raising questions and problematizing the issue rather than offering straightforward answers. It argues that the epistemological and transcendental logic prevailing in the BV debate reinstates the separation between subjects and objects, nature and culture, hindering the articulation of alternative political configurations. Accordingly, it seeks to shift the debate from epistemological questions about the conditions of knowledge to thinking about the nature of the world ontologically. Leaving epistemology does not imply neglecting theoretical reflection, but moral judgment and transcendence. This opens the door to constructive thought about potential mediations between different modes of existence, academic concepts, and discourse and practice, paving the way to establish a link among life, knowledge, and ideology. Here, the interesting questions concern ‘how we can live’ (Latour 2007) with those entities that result from our knowledge acquisition processes and what modes of existence and desire derive from certain knowledge–power articulations. Ultimately, the question of the articulation of desire in relation to ideology should be considered at the same level or as a fundamental constitutive part of the debate around the change of the productive matrix. In the absence of deep cultural and anthropological changes in relation to the articulations of desire and belief, the transition to *any* alternative politics will remain an ideal. After all, socialism ‘is not all about changing the relations of production, but primarily the citizenship’s mentality’ (SENPLADES 2013, 11).

Notes

- [1] All texts originally in Spanish have been translated by the authors.
- [2] In Bolivia, ‘good living’ is often translated as *suma qamaña*, from Aymara.
- [3] The moral turn is clear in different aspects: getting rid of poverty has become a moral imperative and a ‘good end’ in itself, while selling alcohol on Sundays has been prohibited, etc.
- [4] While parliament was approving a \$1,000,000 yearly budget for the creation of the universities of the Amazonian, Yachai, Arts and Education, a seminar was being held on 15 August 2013 to discuss potential survival strategies for Amawtay Wasi, which was required to fulfill similar evaluation criteria of other universities (in terms of impact, PhD ratio, etc.). The State has never supported Amawtay Wasi and since 2011 has forbidden the enrolment of new students.

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