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Toward Human/Non-Human Conviviality : Buen Vivir as a Transformative Alternative to Capitalist Coloniality

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Abstract: Capitalist coloniality has produced multiple crises in our minds, bodies, and social relations by commoditizing wellbeing. Our sense of belonging, collective responsibility, and conviviality with other human and earth beings have been miserably deprived. This chapter explores the decolonizing potential of new forms of conviviality as alternatives to the crisis for humanity and the biophysical environment in the Global South. Most specifically it focuses on examining the multiple dimensions of the notion of *Buen Vivir* / *Vivir Bien* ('living well'), a conceptualization of the Indigenous living world and a political project in the Latin American Andes that connotes a condition of mutual interdependence between individuals, the community, and nature. The chapter investigates how this transformative alternative can provide us with systemic solutions to questions of integral wellbeing through solidarity, a sense of community, ecological knowledge, and sustainability, as opposed to the aggravated individualism and exclusions of capitalist coloniality. It argues that the main strength of *Buen Vivir* is its extension of the concept of conviviality from the sphere of humans to humans *and* non-humans. The chapter also discusses its conceptual and political contradictions, limitations, and failures, especially with regard to its co-option to state agendas in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Introduction

This chapter explores the decolonizing potential of new forms of conviviality that have arisen in the Global South as transformative alternatives to the crisis of climate change, biodiversity, and humanity produced by capitalist coloniality. It does so by examining the multiple dimensions of the notion of *Buen Vivir* / *Vivir Bien* ('living well'),¹ a conceptualization of the Indigenous living world – and a political project – that connotes a condition of mutual interdependence between individuals, the community, and nature. The term has become prominent in academic literature and activist spheres since the late 2000s, when it was popularized by progressive Left-wing regimes, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, as a new development alternative (Acosta, 2013; Farah & Vasapollo, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Schavelzon, 2015; Vega, 2011; Villalba, 2013; Walsh, 2010). Portrayed as the crystallization of diverse Andean and Amazonian Indigenous epistemologies, worldviews, and means of livelihood, *Buen Vivir* raised many expectations as a socially and ecologically more sustainable alternative to the unsustainable development solutions

of Western modernity. While much of the initial enthusiasm for the decolonizing potential of the concept has faded due to the miserable failures of its state capture (Radcliffe, 2015a, 2015b; Ranta, 2018a), I suggest here that we treat the contradictions and limitations related to state co-option as the continuation of what Mignolo (2011) calls the “darker side of Western modernity”: coloniality. For Motta (2016), from whom I borrow the concept of capitalist coloniality, coloniality is “[modernity’s] underside which co-created and sustains capitalism” (p. 34). Capitalist coloniality thus encapsulates the worldview, structure, and epistemological foundations of the prevailing world system, based on racial categorizations, alienation from nature, and the denial of otherness (Motta & Esteves, 2014; Motta, 2018; see also Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Yet the decolonizing potential of the radical grassroots politics of Indigenous epistemologies in Bolivia and Ecuador has not withered away. Consequently, I argue that *Buen Vivir* – and especially the Indigenous terms from which it originated – as the conceptualization of lived Indigenous philosophy may serve to extend the concept of conviviality from the sphere of humans to humans *and* non-humans, thus providing systemic solutions to the fundamental questions of our contemporary times. There is considerable need to reconceptualise integral wellbeing through solidarity, a sense of community, and regenerated human / nature relations in the face of the aggravated individualism and economic, social, and ecological exploitations and exclusions of capitalist coloniality.

The term conviviality has increasingly gained widespread popularity among academic scholars and social activists, as has coloniality as its counterpart. Conviviality can be associated, among other things, with the pioneering works of Ivan Illich (1973), who defined it as an “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment” (p. 12). This view has inspired many post-development and postcolonial scholars by setting the conditions for a “multidimensional balance of human life” in contrast with the imbalances caused by industrial productive patterns and economic growth (ibid., p. 5).² Post-development scholar Majid Rahnema (1997), for example, suggested that conviviality, reciprocity, and communal solidarity should be perceived as positive attributes of non-capitalist societies in the Global South even if mainstream development interventions often tried to portray them as embodiments of “underdevelopment”. In contemporary Euro-Atlantic contexts, conviviality has gained a great deal of attention in counteracting racism, as suggested, for example, by Paul

Gilroy (2004), who talks of the potential of “convivial culture” or “multicultural conviviality”. Intertwining processes of globalization and capitalist coloniality have brought both foreign development professionals to the Global South, and migrants and refugees to the Global North. Unifying analytical tools for understanding conviviality at the crossroads of complex global power asymmetries can be found in the works of the so-called Modernity / Coloniality / Decoloniality (MCD) thought collective in Latin America that includes such authors as Enrique Dussel, María Lugones, Walter D. Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, and Catherine Walsh.

To describe the complex, racialized processes that are integral to the unequal intertwining of the modern world, Mignolo (2000) has utilized the term “planetary conviviality” (p. 157). This describes the emancipatory or decolonizing projects of cosmopolitanisms that counteract the managerial global designs of modernity visible in Christianity, imperialism, and neoliberal globalization. Yet Mignolo claims that even narratives of emancipatory cosmopolitanism, propagated for example in the works of Kant and Marx, performed the perspectives of Western modernity (ibid., p. 723). Thus, they were intimately intertwined with the legacy of colonial domination, the violent Spanish conquest of the Americas, and the present-day ramifications of continuing coloniality (see Mignolo, 2005; Moraña, Dussel & Jáuregui, 2008). As a way to gain true planetary conviviality, Mignolo proposes a critical cosmopolitan project of diversity that connects from below diverse subaltern alternatives in a pluricentric way (Mignolo, 2000, p. 745). One opportunity to root this call to specific ethnographic locations with an emphasis on human and non-human encounters has opened up as a result of the recent ontological turn in social anthropology and political ecology (Blaser, 2013; De La Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2010). Inspired by post-development, decolonial, and ontological scholarship in critical development studies and social anthropology, my chapter on the complexities of *Buen Vivir* at the intersections of conviviality and coloniality also responds to this call.

These analytical tools aside, my interest in *Buen Vivir* as human / non-human conviviality derives from my own ethnographic encounters with Indigenous movements and activists in Bolivia, whose use and circulation of the emic Spanish concept of *convivir bien* (‘good conviviality’) has multiple Indigenous variants, such as *Suma Qamaña* in Aymara and *Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua (Kichwa in Ecuador). Ethnography is a qualitative methodology typical of

anthropological inquiries that seek to build deep description and understanding of social phenomena through the active engagement of the researcher in the lives of the researched over a long period of time (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Wolcott, 2005). The strength of ethnographic methodology is that by emphasizing the importance of personal histories, experiences, and everyday practices, it renders analysis contextually rich, historically grounded, and globally embedded from below. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2008–2009 and 2018 in the Bolivian capital of La Paz amongst ministers, public servants, consultants, development technicians, and Indigenous activists, with an emphasis on participant observation and interviews in state ministries and institutions. While the examination of *Buen Vivir* has often focused on grassroots Indigenous struggles, my ethnographic focus on state bureaucracies allowed me to gain a deeply contextualizing and richly detailed understanding of changing Indigenous-state encounters in a situation in which racialized subaltern Indigenous and peasant actors had entered the spheres of state power with the aim of challenging its deeply rooted capitalist coloniality. I had followed the journey and changing positionalities of Indigenous activists from local scales to national and global political forums since 2001, when I lived in Andean rural Indigenous communities working in an Indigenous organization. As part of an Andean network involving Indigenous peoples in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, the organization promoted the circulation of the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* – a Quechua term for ‘living well’ – as a subaltern political strategy and as an alternative to Western concept of development (for more on my own multiple positionalities, see Ranta, 2014; Ranta 2016a).

I acknowledge that the academic and activist scholarship on *Buen Vivir* is becoming vast. Indeed, in the context of Bolivia, anthropologist Anders Burman (2017) has recently critically remarked that *Vivir Bien* “can mean everything and nothing” (p. 155). Thus, what may define it best is its heterogeneity, diversity, and propensity to generate contestation. It is outside the scope of the current work to conduct an all-encompassing literature review; instead, selected key texts are analysed in more detail. In the first section of the chapter, I trace the conceptual origins and meanings of the notion of *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador and Bolivia, demonstrating how it has served as a political tool in grassroots Indigenous struggles for lands, territories, and self-determination. In the second section, I investigate the political co-option of *Buen Vivir* to state policy and legislations, as well as its portrayal as a new form of ‘development’ in the face of serious

contradictions and failures in its conceptualization and implementation. I argue that the ideal of conviviality has been seriously confronted by the capitalist coloniality of the state despite its being run by progressive political forces. Third, political ontological views of *Buen Vivir* are introduced as a possible way to overcome disappointments with the state co-option of the concept. I aim to demonstrate the potential of grassroots politics in the search for more socially and ecologically sustainable futures. Let me start by tracing the origins and early meanings of *Buen Vivir* as part of the Indigenous living world and political struggles for lands, territories, and self-determination.

Origins and Early Meanings of *Buen Vivir*

In Ecuador, one of the earliest mentions of *Buen Vivir* (or ‘*Bien Vivir*’) can be found in the work of the French anthropologist Philippe Descola (1986), who studied the Amazonian Achuar Indigenous group. In a book chapter entitled “The Criteria for Buen Vivir” (*Los criterios del buen vivir*), Descola utilizes the term *Shiir Waras* (which he translates as ‘*Bien Vivir*’) to describe the Achuar’s unique relation with nature as one of harmony and reciprocity between individuals, society, and nature. He distinguishes this Indigenous philosophy from those of peasants or corporations, for example, who use nature as an object for extracting resources for economic gain. Translations of an Indigenous concept similar to *Buen Vivir* can also be found in the studies of other European anthropologists working with Amazonian Indigenous people in the 1990s (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015, pp. 307–8). Thus, anthropologists acted as brokers and translators of knowledge, exercising power in defining indigeneity.

With the Kichwa concept of *Sumak Kawsay*, however, Indigenous activists themselves were depicting the Indigenous living world. It appears that it was the Amazonian Kichwa community of Sarayaku in Ecuador, especially through the work of Kichwa anthropologist Carlos Viteri Gualinga and the *Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza* (OPIP), who first started to elaborate the term *Sumak Kawsay* (Alonso González & Macías Vázquez, 2015; Altman, 2013; Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015; Ramírez-Cendrero & Santiago García, 2017). From

the early 1990s, the political agendas of the OPIP – whose main goal was the defence of land rights and the recognition of Indigenous territory and self-determination – defined the notion of *Sumak Kawsay* as a Sarayaku way of life in which communities live in harmony with nature and territory (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015, p. 312). Prior to the Spanish term *Buen Vivir* gaining prominence in Ecuador's state politics, Viteri (2003) defined *Sumak Kawsay* as “*Buen Vivir* or harmonious life”, *Sumak* referring to good, beautiful, harmonious, perfect, ideal, and *Kawsay* referring to life and existence (pp. 46–8). In his portrayal, *Sumak Kawsay* was intimately tied to Indigenous territory as a living world in which material and spiritual elements interact: to gain resources for living well, the Sarayaku need to live in harmony with the spirits of the land, water, and forests. In concrete practice this meant that, for Indigenous peoples, a river, for example, was not just a river that could be harnessed for energy, irrigation, and consumption, but an integral part of the social, economic, and cosmological order. The same applied to the community: harmony, mutual help, and reciprocity were described as foundational elements of the Indigenous way of life (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015, p. 318–9). To conclude, the elaboration of cultural conceptualizations by Indigenous scholars and activists tied the defence of Indigenous living worlds to the defence of Indigenous territory. This demonstrates that the theory of social and political change started to emerge from concrete grassroots struggles for social and environmental justice among Indigenous subaltern groups themselves.

In Bolivia, it was the Aymara, especially Simón Yampara, Mario Torrez, and other members of the *Centro Andino de Desarrollo Agropecuario* (CADA), who theorized the concept of *Suma Qamaña* during the 1990s and 2000s (Burman, 2017, pp. 156–7; see Torrez & Yampara, 1998; Yampara 1993, 2001). In my ethnographic encounters with Yampara, he defined *Suma Qamaña* as the Aymara's harmonious paradigm of life, bringing lands, territories, reciprocal social relations, and spiritual aspects into a balanced unity, as opposed to the Western matrix of development (Ranta, 2018a, pp. 66–8). If, in contemporary societies, conviviality tends to refer to the sphere of the social, of the community and society, which is detached from nature, *Suma Qamaña* rather suggested the opposite: intimate interrelations and interdependency between humans and non-humans. In Spanish, Yampara utilized the concept *convivir bien*, which translates as ‘living well together’, the word ‘together’ referring here to both humans and non-humans, and especially the *ayllu*. The *ayllu* was the traditional spatial organization of the

Aymara nations prior to the colonial conquests by the Inca state *Tawantinsuyu* (ca. 1438–1533) and the Spanish (1533–1825). Each *ayllu* had territory in different ecological zones along the Andean mountain range that produced different crops and food staples (Murra 2002[1956]). An elaborate system of economic exchange and reciprocity existed between them, maintained through kinship, gifts, and labour obligations (D’Altroy, 2002). At the same time as Yampara and others were starting to give salience to *Suma Qamaña* during the 1990s and early 2000s, struggles for the return to collective ownership of traditional Indigenous territories (*ayllu*) in the Bolivian Andes were gaining strength. Subsequently, discourses of *Suma Qamaña* played an instrumental role in the revitalization of the *ayllus* in Andean Indigenous movements such as the *Consejo Nacional de los Ayllus y Markas de Qullasuyu* (CONAMAQ).

Although Indigenous struggles for territories and self-determination had been ongoing for decades, if not centuries, the push to utilize the new political space for doing this derived from the awareness that Indigenous living worlds had become increasingly endangered. Starting from Chile in the 1970s, neoliberal reforms that shrank the regulatory role of states, opened national markets to the predatory operations of transnational enterprises, and deepened the tutelage of international financial institutions over states in Latin America intensified during the 1980s and 1990s (Kohl & Farthing, 2006). Transnational oil and gas exploration accelerated, and felling forests for cattle ranching, soya production, and coca farming increased, especially in the Amazon region, leading to intimidating threats and the violent displacements of Indigenous people from their lands and livelihoods (Postero, 2007; Yashar, 2005). An epistemological shift emerged, particularly amongst miners, workers, and peasants, who had relied on Marxist, Trotskyite, and national revolutionist thinking and political practice. In Bolivia, the Aymara and the Quechua of the Andes, many of whom had for decades identified themselves as Left-wing peasants, started increasingly to network with lowlands Indigenous groups and to identify their political cause through the global advocacy of indigeneity. Alliance building between Indigenous groups and peasants and between the Andes and the Amazon was inspired by the influence of the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador* (CONAIE). In the late 1980s, it had launched a forceful political movement in Ecuador for the promotion of Indigenous autonomies and the construction of the so-called plurinational state, a new concept that also started to circulate amongst Bolivian movements (Yashar, 2005, p. 179). Discourses of *Sumak Kawsay* /

Suma Qamaña and plurinationalism started increasingly to overlap and articulate with each other in the search for tools to protect and revitalize Indigenous territories in contexts of increasing neoliberal intrusions. Plurinationalism became a key denominator of state politics in Evo Morales' Bolivia (2006–2019) and Rafael Correa's Ecuador (2007–2017) during the mid-2000s, when many activists from Indigenous and peasant movements rose into political positions as ministers, vice-ministers, and members of parliament. The Spanish translations of Indigenous terminologies describing the Indigenous living world and struggles for lands and territories – *Buen Vivir / Vivir Bien* – became major denominators in state policy and legislations, an issue to which I turn next.

State Co-option of *Buen Vivir*

The notion of *Buen Vivir / Vivir Bien* emerged as an overarching political term in state policy and legislation with the presidential election of the Aymara peasant activist Evo Morales in December 2005 in Bolivia and the presidential election of the Left-wing Rafael Correa in 2007 in Ecuador. In Bolivia, the *Vivir Bien* term was introduced to the political agendas of Morales' political party, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), primarily by the Left-wing Minister of Planning, Carlos Villegas, and David Choquehuanca, one of the longest serving Aymara ministers within the governing regime, filling the post of Foreign Minister from January 2006 until January 2017. The term became the key denominator of MAS' first governmental development plan, in which it was defined in the following way:

The notion of *Vivir Bien* refers to encounters between Indigenous peoples and communities, and respects cultural diversity and identity. It means “to live well among ourselves”; it is about communitarian conviviality (*convivencia comunitaria*)... It is about belonging to a community and being protected by it, as well as about living in harmony with nature... (República de Bolivia, 2007, p. 2; my translation)

Here “communitarian conviviality” referred not solely to egalitarian relations between people, but also between people and nature. While the term disappeared from policy after Morales' first regime, it re-emerged, however, in the 2016–2020 policy guideline (*Plan de Desarrollo*

Económico y Social en el Marco del Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien). It was defined as an Indigenous, Afro-Bolivian, and peasant alternative to capitalism and modernity (Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo, 2015, p. 4), thus emphasizing both political-economic and decolonial aspects of the concept. The policy document portrays *Vivir Bien* as a conglomeration of knowledges – knowledge about being and thriving, about learning and thinking, and about relating with one another, to name a few – constructed on the basis of harmonious relations between the individual, the community, the cosmos, and Mother Earth (ibid., 5). Thus, by utilizing the managerial global designs of modernity (state policy), new state actors tried to promote an epistemological shift by introducing subaltern philosophies to the exact locus of capitalist coloniality: the oppressive state.

In the case of Ecuador, it has been argued that *Buen Vivir* became state policy and the subject of legislation not solely through Indigenous movements but also through the brokerage of urban middle class politicians and scholars of the Latin American pink tide (Altman, 2013, p. 291). Indigenous ecological alternatives offered possible solutions to the search for a new environmental political agenda in the face of global climate emergency. In the Ecuadorian National Development Plan, *Buen Vivir* was defined as a “social, liberating alternative which proposes other priorities for social organization to the simple economic growth implicit in the [Western] development paradigm” (Ecuador SENPLADES, 2013, p. 16). It refers to “an environmentally and socially sustainable development objective that is strengthened and guaranteed through rights-based citizenship in which the barriers to substantive citizenship caused by impoverishment are removed” (Radcliffe, 2015b, p. 259). Ecological views were thus combined with the more traditional redistributive concerns central to the agendas of the Left (Acosta, 2013; Ramírez, 2010).

Instrumental in this was the economist Alberto Acosta, a former minister in Correa’s government and the President of the Ecuadorian Constituent Assembly, who was familiar with Viteri’s work on *Sumak Kawsay* (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015, p. 317). Together with Uruguayan Eduardo Gudynas, one of the best-known scholars on *Buen Vivir*, who assisted Acosta in the Assembly, they paraphrased *Buen Vivir* as an ecological, biocentric proposal to counter Earth’s crisis. According to Gudynas (2011), the notion of *Buen Vivir* confronts the idea

of development as linear transformation from one stage to another, extends the notion of human wellbeing from material resources to spirituality and happiness, and treats nature as having rights. While recognizing Indigenous aspects of the concept, however, he also started to distance it from its intimate association with Indigenous living worlds and struggles for lands and territories, rather associating it more closely with other critics of capitalist coloniality, including post-development theorists (such as Ivan Illich and Arturo Escobar), political ecologists, and feminist scholars and movements (ibid., pp. 444–5). This move facilitated its detachment from the specificities of epistemological and political realities in Bolivia and Ecuador, allowing the concept's more intensive cosmopolitan travel as a transformative decolonizing alternative to modernity / coloniality. Since then, *Buen Vivir* has been popping up in such diverse settings as amongst ministers in Bhutan, in governmental agendas in Nicaragua, in environmental networks in South East Asia, in electoral campaigns of individual politicians in Finland, in de-growth events in Canada and Sweden, and so forth.

While ideally *Buen Vivir* echoed a transition away from growth-based neoliberal reforms and development thinking, and practice based on capitalist coloniality, the practice of state politics in Bolivia and Ecuador has demonstrated that there has been many tensions, contradictions, and limits to its implementation. In Ecuador, for example, the Indigenous movement CONAIE severed its support for Correa soon after 2008, accusing him of forgetting the principles of *Buen Vivir* because, while the Ecuadorian state was declared plurinational, Indigenous peoples felt that they were not gaining true autonomy over lands and territories and the governance of their natural resources (Altman, 2013). In fact, instead of decentring the state (as plurinationalism denotes), its presence in guiding and decision-making with regard to the economy and development has been strengthened in Bolivia and Ecuador (Walsh, 2010; Postero, 2017; Ranta, 2018a). Meanwhile, at the same time as Bolivia was promoting ambitious climate goals internationally in the name of *Vivir Bien* (Fabricant, 2013), it intensified its extractivist policies and dependencies on natural gas industries, causing new conflicts with and amongst Indigenous groups (McNeisch, 2013; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2014). Morales' state expended considerable effort, sometimes violently, to bring peasant unions and Indigenous organizations under the tutelage of the centralized state in the guise of the new plurinational arrangement (Ranta, 2016b). As a result, major Indigenous organizations withdrew from the alliance, accusing the government of

intruding onto Indigenous territories through state-led resource extractivism – an economy based on the export of natural resources – which allows the government to run highly popular social benefit programs with the revenues (Gudynas, 2015). Consequently, there is an agreement amongst *Buen Vivir* scholars that its adoption as policy by the state and subsequent legislation have not provided “closure to the eternally contested notion of development” (Radcliffe, 2015a, 861). Claims of conviviality between humans and non-humans have begun to appear mere rhetoric.

Furthermore, in Bolivia, the increasing role of the state in defining the parameters of development has been accompanied by authoritarian tendencies: the centralization and personification of state power in the MAS and the figure of Morales (Ranta, 2017). In 2019, against the dictates of the constitution and the popular vote in a referendum, Morales and his Vice-President, Alvaro García Linera, ran for the presidency for the fourth time with the conservative slogan of continuing with “progress and development”. Due to state co-option of the *Buen Vivir* / *Vivir Bien* discourse, it has been losing its cutting-edge positionality as a subaltern philosophy and a political strategy amongst many radical social movements. Yet, while much of the initial enthusiasm for the decolonizing potential of the concept have faded due to the miserable failures of its state capture (Radcliffe, 2015a, 2015b; Ranta, 2018a), I suggest here that we treat the contradictions and limitations related to its co-option as the continuation of capitalist coloniality; the decolonizing potential of the radical grassroots politics of Indigenous epistemologies has not disappeared. In Ecuador, Radcliffe (2015a; 2015b) makes a clear distinction between the governmental *Buen Vivir* agenda and the continued potential of the Kichwa concept of *Sumak Kawsay* at grassroots levels. In Bolivia, time will tell whether the recent derogation of Morales’ legacy will lead to the enforcement of capitalist coloniality with overt racism and violence. On the other hand, moments of change may also open up forums for the booming of new Lefts, new feminisms, new decolonial projects, and new Indigenous alternatives that for too long now have been latent and subordinated to the will of the governing regime. One opportunity to examine *Buen Vivir* / *Vivir Bien* potential, beyond empirical cases of state co-option, has appeared as the result of the recent ontological turn in social anthropology and political ecology, to which I turn next.

‘Living Well Together’ as Indigenous Living Worlds

I argue that *Buen Vivir* – and more particularly the Indigenous terms from which it originates – as the conceptualization of lived Indigenous philosophy may serve in extending the concept of conviviality from the sphere of humans to humans *and* non-humans, thus providing systemic solutions to fundamental questions of our contemporary times. Indigenous living worlds have been discussed in recent political ontology scholarship that argues that, despite the hegemony of centuries-old modernity, there are ontological differences in perceiving “what exists” and “what is there” (Blaser, 2013; De La Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2010). According to this line of argument, anthropological knowledge has traditionally looked at human societies as ‘cultures’, with comparisons between them showing up as ‘cultural differences’. In contrast, scholars of ontology argue that “cultural difference is not different enough”; an ontological stance, rather, is an “attempt to take others and their real difference seriously” (Carrithers et al. 2010, p. 175; quoted in Blaser, 2013, p. 550). Thus, to take two examples: the divergence in the portrayal of Ausangate Mountain as an earth being (outlined below) by the Quechua peoples and as a touristic destination by the Peruvian state (De La Cadena, 2015), or the orca whale as the deceased spirit of the Mowachat / Muchalaht First Nation and as an object of intervention by the Canadian fisheries, bureaucrats, and environmentalists (Blaser, 2013, p. 548), are not solely demonstrations of cultural differences within a single reality, but rather a manifestation of an ontological conflict between different ways of knowing, perceiving, and being in the world(s). According to this view, *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña* are specific ways of existing and relating in and with the world.

The key significance of these grounded Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies is their implications for the radical rethinking of our being in the world, in the face of the crisis of climate change, ecological diversity, and global extractivism. According to Blaser (2013), the ever-deepening separation between culture and nature is constructive of modernity. The mastery of nature as the key element of modernity is backed by sciences that universalize the truth about the environment and nature, while portraying other knowledges about them as cultural beliefs

(ibid., p. 555). However, taking an ontological stance on others' "real differences" provides us with a different perception about our being in the biophysical ecology. To take an example from Marisol De La Cadena's (2015) ground-breaking ethnography from the Peruvian Andes: the Quechua people's relationship to the surrounding mountains is explained by stating that, "to them, Ausangate [the mountain] *is*, period. [It is] not a belief but a presence enacted through everyday practices through which *runakuna* [Quechua people] and earth beings are together in *ayllu* [Indigenous territory]" (p. 26). Quechua being in the world includes not solely humans but non-humans as well; it is living well together amongst humans and between humans and non-humans.

To summarize, in one world, a river, a mountain, the land are nature, which can be re-conceptualized and appropriated as a natural resource, and then be commoditized and given a price and sold. In another world, they are earth beings which are more than nature: an earth being does not "follow distinctions between the physical and the metaphysical, the spiritual and the material, nature and human" (De La Cadena, 2015, p. 25). Indeed, one of key claims of scholars of political ontology is that the culture / nature divide is not universal: there are people in the realm of the 'non-modern', as Blaser (2013) would say, who act and are in the world differently, providing us with radically new ways of conceptualizing natural and lived environments. Although it is tempting to assume that these differences coincide with juxtapositions such as Westerners and Indigenous peoples, Blaser (2013) rather emphasizes that ontological differences do not correspond with specific groups of people *per se* (p. 553). They are rather particular "practices, performances, and enactments" that define modernity and the non-modern (referring here to the realm where the culture / nature divide is not foundational). Consequently, according to this view, the notion of *Buen Vivir* (or its Indigenous variants: *Sumak Kawsay*, *Suma Qamaña*) as a manifestation of an ontological difference is an enactment that opens up horizons for human / non-human conviviality.

The constant attempts by modernity to occupy and govern all possible spaces, minds, bodies, and ecologies are not neutral occurrences but rather violent acts of capitalist coloniality. De La Cadena (2015) suggests that what has happened in Bolivia and Ecuador in terms of state co-option of *Buen Vivir* is an ontological disagreement. Oftentimes, arguments of cultural difference

are utilized to portray Indigenous peoples attacking resource extraction as irrational; they can only speak in the realm of culture, although their existence in the world (nature) is different (Blaser, 2013, p. 555). According to De La Cadena (2015), it is an ontological conflict that cannot be overcome, because “the principle that partitions the sensible into nature and humanity...is not common to all parts” (p. 284). It helps us to conceptualize a non-commoditized way of being in the world dominated by the commercial spirit and productive patterns of capitalist coloniality. *Buen Vivir*, as De La Cadena suggests, references the works of Aymara scholar Simon Yampara (mentioned above) in that it is “a proposal for *cosmovivir* (to cosmo-live, or to have a cosmo-life)” (p. 285). It is what I call human / non-human conviviality. According to this approach, *Buen Vivir* is not solely a political alternative for redistributing economic resources or providing a more sustainable and cleaner environment, but also a “proposal to open up life to a cosmos of worlds that would be intra-connected through respect,...a proposal for a politics that, rather than requiring sameness, would be underpinned by divergence” (De La Cadena, 2015, pp. 285–6). This is not solely a response to the urgent contemporary need to find dialogues, convivial well-living, and understanding between increasingly polarized ideological extremes, but also to the modern yearning for connectedness with oneself, other human beings, and earth beings.

Conclusions: Resuscitating *Buen Vivir* as a Transformative Alternative

This chapter has conceptualized the notion of *Buen Vivir* as referencing the condition of ‘living well together’, a condition involving individuals, the community, and nature. It has delineated the main value of the concept to be its portrayal of conviviality as integrally connected with non-human spheres of life. This rethinking of human / nature relations amidst contradictory global processes offers considerable potential for transformative global studies scholarship. However, the “domestication of *Buen Vivir*” (Gudynas, 2013) by modernist, colonizing and authoritarian state apparatuses has given rise to disbelief in its conceptual and political promises.

My suggestion is that we need to restore the radical potential of *Buen Vivir* as a transformative alternative both academically and politically. With regard to the first goal, I see two ways forward. The first requires its conceptual elaboration as a critical, cosmopolitan, transformative alternative for post-capitalist societies. A fascinating example of this endeavour can be found in Hosseini (2018), who posits the term ‘well-living’ as having “dialogical potential” for the transition from a capitalist commodification of well-being to “enhancing the capacity of individuals to care for and to promote the wellbeing of their communities and their environment in the most collaborative way possible” (p. 39). The second requires more detailed ethnographic scrutiny of the complex politics of knowledge and the enfleshment of multiple Indigenous lived philosophies (whether termed *Buen Vivir* or something new) in all its multiplicity in different historical times, geographical locations, and amidst a diversity of actors (e.g. Radcliffe, 2015b; Ranta, 2018a; on ontologies, e.g. de la Cadena, 2015). In terms of politics, there is a need to restore solidarity with the diverse Indigenous groups that are suffering from the absence of a global politics of redistribution, and also from state co-option of their political agendas of self-determination. In other words, it is time to rethink and to act to bring radical grassroots politics back to *Buen Vivir*.

Notes

¹ The term *Buen Vivir* is common in Ecuador and global activist networks, while the term *Vivir Bien* is utilized in Bolivia. In this chapter, I use the generic term *Buen Vivir* to refer to general academic discussions, the global travel of the concept, and the Ecuadorian case, while I use the term *Vivir Bien* to refer to the case of Bolivia.

² Post-development is a critical school of thought in development studies that radically rejects the concept of development. It focuses on the critique of modernity, Western dominance, and ecological destruction, and defends diverse local alternatives from the Global South. Its main figures include Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, Serge Latouche, Majid Rahnema and Wolfgang Sachs among others. For a critical account, see Nederveen Pieterse, 2000.

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