



Methodological and Ideological Options

Buen vivir: Emergent discourse within or beyond sustainable development?Julien Vanhulst^{a,*}, Adrian E. Beling^{b,c,d}^a Universidad Católica del Maule, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Económicas, Avda. San Miguel 3605 - Casilla 617, Talca, Chile^b Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Cienfuegos 46, Santiago de Chile, Chile^c Global Studies Programme, FLACSO Argentina, Ayacucho 555 (C1026AAC) Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina^d Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Philosophische Fakultät III, Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, LB Vergleichende Strukturanalyse, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to review the content of *Buen vivir* ('good living') as an emergent discourse, reflecting on its genesis and contributions to the sustainability debate, as well as on incipient attempts at its institutionalization. First, we briefly revisit criticisms to the development discourse and then engage in deeper exploration of the status of its direct descendant: sustainable development (SD). Next, we consider the Latin-American position in the discursive field of SD and the situation of *Buen vivir vis-à-vis* SD. Drawing on the traditional repository of the continent's indigenous cultures, this discourse has been theorized in the academic sphere and translated into normative principles that have started to permeate the public, but also the political sphere, especially in Ecuador and Bolivia. In this article we refer to *Buen vivir* as the contemporary discursive reelaboration of the Quechua concept *Sumak Kawsay* and similar principles from other indigenous peoples. It includes both the idea of interdependence between society and nature and a conception of the universal as a plurality. Lastly, we outline some inbuilt tensions of the *Buen vivir* discourse, but also its dialogic potential with several variants of the heterogeneous discursive field around the idea of SD.

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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century the idea of 'development' asserted itself as the main vector of the modern ideology of progress. It seemed to describe a universal horizon, modeled after Western standards and then disseminated globally. But 'development' was eventually recognized to be a pathway ultimately leading to chronic crises in the sociopolitical, environmental and economic fields. As a consequence, several 'substitute' discourses have emerged alongside the axial idea of development; e.g. the call for "another development" in the report *What now?* by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (1975), the proposals of a "Human scale development" (Max-Neef et al., 1986; Schumacher, 1973), "De-growth" (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Latouche, 2006), "Maldevelopment" (Amin, 1990; Tortosa, 2001, i.a.), "Post-development",¹ "Human development" (UNDP,

1990), "Development as Freedom" (Sen, 1999), and, finally, "Sustainable development" (SD).

SD arose from the hybridization of social development and ecological theories. Indeed, since the late 1960s, given the growing evidence of human responsibility in global environmental change, debates on the relationship between development and the environment increased. The idea of SD emerged from this problematization of the relationship between society and its natural environment. Its roots certainly lie with environmentalism, but also with the progressive codification of the society/environment equation (Adams and Jeanrenaud, 2008; O'Riordan, 1999; Pestre, 2011), and thus SD gradually became a central axis in policy design, but also in civil society contestations, business strategies, and in basic and applied research from the human and the natural sciences (Adams, 2001; Dryzek, 2005; Elliott, 2006; Sachs, 1999; Zaccai, 2002, 2012).

Therefore, from the outset, there is no single meaning of SD, but rather a wide range of interpretations guided by specific views (Adams, 2001; Dryzek, 2005; Hopwood et al., 2005; Jacobs, 1999; Lélé, 1991, 2013; Sachs, 1997, 1999; Sneddon et al., 2006). In the words of Sneddon et al., "*Our Common Future* marked, anchored and guided the rise of a remarkable political debate, indeed a whole new political discourse across contesting interests, from grounded practitioners to philosophical academics, from indigenous peoples to multinational corporations" (2006, p. 254). This polysemic nature of SD should not,

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¹ This trend of thought is wide and expanding, as exemplified in the work of Wolfgang Sachs, Serge Latouche, Gustavo Esteva, Ivan Illich, Arturo Escobar, i.a. In this article we consider, by way of illustration, the texts compiled by Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree in the *Post-Development Reader* (1997).

however, be regarded as an impediment for making meaningful distinctions among its multiple interpretations according to the greater or lesser integration of several core dimensions, notions and debates, including environmental protection, the notion of development, democracy, a principle of intergenerational and international equity and a global outlook (Houghton, 1999, pp. 235–237; Sneddon et al., 2006, p. 261; Zaccai, 2002, p. 39).

SD will thus be treated here neither as a concept nor as a theory, but rather as a discourse² or, more precisely, a hybrid and diffuse global discursive field made up from the “argumentative interaction” (Hajer, 2006, 1997) between culturally and politically localized discourses with specific worldviews which compete for hegemony. This is the perspective endorsed by Wolfgang Sachs, who addresses SD as a “discursive field” (Sachs, 1997, p. 71) and differentiates discourses according to their assessment of ‘development’ and the way they link ecology and social justice (Sachs, 1999, 1997). John Dryzek also adopts a discursive approach, classifying environmental discourses according to how far they challenge and redefine the notion of “industrialism” and the political and economical chessboard (Dryzek, 2005, pp. 14–15). In line with Dryzek, Hopwood et al. (2005) provide a useful categorization of existing discourses in the field of SD: *status quo*, reform, and transformation; according to the degree to which they adopt rather an anthropocentric or an ecocentric approach, on the one hand, and to which consideration they give to questions of social equality, on the other. They further emphasize that, at present, the policy outlook is dominated by the *status quo* approach, which is an “inadequate answer to the need of sustainable development” (Hopwood et al., 2005, p. 48).

Finally, in this vein, Sneddon et al. emphasize the need to consider SD in a “pluralistic” way, rather than searching for a single correct approach towards sustainability (Sneddon et al., 2006, p. 262). This approach basically seeks to retrieve the key ideals of SD (*i.e.* equity within and across generations, places and social groups; ecological integrity; and human well-being) as standard reference for the assessment of current institutions and forms of governance. His basic argument parallels that of Charles Taylor concerning “the need to undertake a ‘work of retrieval’ to ‘identify and articulate the higher ideal’ of the ethics of modernity rather than simply criticizing its more perverse forms of practice” (Sneddon et al., 2006, p. 264).

The aim of this article is to describe and analyze one particular way of appropriation and reformulation of the SD discourse in Latin America: that of *Buen vivir*³ (Vanhulst and Beling, 2013a, 2013b). We intend to analyze this emergent discourse simultaneously addressing the question of whether it actually fits the SD framework in the first place, and discussing its potential contribution to challenging the currently dominant approaches therein, and – paraphrasing Charles Taylor – to the building of “higher ideal of sustainability”. We start by briefly looking at the general position of Latin America in the discursive field of SD. Next, we analyze the contents of *Buen vivir* and the actors who promote it in order to properly situate it *vis-à-vis* SD, exploring differences and resemblances with *status-quo*-prone, reform-oriented, and transformational approaches within this field. Finally, we consider the experiences of Bolivia and Ecuador as prototypical empirical cases

of (attempts at) state-led implementation of *Buen vivir* and its ambivalent consequences, and derive some conclusions from the analysis.

2. Latin America and the Global Discursive Field of Sustainable Development

In Latin America, some SD discourses are difficult to understand without considering the Theories of Global Modernity, which envisage diverse possible “trajectories of modernity” within the historical framework of globalization.⁴ Indeed, by seeking to critically re-interpret the heritage of Eurocentric modernity,⁵ these theoretical approaches envisage different possible answers to the vital problem of sustainability.

Since the 1940s, most Latin-American countries adopted a critical stance towards the prevailing hegemonic equilibrium in the international order given the unbalances observable in the “Center-Periphery” relations, as portrayed in the geopolitical–historical hermeneutics of Dependency Theory⁶ and Postcolonial Theories.⁷ This trend of thought was developed intermittently against the backdrop of recurrent military coups that scourged many Latin-American countries between the early 1930s and the late 1980s. The right-wing dictatorships set up through these coups had wide-reaching social and economic consequences associated with the implementation of liberal economic state-policies. This neoliberal outlook, summarized in the tenets of the ‘Washington Consensus’, associates development univocally with the freeing of market forces and the reduction of the state to a minimum (Larraín, 2005, pp. 53–55), and strongly influenced the normative horizon in Latin America throughout most of the 1970s to the 1990s. In parallel, however, simultaneously to the emergence of environmental discourses in Europe and North America since the 1970s, some Latin-American progressive intellectuals developed a critical stance with respect to global consensual positions on ecology and development. Worth mentioning are the *Latin-American Global Model* (or *Bariloche Model*) of 1976 (Herrera et al., 1976) in reply to the report *The limits to growth* (Meadows et al., 1972); and the report *Nuestra propia agenda sobre desarrollo y medio ambiente* (“Our own agenda on development and environment”) (CDMAALyC, 1991), as the official position adopted by Latin-American countries *vis-à-vis* the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987) and the Earth Summit in Rio 1992. Also worth mentioning are the work of Arturo Escobar, Manfred Max-Neef, Gustavo Esteva, Victor Toledo, Enrique Leff, Alberto Acosta, *i.a.*, and – more recently – the emergence of the *Buen vivir* discourse.

Buen vivir has both a reactive and a proactive dimension: on the one hand, it denounces the drifts of the civilizational project associated with the idea of development as irremediable, and simultaneously, on the other, it draws on the social and ecological imperatives that gave rise to the criticism of development in the 1970s, portraying itself as an attempt to overcome the limitations of mainstream SD.

² The term “discourse” is used here, according to Dryzek (2005), Hajer (2006, 1997) and Litfin (1994), in its double meaning of *discursive universe* (a shared way of apprehending the world) and *discursive practice* (referring to its performative potential).

³ We use the term “*Buen vivir*” to name a specific discourse which draws on the worldviews of many of the native peoples of South America, and is usually understood as an equivalent to the Quechua concept *Sumak Kawsay* or the Aymara *Suma Qamaña*. In this paper, we introduce a fine semantic distinction between the discourse of *Buen vivir* and these indigenous principles. Concepts such as *Sumak Kawsay* are embedded in a worldview that is alien to modernity. Efforts to extrapolate them into modern linguistic categories amount to attempts at building bridges between two incommensurable spheres, so that resulting translations will be necessarily imperfect. The discursive reconstruction of such non-modern notions in terms of *Buen vivir*, on the other hand, can be conceived of isomorphically in dialogical terms with other normative contemporary discourses inside the discursive field of SD.

⁴ See: Hybridization (García Canclini, 2001), *Kaleidoscopic dialectic* (Rehbein, 2013, 2010), *Reflexive modernity* (Beck, 1992; Giddens et al., 2000), *Global modernity* (Dirlik, 2007; Domingues, 2006, n.d.), *Entangled modernities* (Arnason, 2003; Therborn, 2003), *Multiples modernities* (Eisenstadt, 2000; Larraín, 2007; Wittrock, 2000), or else *Modernity as experience and interpretation* (Wagner, 2010, 2008).

⁵ “Eurocentrism” is a neologism that refers to assumptions that identify the European historical course and social structural patterns as a universal model (Wallerstein, 2004). This neologism first appears with the postcolonial theoretical current (particularly in the work of Amin, 1988; Dussel, 1995; Quijano, 2000) and denounces the founding myths of this hegemonic version of modernity. The term “Eurocentric” means a worldview that, implicitly or explicitly, considers the history of Europe, and European values, as “normal” and superior to others. At the same time, this worldview helps to produce and justify the domination of Europe, and, in a wider sense, of the western world, throughout geopolitical and economic relations.

⁶ Represented by authors such as Raúl Prebisch, André Gunder Franck, Celso Furtado, Enzo Faletto, or else Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *i.a.*

⁷ Represented by Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, or else Enrique Dussel, *i.a.*

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