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Post-development and *BuenVivir*: An approach to development from Latin-America

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to contribute to the academic and popular discussions on the concept and practices of development and how it is linked to peace studies. Basing on the subaltern critiques of the concept of development and the Latin-American indigenous understanding of well-being – *BuenVivir*, the paper explores indigenous ways of seeking and achieving peace. It underscores the need to transcend the orthodox understandings and practices of development. In this paper, I intend to prompt a critical investigative conversation and evaluation on development which focuses on exploring the possibilities that these alternatives present in the transition from the current world order to a more human, sustainable and intercultural one. The article therefore, presents the prospects and relevance of cultural diversity towards peace and development across communities.

Keywords: BuenVivir; development and Post development; Peace studies; culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Peace studies have always had an inextricable link to development. It is considered one of the basic elements of peace building processes or even one of the constitutive elements of peace itself. The debates around the concept of development – reviewed in this paper-, are of special interest to the field of peace studies, particularly its theoretical and practical foundations.

The current discourse and practices of development challenge the *orthodox* or conventional understandings of the concept. On the other hand, critical approaches to development consider the term to be Eurocentric and built on the framework of the values and precepts of “western” modernity which frequently ignore, marginalize and impose themselves over other social, political, epistemological and environmental configurations (Escobar et al., 2006). In addition, critiques challenge the practices of development, particularly its failure to address the current context of increasing inequality and global crisis: environmental, financial/economical, alimentary and environmental (Tortosa, 2009).

In the academic discourse, terms such as ethno-development, sustainable development, human development and alternative development have variously been used in the past decades, precisely with the view of *filling* the gaps in the conventional concept of development. The concept of post development emerged with the objective of transcending, rather than improving

the concept of development. In practice, many alternative ways of conceiving and achieving human well-being are being attempted. Central to these alternatives has been the rejection of the neoliberal capitalist economic and social system as well as values and life philosophies based on “Western” modernity. One of these practical alternatives in the context of Latin-America is the indigenous understanding of well-being: *Buen Vivir*.

It is thus imperative to appreciate the contributions of alternative ways of conceptualizing development to the global discussions on “development” within an academic context. At a more personal level and beyond this academic motivation, I intend to initiate a critical analytical conversation and evaluation on development that explores the possibilities that these alternatives present in the transition from the current world order to a more human, sustainable and intercultural one.

2. PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT: THE INEXTRICABLE LINK

Among peace studies, development is historically understood as a fundamental component of peace and peace building. Fisas (1998, 20), one of the most recognized scholars of peace studies in Spain¹, revisits the idea that peace is composed of four main foundations: human rights, disarmament, democracy and development. The absence of any of these elements, he suggests, would permit the emergence of some type of violence; while the construction of peace necessarily needs to strengthen them. Even if the consideration seems accurate in general terms, the need to define and critically approach concepts and practices such as human rights, democracy and development is overlooked by the author. It is thus necessary to examine the multiple understandings and conceptualizations of development and how it is linked to peace studies.

Dietrich and Sützl, (1997, 283) observe that in the modern thinking, peace and development have been elevated to the mythical status of a worldly and eschatological paradise only attainable through a civilizing process. However, peace scholars have recognized and even incorporated *subaltern* critiques to this kind of universal/eurocentric prescriptions and postmodern reflections that question the implicit power and project inscribed in the idea of development. Based on a critique of cognitivism and naturalism (see Flyvbjerg, 2001), Guzmán (2001) argues that peace studies seeks to construct its own paradigm among social sciences, rejecting the imposition that ‘modern’ science implies over other ways of creating knowledge and, in a broader sense, the violent imposition of ‘modern life’ over the understandings of life itself.

Increasingly peace studies are preoccupied with transcending this modern paradigm through the recognition of other ways of understanding and achieving peace. The construction of *peace cultures* in the plural (Dietrich and Sützl, 1997), and Guzmán’s (2001) promotion of diverse manners of *making peaces* are clearly aimed in this direction. Dietrich and Sützl’s view of *many peaces* affirms that the response to the structural violence of modernity demands a pluralistic, differentiated and incompatible vision of peace. The world therefore needs more than *one peace* for concrete societies and communities to be able to organize themselves (1997, 300-301). In addition, the idea of *trans-rational peaces* (see Dietrich, 2006) transcends the modern primacy of rationality (see, Flyvbjerg, 2001) and postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1979) when it incorporates the *energetic* elements of peace. Trans-rationality recognizes “earlier achievements of pre-modern civilizations and its practices [a recognition that does not intend

¹Vicenc Fisas is the current director of the UNESCO Chair of Peace and Human Rights, Universidad Autònoma of Barcelona.

to idealize them, but which] integrates the pre-rational, consciously, into its own stock of knowledge, embedding, differentiating and reinterpreting it according to its own practice” (Dietrich, 2011, 13). By transcending the ‘modern’ paradigm, particularly its universalistic aspiration and dichotomized thinking that separates reason from spirit and nature from society, *trans-rational peaces* appreciate inter-relations and interconnectedness as a founding condition of the universe, from which humanity takes part.

The arguments in this paper are embedded within this plural comprehension of peace. Based on the *subaltern* critiques of the concept of development, and indigenous ways of conceptualizing well-being, this paper explores indigenous ways of seeking and achieving peace.

3. THEORETICAL SITUATION AND POST-DEVELOPMENT

The start of the discourse on development can be traced to the inaugural address of President Harry S. Truman of the USA in January 1949. Truman introduced the term ‘underdevelopment’ in reference to the nations and populations who have not achieved certain levels of economic growth, industrialization and quality of life. In a post-war and post-colonial context, “Truman’s speech drew a distinction between the ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘prosperous’ areas of the world. People in the former lived in what Truman noted as ‘conditions approaching misery’, characterized by poverty, disease and ‘primitive and stagnant’ economic life” (cited in Rist, 1997, 71). He underscored the need for “a bold new program for making the benefits of scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (Truman, 1949)².

In a political sense, the basis of this aspiration is institutionalized through four main axes of what constitutes development policies (Kapoor, 2008, 19-37). The first axis is the definition of some human *basic needs*. The second involves the implementation of a set of structural adjustments – including privatization, free market policies and other mechanisms derived from the Washington Consensus-. The third involves the struggle to constitute democracies guided by a good governance principle that guarantee, at the national and local level, the existence of the legal frameworks in which development should be pursued. This is based on the notion that development can only be accomplished in a particular way of democratic social life. The fourth axis relates to the respect and guarantee of a set of human rights, particularly civil and political rights, which are viewed as the legal language of the hegemonic development paradigm³.

Epistemologically, theoretical understandings of development have been discussed. During the 1950s and 60s the modernization and dependency theories provided alternative explanations for the development and underdevelopment. The modernization theory links development mainly to economic growth. The dependency theory (mainly propagated by scholars from Latin America⁴) emerged as a critique of the modernization theory. Dependency theorists view underdevelopment to be as a result of unequal power relationships between rich

²Text of the Speech in *Department of State Bulletin*, January 30, 1949, p. 123

³ It is important to point out that each of these axes may not only be useful to the material realization of the development discourse. If we do approach these axes from a complex perspective, we will realize that some of them when taken to the local level have strongly supported alternatives which challenge the hegemonic ideology of development -particularly human rights and democracy. This is the case for example, when Indigenous Populations or Feminists “translate” their meanings and create different understandings according to their demands.

⁴ See Prebisch, Dos Santos, Gunder Frank, Cardoso; among others.

developed capitalist countries (core) and poor developing ones (periphery). They attempt to explain the present underdeveloped state of many nations in the world by examining the patterns of interactions among nations and by arguing that inequality among nations is an intrinsic part of those interactions. Underdevelopment is understood to be not the incapability of certain countries or people to ‘progress’ but rather as a constitutive part of development and the global political and economic relations emerge from this co-constitution of opposite poles.

In the 1980s and 90s, the critical and analytical approach to development shifted from modernization and dependency theories to cultural discourses perspectives and frameworks of analysis, including the notion of post-development (discussed later) and reformative concepts aimed at filling the gaps in the conventional notion of development such as ethno-development, sustainable development, social development, etcetera. I utilize a categorization established by Escobar to situate and understand the foundational beliefs of these approaches and the scope from which they address the development issue and attempt to “bring contents” to it. This categorization situates these theoretical trends within three main paradigms that have defined social sciences in the last century: liberalism, Marxism and post structuralism (2005, 21).

The differences between the various approaches as illustrated in the table above are very clear. Central to the post-structuralist schools of thought is the concept of post-development. Post-development scholars approach the issue of development from the following general supposition: development was created as the *formula* to address the inequalities and problems raised by the current world-system but its mechanisms, i.e. the development policies described above, have done too little to improve the situation of most of the world’s population and their common natural environment (Escobar, 2006). This discursive dimension shows that development and its underlying assumptions is: (i) based on a particular way of understanding life, social relations and human well-being, (ii) has been indiscriminately imposed to the social and cultural diversity of the world, and (iii) that along the way it has constituted itself as the one and only organizing principle of social life, while annulling and colonizing any other alternative to understand and achieve human well-being (Escobar, 2006). Many scholars argue that beyond the *material* impacts of the development endeavor, its underdevelopment co-constitutive part has become “a state of mind, and understanding it as a state of mind, or as a form of consciousness, is the critical problem” (Illich, 1997, 97).

Post development scholars argue that “development did not prove to be the panacea [but rather] as it imposed itself on its ‘target populations’, was basically the wrong answer to their true needs and aspirations” (Rahnema, 1997, 378-379). The main idea here is that the hegemonic discourse and practice of development has failed but can and needs to be transcended. As Sachs (2009, 15) argues in *The Development Dictionary*, “the last forty years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary”.

Table 1. Theoretical approaches to Development⁵

Paradigm Variables	Liberal theory	Marxist theory	Poststructuralist theory
Epistemology	Positivist	Realist-dialectic	Interpretative/constructivist
Key concepts	Individual Market	Production Labor	Language Meaning (semiotics)
Object of study	“Society” Market Rights	Social structures (relations) Ideologies	Representation/discourse Knowledge-power
Relevant actors	Individuals Institutions State	Social classes Social movements State	“Local communities” New social movements / NGOs Every producer of knowledge
Questions about development	How a society can develop or be developed through the combination of capital and technology and state and individual actions?	How does development work as dominant ideology? How can development be de-linked from capitalism?	How Asia, Africa and Latin-American came to be represented as underdeveloped?
Criteria for change	“Progress”, growth Growth plus distribution Market adoption	Transformation of social relations Development of the productive forces Social class consciousness	Transformation of the political economy of truth New discourses and representations (discourse plurality)
Mechanisms for change	Better theories and data Focused interventions	Social class struggle	Changing the practices of knowing and doing
Ethnography	How development and change are mediated through culture Adapting projects to local cultures	How local actors resist development interventions	How the producers of knowledge resist, adapt, subvert hegemonic knowledge and create their own
Critical attitude towards development and modernity	Promoting an egalitarian development (intensify and achieve the modernity Project)	Redeploy development towards social justice and sustainability (critical modernism: dissociate capitalism and modernity)	To articulate an ethic of expert knowledge as a practice of freedom (alternative modernities and alternatives to modernity)

The dismantlement of the idea, discourse and practices of development is the main interest of post-development scholars. Accordingly, Escobar (2005) suggests four main foundations to guide post-development:

- The possibility of creating different discourses and representations, away from the development construction;

⁵ The translation is made by the author of this paper.

- The need to change the practices of knowing and doing and the “political economy of truth” that defines the development regime;
- The need to multiply the agents of knowledge production, this means making visible the knowledge of those who are supposed to be the “objects” of development, so that they become agents of themselves;
- Two useful ways of achieving this are: focusing on the adaptations, subversions and resistances that people activates at the local level, faced with the development endeavor, and highlighting the alternative strategies produced by social movements when facing development projects.

The post-development school thought draws from a post and decolonial perspectives. Central to the post-development thinking is the search for alternatives *to* development through the emergence and recognition of other ways of being, other forms of creating knowledge, other ways of relating to nature and therefore other manners of defining social life and human well-being. These other ways mainly come from *subaltern* experiences and indigenous knowledges that have been largely marginalized in the Eurocentric-capitalist world-system within which the very concept of development arises (Escobar, 1992). Post development is sheltered under the big umbrella of the will to transform the whole system that dictates current power relations and its effects, that is “our existing world-system, which is a capitalist world-economy, which is hierarchical and polarizing, racist and sexist, and fundamentally undemocratic”(Wallerstein, 1996, 358). To do so, the post-development underlines “an entirely new rationale and set of assumptions” (Rahnema, 391), which arguably are still under construction, yet can be found in many social struggles around the world.

4. *BUENVIVIR*⁶: A POST-DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVE

Post-development theoretical constructions underscore not only the need to take into serious account local and cultural knowledge in the shaping of particular well-beings, but also the need to give a protagonist role to this locality, to communitarian/grassroots/social movements that struggle for the materialization of these well-beings in particular contexts. As Esteva reminds us, in the search for alternatives to the global challenges that the modern-capitalist world-system imposes in every dimension of life what is needed is “people thinking and acting locally, while forging solidarity with other local forces that share this opposition to the ‘global thinking’ and ‘global forces’ threatening local spaces” (Esteva and Suri Prakash, 1997, 282).

In the last decade, the idea of *BuenVivir* has gained a protagonist role among alternative and post-capitalist scholars and activists of Latin-America. The discussion that has historically accompanied the continent in search of alternatives to western/colonial dominations recently incorporated and recognized the indigenous philosophy of *BuenVivir* as a possible alternative to development/underdevelopment and, in a broader sense, to modernity. In ancient indigenous philosophies and *cosmovisions* the idea of development does not exist, nor does the idea of poverty. Similarly, the linear-evolutionary comprehension that most of western philosophy makes of life and the ‘progressive’ transit from underdevelopment to development, cannot be found in indigenous conceptualizations of life. Nonetheless, concepts such as development,

⁶*BuenVivir* is the Spanish translation for aymara indigenous concept *sumaqamaña* and quechua indigenous concept *sumac kawsay*; both are indigenous populations from the Andean region of South America.

poverty and underdevelopment, have been strongly imposed on and incorporated by the Latin-American peoples. *BuenVivir* reflects an epistemological and political resistance to these impositions. Its philosophy is based on the local indigenous knowledge, but also incorporates post-modern western knowledge, such as ecologist, feminist, humanistic, among many others.

BuenVivir is not meant to be a philosophy which remains in the endogenous dimension of Latin-American indigenous populations, but one that is open to incorporate and adapt exogenous knowledge and paradigms as far as they are proven useful to respond to local particular challenges (Viteri, 2004). Even within the Latin-American context, there is a wide recognition that *BuenVivir* is not a homogenous philosophy; rather, it incorporates a diversity of knowledges and philosophies. Accordingly, the plural, *Buenos Vivires* is often used (Acosta and Gudynas, 2011, 80). Nonetheless, a general definition or approach to *BuenVivir* represent it as a philosophy that “denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledge, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living” (Walsh, 2010, 18).

Two main and subversive characteristics of *BuenVivir* are noteworthy. First, it suggests an understanding of human well-being that goes far beyond its material aspect, incorporating the spiritual human dimension, and other dimensions beyond the individual sphere, including collectivity and solidarity as a basis of well-being. The collective understanding of humanity implies a concept of equality including liberty, social and environmental justice that determine and form the basis for social interactions (Acosta, 2010, 12). Thus, in understanding human well-being, a focus on spiritual and collective well-being is as important as the material and individual aspects within this philosophy. In fact, they are all constitutive of each other in a holistic, horizontal and non-hierarchical comprehension of humanity. Second, it understands nature as the starting and ending point of life itself and understands that humanity has to live in interconnected harmony with this source of life in the achievement of well-being. Human well-being is not possible without *Pacha Mama*'s⁷ well-being. To provide a better explanation of the connectedness that inspires the indigenous relation to nature, a statement made by Chief Seattle in 1854, when the United States president, Franklin Pierce, attempted to buy the territory where his population belonged comes to mind:

“How can one buy or sell the air, the warmth of the land? That is difficult for us to imagine. If we do not own the sweet air and the bubbling water, how can you buy it from us? [...] Each pine tree shining in the sun, each sandy beach, the mist hanging in the dark woods, every space, each humming bee is holy in the thoughts and memory of our people [...] We are part of the earth and the earth is part of us [...] All things are bound together. All things connect. What happens to the Earth happens to the children of the Earth. Man has not woven the web of life. He is but one thread. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself”. (Benton and Rennie, 2000, 12-13).⁸

The philosophy of *BuenVivir* relies then in a different comprehension of humanity, of nature, of social relations, of materiality and spirituality. It has not the aim of becoming universal, but rather it is strongly anchored at the local level –without rejecting broader networking, as mentioned above. *BuenVivir* is not an attempt to modify the current paradigms,

⁷Pacha Mama is the indigenous concept of Mother Earth.

⁸ I acknowledge the polemic and discussion surrounding the authenticity of this speech; nevertheless I consider it appropriate for two main reasons: first, it does transmit accurately the cosmovisions of many indigenous peoples regarding nature; and second, independently of its historic veracity, this statement has constituted a symbolic and normative narrative which fundamentally inspires environmental consciousness.

but it is in and by itself another paradigm which implies an exercise of decolonizing power, knowledge and being: a transformation of the historical relations of domination that have imposed the western “world of life” as the one and only.

The incorporation of *BuenVivir* in the State institutional level is the most recent achievement of Latin-American indigenous struggles. In 2008 and 2009, Ecuador and Bolivia respectively have recognized *BuenVivir* in their country constitutions as the fundamental element of their pluri-cultural States. In the case of Ecuador, it has been given the status of a legal right for its indigenous populations (Acosta and Gudynas, 2011; Walsh, 2010). It might be too soon to assess the impact of this institutional recognition of indigenous paradigms, and many challenges certainly remain. Nonetheless, this represents a symbolic step forward in the constitution of truly inter and pluricultural societies.

The potential of *BuenVivir* as an alternative is starting to be tested at very different levels, from autonomous indigenous populations to the constitution of some Latin-American States. It has also gained the support and sympathy of many voices that decreed the failure of development and of modernity in general. As mentioned above, the philosophy and its practice are under continuous construction and re-construction and in a constant struggle against the paradigms and knowledge established by the capitalist and colonial world-system. How it will establish itself in the times to come is still unknown.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed some of the debates and constructions that are taking place around the development discourse in the academic but also popular arenas. While acknowledging the many challenges that the current global reality presents in every dimension: environmental, social, political, spiritual, epistemological, etc.; the focus has been on recognizing, naming and fostering theoretical and practical alternatives to the western idea of development, which has failed in its attempt to *improve* social and human well being.

We now face some unavoidable questions: Is it possible, and to what extent, to construct non-capitalist alternatives in an undeniably capitalist world-system? What are the probabilities that these alternatives succeed? What would happen if these alternatives do not succeed and the current structure of environmental depredation and human annihilation persist? From the recognition of our diversity, how can we achieve more peaceful societies and realities?

I am unable to answer these questions, but it is my considered belief that it is prudent to observe attentively the steps that efforts such as *BuenVivir* are forging in the attempt to live differently. Their mere existence, their limitations, contradictions and imperfections notwithstanding, is already a sign of hope and a step towards achieving a different world, one which recognizes diversity and through this recognition, one which can transition to social, political and environmental relations mediated through harmony and solidarity. As Mexican indigenous Zapatistas state: a world in which many worlds can fit.

Is *BuenVivir* an answer to the pressing changes that the world demands? Time will tell. But it represents an opportunity and a path to start building local answers.

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