

Pachakuti: Indigenous perspectives, buen vivir, sumaq kawsay and degrowth

Bob Thomson, Ottawa, Canada, 1 August 2011

Summary

The realization that infinite growth on a finite planet is slowly gaining currency via the largely European sustainable degrowth “movement” and a plurinational Latin American cosmivision, largely indigenous but also criollo, which challenges us to decolonize our minds as well as our economies. This paper introduces a number of writers and perspectives on “degrowth” and suggests that a synthesis of indigenous concepts of “living well” with western critiques of our unsustainable industrial “model” may hold promise for a way out of the multiple environmental, economic and social crises that we face.

Traditional economics teaches us that growth is good. It promises more jobs, more consumption and more satisfaction of personal needs. But recent literature reviewing the history of Homo Sapien's several hundred thousand years on the planet earth shows that unlimited economic growth has brought us to the brink of closely related financial and climate crises.¹ What should have been obvious, the idea that infinite growth on a finite planet is not possible, is now creeping into our consciousness and even come into vogue. We need a new look at where we go from here.

When we talk about alternatives to the dominant economic growth model, there are three broad streams or “cosmologies” of zero or de-growth discourse: a largely European degrowth discussion, a Latin American, largely Andean, indigenous “live well/buen vivir” approach, and a largely North American steady-state and/or eco-economics model. One hears of a-growth, anti-growth, sustainable degrowth, convivial degrowth, objectors to growth, slowcialism, voluntary simplicity, deep ecology, right relationships, right-sizing, steady state, buen vivir, sumaq kawsay, suma kamaña, ñande reko, kúme mongen, etc. - an indication that the growth critique is as varied as its many proponents and the many cultures and contexts in which it is challenged.

A European/Western degrowth/décroissance “movement” has been developing a critique of growth over the past several decades, with a number of international conferences and a host of web sites dedicated to this “new” paradigm.² More recently, the Latin American “buen vivir” discourse has grown considerably, with a particular non-western approach which challenges us to decolonize our minds as well as our economies.

In his timely review of Latin American approaches to “buen vivir” or “good living”, Eduardo Gudynas of Uruguay notes that:

“Buen vivir” is a pluralistic concept with indigenous roots, still in construction, with many sources. While clearly wanting to break with the modern European “project”, it shares a questioning of development and a search for substantial change with some criollo and western critiques. It is not however, a hybridization or multi- or pluri-culturalism. Indigenous cultures are diverse, with each having their own conceptions or cosmivisions.³

1 See for example: Jared Diamond “[Guns, Germs & Steel](#)”, Alan Weisman: “[The World Without Us](#)” 2007, Peter Victor, “[Managing without Growth: Slower by Design, Not Disaster](#)” 2008, [Thomas Homer-Dixon](#): “The Upside of Down” 2007

2 Joan Martinez-Alier et al have provided a good overview or “mapping” of Western degrowth approaches in a recent issue of the journal *Ecological Economics*.

3 Gudynas' review of Latin American approaches to “buen vivir” is available in [Spanish](#) & [English](#) at the AlaiNet web site.

He adds:

“In the wide field of Western knowledge, critical positions on development exist as well. They have often been marginalized or excluded, but a close examination shows that they too are searchers of Good Living. In these critiques, which originated from within those same Western positions, for example, critical studies of development, biocentric environmentalism, radical feminism, or the decolonization of knowledge, just to name some of the more recent... These and other examples serve to show that even within western thought, there are critical currents, which seek alternatives to development, and in almost all cases have been marginalized or subordinate, and therefore remain under the same cover of the concept of Good Living. Not only this, but these kinds of positions are very necessary to strengthen the current stage of construction of Good Living, as complements to other positions, and each brings specifics which in some cases are missing or are weaker in other streams.”⁴

Thus western proponents of degrowth have some things in common with the the indigenous movements which have inserted degrowth like concepts into the formal constitutions of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian states, who convened the “Peoples World Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth’s Rights” held in Cochabamba, Bolivia from April 19-22, 2010, who presented numerous workshops and proposals at the Fourth Americas Social Forum in Asuncion, Paraguay from August 11-15, 2010, and which is making exciting progress, albeit in fits and starts, toward an international charter for the protection of the planet, Mother Earth, and all forms of life on it.

Within the Latin American living well “discourse”, one needs to look at the pluralinational ideas of “buen vivir” in Spanish, “sumak kawsay” in Quechua, “suma kamaña” in Aymará, “ñande reko” in Guarani, “shiiir waras” in Ashuar, “küme mongen” in Mapuche, amongst others. They are not synonymous, despite some shared roots and concepts. At the risk of simplification, many authors writing about “buen vivir” come from a “criollo” critique of development and colonialism, many with “traditional” left or Marxist roots, and are developing eco-ecology elements and critiques as new and innovative responses to climate justice and the failure of the capitalist system. Again, at the risk of simplification, proponents of indigenous cosmovisions such as “sumak kawsay” are centred in indigenous communities which have resisted colonization for centuries through the defense and protection of cultural historical memories, based in non-western, non-international paradigms and communities.

These varied “ontologies” provide a rich complex of “cosmologies” which, despite their differences, offer spaces for exchange, learning and mutual respect for very different and pluralistic visions of the future.

In a recent paper presented to the Institute for New Economic Thinking, William Rees of UBC, one of the founders of the ecological footprint concept, has noted:

All cultural narratives, world views, religious doctrines, political ideologies, and academic paradigms are ‘social constructs.’ They are products of the human mind massaged or polished by social discourse and elevated to the status of received wisdom by agreement among members of the social group who are creating the construct... By the time most people have reached mature adulthood they will have accepted their culture’s overall ‘narrative’ and will subscribe, consciously or not, to any number of subsidiary religious, political, social and disciplinary paradigms⁵.

4 <http://alainet.org/active/48054>

5 http://ineteconomics.org/sites/inet.civicaactions.net/files/BWpaper_REES_040811.pdf

This “learning” or “acculturation” process, could be said to flow from the application of highly individual filters to identify patterns in masses of unsorted “facts”.⁶ Thus we all synthesize “data” into “information” using filters based on gender, language, class, culture, religion, etc. – a myriad of factors. Over time, we further synthesize “information” into “knowledge” and eventually “wisdom”, applying broader and broader patterns built on our original cultural narratives. If we were truly wise, we would recognize from time to time that the original filters and patterns used to identify “information” in “data” might be wrong or biased or require adjustment and thus a return to the original data and a re-assessment of our original syntheses. The advent of the internet, with its huge expansion of access to more “data” than can be easily synthesized by individuals, has led to dependence on commercial or politically motivated media syntheses which become entrenched, making an often necessary reassessment of “knowledge” difficult, if not impossible. Reassessment is thus not an easy process, and as the history of conflict in and between human societies attests, is not often done or seen as necessary.

Despite the difficulty of such reassessments, it seems legitimate to ask, is some synthesis possible between the western degrowth discourse and the growing Latin American indigenous discourse, one which respects the diversity and pluralism of their origins?

To enter a dialogue to this end with respect, we need an introduction to this Latin American cosmovision, which some call the “Pachakuti”, a term taken from the Quechua “pacha”, meaning time and space or the world, and “kuti”, meaning upheaval or revolution.⁷ Put together, Pachakuti can be interpreted to symbolize a re-balancing of the world through a tumultuous turn of events that could be a catastrophe or a renovation.⁸ As noted above, the main form that this indigenous perspective seems to be taking is the presentation of a “paradigm” called “Live well, but not better”: Vivir Bien or Buen Vivir in Spanish, Sumaq Kawsay in Quechua and Suma Qamaña in Aymara.

The following necessarily sketchy overview of some perspectives on “buen vivir” is my modest contribution to this dialogue. I hope this may encourage others to read the texts synthesized here.

Pre-colonial indigenous societies were in part organized with relationships of reciprocity and complementarity, and a respect for plurality, coexistence and equality. To be sure, there were and still are elements of inter and intra ethnic conflict, conquest and differences over tactics, and it would be dangerous to romanticize the “noble savage” and some forms of indigenous fundamentalism⁹. Nevertheless, indigenous societies offer us much to learn from, as they contain elements central to the degrowth and ecosocialist movements’ calls for a new economic, cultural, environmental and political paradigm.

Following a distinct historical path from “modern” anti-capitalist struggles, indigenous anti-colonial rebellions and victories managed to achieve certain degrees of legal, land tenure and cultural rights and autonomy in the face of exceptionally brutal colonial conquest and latterly capitalist exploitation. Today Victor Wallis notes, it is amongst the peasants and indigenous peoples of the global South that “the most radical expressions of environmental awareness” has arisen.¹⁰

6 Thomson, B, “[Notes on the information revolution](#)”, April 1995

7 <http://www.incaglossary.org/p.html>

8 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Pachakuti: [The historical horizons of internal colonialism](#)”

9 See Francois Houtart, “For a general well being of humanity”, [ALAI March 2010](#) for a discussion of “Living Well” or “Buen Vivir” or “Sumak Kawsay”

10 Cited by Cy Gonick in “Exploring Ecosocialism as a System of Thought”, Canadian Dimension, Vol. 44 No. 5, Sept/Oct 2010

Andean and other amerindian indigenous peoples have navigated a complex historic path as both subjects and objects, a path in which both negotiations and armed rebellion have played a role. Their still incomplete and inadequate victories have nevertheless preserved a historical “memory” which Cusicanqui notes could nourish the struggles for a new equilibrium in Bolivia and elsewhere today.¹¹

One of the results of these struggles, Sumak Kawsay, has been defined as “a complex concept, non linear, historically developed and constantly under revision, which identifies as goals the satisfaction of needs, the achievement of a dignified quality of life and death, to love and be loved, the healthy flourishing of all in peace and harmony with nature, the indefinite prolongation of cultures, free time for contemplation and emancipation, and the expansion and flourishing of liberties, opportunities, capacities and potentials.”¹²

Racist western ideas, including those of some parts of the “traditional” left, have often portrayed indigenous cultures and their sophisticated cyclical appreciations of time and nature, as “turning back the clock” or even barbaric. Yet the time has clearly come when humanity and the planet, to survive, must return to a balance based on those natural cycles and on current solar energy flows in a closed planetary system.

We have depleted some three hundred million years of accumulated solar energy flows in the form of plant based fossil fuel stocks in less than 300 years of the industrial era. Indigenous culture and knowledge of and respect for planetary flows and cycles could be crucial to our survival. This does not mean a return to the cave as some have argued. Democratically negotiated syntheses with elements of western knowledge and science can complement indigenous knowledge in new pluralist paradigms which stop destructive western over consumption and accumulation while redistributing sustainable “income” to the heretofore exploited global south.¹³

The western discourses on degrowth, steady-state economics, deep ecology, ecosocialism, climate change and others, based on an analysis of energy, entropy and economics, and to a lesser degree on their social and cultural manifestations, has generated a large volume of scientific work on historical energy flows in the development of modern capitalism and globalization which is crucial to understanding the old paradigm.¹⁴ Footnote one provides a sample of works which clearly show that the past several hundred years of homo industrialis, but a blip in our 200,000 year sojourn on the planet, has brought us to the brink of an environmental precipice.

However, convincing northern consumers of the need for a new paradigm and new lifestyles, given the impossibility of endless growth on a limited planet, will not be an easy task.¹⁵ A synthesis, of elements of sometimes overly holistic indigenous wisdom and of excessively compartmentalized western science, seems to me the a fruitful combination to provide guidance for a way out of the current crises which threaten the planet, our Mother Earth.

The footnotes to this article provide a sample of references to indigenous perspectives on degrowth. Below is my synthesis of a few examples of these contributions.

11 Carol Smith in NACLA, December 1991, cites Mayan resistance as one root of this historical “memory”.

12 Rene Ramirez in Ecuador’s “National ‘Buen Vivir’ Plan”, cited in Irene Leon, “Re-significaciones, cambios societales y alternativas civilizatorias”, America Latina en Movimiento #457, ALAI, Quito, July 2010

13 Immanuel Wallerstein has said this “may turn out to be the great debate of the twenty-first century.”

14 See footnote 1 for a list of some studies in this area

15 Even convincing sympathetic colleagues in the progressive “development” discourse is proving difficult based on one response to a January 2010 London UK public meeting.

Xavier Albó, Catalan-Bolivian Jesuit and founder of CIPCA, a peasant research and education centre, looks at the Aymara roots of Good Living (Suma Qamaña) in order to help us understand its full meaning and potential to guide us to “the good life”.¹⁶ Living well but not better (than others), now a central element of Bolivia’s national development plan,¹⁷ outlines the virtues the new Bolivia should have – respect, equality between all, solidarity, harmony, fairness, etc. – “where the search for living well predominates”. Albó’s review of the Aymara semantic origins of “Suma Qamaña” parallels the degrowth movement’s debate over the terms “decroissance” vs “degrowth” as to their adequacy in describing the new paradigm we seek.¹⁸

Indeed, the phrase “to live well but not better” (than others, or at the cost of others) is potentially confusing in English since “well” and “better” are similar if used to denote qualitative vs quantitative meaning. Language and culture are crucial elements if we are to convince others to understand and then follow this “dictum”. For example, English is a language based largely on nouns, while Anishinabe languages are dominated by verbs, resulting in cultures which focus respectively on objects versus process¹⁹, with a resultant tendency to objectivize or integrate nature.²⁰ This may in part explain the domination of the planet today by English (noun-object) dominated cultures and may make the task of undoing this domination extra difficult.

Bolivian historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui notes that, what a western linear perception of history condemns as a “turning back of the clock”, is viewed in the Andes as the redemption of the future, a past that can yet turn the tables.²¹ Analysing the history of indigenous rebellions and struggles over the paternalistic yet protective colonial Leyes de Indias, as well as conflicts with the traditional left earlier this century, Cusicanqui shows how indigenous autonomy is the starting point for building a new egalitarian, multi-ethnic nation. She asks: “In a complex, multi-ethnic ‘nation’ composed of diverse societies, who should constitute the umbrella authority that would link its many segments?” and speculates on whether the coming Pachacuti will lead to catastrophe or renovation.

Ecuadorian ex-legislator Monica Chuji²² contrasts the trillions of dollars allocated last year to save the world banking system to the “mere” \$100 billion that would be needed to meet the UN’s millenium development goals to overcome world-wide poverty, to highlight the distance between the speeches and the realities of power. She notes how the discourse on globalization has been constructed in a way which has narrowed the horizon of human possibilities to the coordination of markets and economic agents and points to Sumak Kawsay as the alternative to progress, development, modernity – a notion that wants to recover the harmonious relation between human beings and their surroundings, between humanity and its fellows.²³

16 Xavier Albó: “To Live Well = To Coexist Well”, [CIPCA Notas 217](#), 10 February 2008

17 Ministry of External Affairs of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, “Manual de construcción del Vivir Bien” pp.202

18 Some French proponents of “decroissance” actually believe English speakers are incapable of understanding the concept.

19 Personal conversation with Mireille Lapointe and Bob Lovelace, traditional leaders of the Ardoch Algonquin, June 2010

20 See also “[Does Your Language Shape How You Think?](#)”, Guy Deutscher, New York Times Sunday Magazine, 29 August 2010

21 Ibid, NACLA December 1991

22 Monica Chuji G.: “[Modernity, development, interculturality and Sumak Kawsay](#), or Living Well but not Better”, Presentation to the International forum on Interculturality & Development, Uribia, Colombia, 23 May 2009

23 In mentioning the Millenium Development Goals, one should also review the [Millenium Consumption Goals](#) recently proposed by a Sri Lankan economist.

Ecuadorian economist Pablo Davalos²⁴ provides a brief survey of the evolution of dependency, Marxist, world system and neo-liberal classical economics to show how we have arrived at a state of economic autism. He concludes that “Of the alternative concepts that have been proposed, the one that presents more options within its theoretical and epistemological framework to replace the old notions of development and economic growth, is Sumak Kawsay, good living.”

Ediciones MASAS provides us with a Marxist (Trotskyist) critique of indigenous post-modernism in Bolivia’s ruling party, the MAS (Movement toward Socialism).²⁵ MASAS claims that post-modern proponents downplay capitalist exploitation as the central configuration of society and pose “an infinite number of identities with no socio-economic structure” over the working class and other “standard” Marxist class identities, thus weakening the class struggle (and challenging left-wing leadership of that struggle).²⁶

The Chavez and ALBA proposal for a Fifth International²⁷ has been presented as an effort to bring together a wider spectrum of traditional left political parties and social movements, including indigenous movements. Miguel D’Escoto, former Sandinista Foreign Minister and President of the UN General Assembly in 2008-2009, and Brazilian liberation theologian Leonard Boff, appear to support this call, relating it to their own proposal for a Universal Declaration on the Common Good of the Earth and Humanity²⁸ following the UN General Assembly’s acceptance of Bolivia’s resolution on the declaration of April 22 as International Mother Earth Day.²⁹

The Zapatista indigenous “model” has had successes and difficulties. It is difficult however, to find evaluations of the Zapatista’s impact on health, agriculture, education and nutrition in Chiapas fifteen years after their January 1994 rebellion. The creation of “autonomous” zones of power in Chiapas, with parallel institutions of governance are said to have brought significant political transformation, but some say they have not yet created a viable model of economic autonomy for poor peasants.³⁰ Others cite civil – military tensions in the Juntas of Good Governance as reducing local autonomy.³¹ Some feel that internal political organization has taken priority over social and economic improvements and weakened earlier efforts to reform the broader Mexican state and guarantee indigenous rights of self-determination.³² Nevertheless, the Zapatista carcoles are models of governance which include many elements implicit in the degrowth paradigm and further research on these experiences is sorely needed.

In this regard too, the Vivir Bien “model” is not unlike the sustainable degrowth paradigm. Much has been written about the need to downshift in the face of the economic and environmental crises, and even about how to change relations of production from capitalist modes to collectivism, reciprocity and complementarity, or how to measure gross domestic happiness or define genuine progress indicators. Not enough however has been offered to-date on what and how to produce, or what a new dynamic “equilibrium” would look like. Without more concrete examples and basic research or macro-economic models, it remains a laudable and even logical goal, but with still inadequate road maps on how to get there.³³

24 Pablo Davalos: Reflections on Sumak Kawsay (good living) and theories of development [ALAI, 5 August 2008](#)

25 Ediciones MASAS: “[El Postmodernismo Indigenista del MAS](#): Una crítica marxista”, October 2009

26 See also “[Two Takes on the Bolivian Uprising in Potosi](#)”, Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 404, August 20, 2010

27 <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/4946>

28 <http://servicioskoinonia.org/logos/articulo.php?num=118e>

29 <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10823.doc.htm>

30 See for example the report of an April 2009 conference “[Fifteen Years After the Zapatistas](#)”

31 <http://www.counterpunch.org/ross07312006.html>

32 [The Zapatistas Break Their Silence](#), January 2003

33 See [Degrowth: Is it useful or feasible?](#) a provocative blog review of a January 2010 degrowth meeting in London

Recent New Economics Foundation books on Growth Isn't Possible and The Great Transition are laudable western beginnings to this task.³⁴ Serge Latouche points briefly to a starting place in his recommendations to reduce or eliminate negative externalities of growth such as excessive transport, obsolescence, advertising, energy conservation, drugs, disposable gadgets, his 8 Rs, etc.³⁵ The Climate and Capitalism web site³⁶ and the Ecosocialist International Network group/list on Yahoo³⁷ offer some discussion and debate on these issues.

But the degrowth movements, as well as the proponents of Vivir Bien, still have much work to do to show in a concrete way how our new paradigm(s) would work. [A plug that could be left here or removed: A conference on degrowth in the Americas in Montreal, 14-20 March 2012, proposes to bring proponents of many of these ideas together to move this work forward.³⁸]

Bob Thomson's bio: Following some 15 years as a consultant evaluating international co-operation projects, Bob founded and managed TransFair Canada, Canadian affiliate of Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), a 17 nation certification body promoting a fair trade label for coffee and other foods/commodities. He was introduced to the concept of "degrowth" while facilitating the Export Credit Agency Watch network based in Paris from 2005-2008. Bob has a degree in Civil Engineering (U of T 1968) and an M.A. in International Affairs (Carleton 1983). He has lived and worked in Peru (1968-70), the Caribbean (1976-79), Paris (2004-2008) and Canada and has extensive experience with NGO programme and project evaluations, fair trade producer support, non-profit governance, housing co-operatives and computer assisted communications for civil society. He is currently helping with the planning of an international conference on degrowth in the Americas to be held in Montreal May 14-20, 2012. (<http://montreal.degrowth.org>)

34 [New Economics Foundation](#), "The Great Transition" and "Growth Isn't Possible"

35 Journal of Cleaner Production, [April 2010](#), "Growth, Recession or Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity?"

36 <http://climateandcapitalism.com>

37 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EI-Network/>

38 [Http://montreal.degrowth.org](http://montreal.degrowth.org)