

Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity

Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening

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Buen vivir and the outside of modernity

The notion of *buen vivir*, that we suggest to translate into English as 'living in plenitude'¹, is one of the indigenous notions most present in current debates in 'Latin America' and one that plays a key role in various social movements. For example, it has been prominent in the constitutional debates and the transformations of the states of Bolivia and Ecuador (see Walsh, 2009; Cortez, 2009).

Buen vivir is an idea whose genealogy does not belong to the European tradition of thought. It is rooted in the indigenous cosmologies and traditions of thought of 'Latin America', of Abya Yala². To open a dialogue with the *buen vivir* requires an awareness of modernity's outside. The awareness of the exteriority of modernity comes hand in hand with the questioning of modernity's universal validity claims and more specifically of the modern/colonial rule over 'the real'. The universal pretensions of modernity have functioned, at one and the same time, as mechanisms of exclusion (of all that do not fit into their particular universality) and as the concealment of the very exclusion that they produce. The affirmation of modernity's universalism, which is an expression of its total validity claims, is built on a double negation: the exclusion of the 'other' and the negation of that exclusion. Modernity's process of denial comes with the denial of the denial. This is what gives modernity its semblance of totality and articulates the rift between modernity/coloniality, between modernity's affirmation of 'the real' and coloniality's denial of existence. Decolonial critique uncovers the confinement of modernity in its own totality and the concurrent denial of its outside.

The question of *buen vivir* signals the borders and it gives voice to the outside of modernity. It opens itself up as a question, an interpellation from the exteriority of western thought. *Buen vivir* shows us the beyond modern critical thought and the need to open a critique towards an intercultural dialogue.

¹ See Fernando Huanacuni Mamani (2010:7) who suggest "vida en plenitud" as the closest translation to both the Aymara *suma qamaña* and the Quechua *sumak kawsay*. In this text we have chosen to keep the most used notion of *buen vivir* in Spanish, due to its current public recognition and as an indication of its provenance from the outside of the English language in which this text is written.

² Abya Yala 'is a kuna expression –which refers explicitly to the indigenous continent with its non-Western roots' (Estermann, 2009:130).

Appropriation, representation and Modernity/Coloniality

Before engaging in a critical dialogue with the *buen vivir*, let us present the framework and location from which we are writing. As it is already apparent, this text is not written from the outside of modernity. It is not written from an indigenous perspective, hence it has no pretention to elaborate the notion of *buen vivir*. The text is written from within the field of western academia. It is written from within modernity. However, it seeks a decolonial understanding of modernity. From a decolonial perspective modernity cannot be thought without its underside coloniality (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2000). We use here modernity/coloniality as coeval concepts. In our mind, modernity designates the affirmation of 'the real', ranging from the material to the symbolic, whereas coloniality designates the denial and disavowal of all that belongs to the outside of that 'reality'.

We see modernity/coloniality as exercising their hegemony, their control over the world mainly through two overarching movements, two modes of relating to the world: appropriation and representation. Each mode of relating to the world manifests itself in a wide variety of fields, discourses, mechanisms and practices. For example, the mode of appropriation is enacted in the privatization of land, the exploitation of workers, the extraction and patenting of knowledge, the plundering and manipulation of nature for the sake of profit, in the everyday shopping practices of the consumer among other processes and practices. In turn, the mode of representation finds its expression, for example, in the discourses of science or aesthetics that determine their own fields of validity and visibility. The mode of representation can also be seen operating in the self-referential system of meaning of the commodity (Baudrillard, 1968) or in the control of enunciation of the mass media. We suggest that together, these two modes of relating to the world as presence (appropriation and representation) enable modernity's rule over 'the real'. In short, we can say that the modern/colonial rule over 'the real', operates through the control of the production of that reality and over its visibility and intelligibility.

The decolonial critique uncovers these movements in their double fold, their modernity and their coloniality. Modernity's production of the 'real' as presence and coloniality's disavowal and concealment of the outside of modernity. Coloniality's denial and disavowal of the outside of modernity is the condition of possibility for the affirmation of modernity as holding the monopoly over 'the real'.

In revealing the mechanisms of appropriation and representation of the modern/colonial rule over 'the real', decolonial critique aims at depriving modernity of its universal pretensions, of its total validity claims. Such a critique is a necessary step towards the humbling of modernity and the possibility of decolonial understanding and intercultural dialogue.

On decolonial critique

Decolonial critique, as a form of the epistemic struggle, aims to move towards intercultural dialogue and decolonial understanding. In it we see three moments: the moment of modernity, the moment of coloniality and finally the decolonial moment. The first, the moment of modernity, strives to understand the mechanisms of affirmation of modernity and expose their genealogies. It asks for the production and representation of what appears in modernity as 'the real'. It contextualizes and denaturalizes the universal validity claims of modernity, its semblance of totality. This moment of the decolonial

critique builds on the longstanding internal tradition of the critique of modernity (Romanticism, Frankfurt School, Post-structuralism etc) (Bermúdez, 2011). The second moment, the moment of coloniality, directs its efforts to expose the mechanisms of exploitation, disdain, disavowal and exclusion. It asks for what is being lost under the hegemony of modernity. It reveals the underside of modernity. From its perspective modernity's total validity claims and more generally, its hegemony over reality appear as machineries of negation, of silencing. This moment shows how the condition of possibility of modernity's rule over reality is the negation of alterity and the concealment of this negation. The third moment, the decolonial moment steps on the other two moments. It reaches out to those who have been disdained, made invisible, or dispensable and listens to the alternatives from the outside of modernity. Its struggle is orientated under the sign of remembrance, a remembrance that wrests the voices out of the silence and oblivion of coloniality. A remembrance that provides an ethical orientation, as it engages in the task of understanding the suffering of the oppressed. It is the moment of delinking from the logic of modernity and recognizing the alternatives and the hope that are alive in the outside of modernity.

Decolonial critique, aims to foster spaces where the listening of what has been relegated to oblivion becomes possible. 'The culture of the other, in order to be a living place of identity of living persons, needs to make itself world and become world' (Fornet-Betancourt, 2009: 69). Decolonial critique and the humbling of modernity work in the epistemic field to open spaces for the listening of the voices from the outside of modernity. This is just a contribution from the epistemic side into the much broader struggle for autonomy and dignity, for the possibility of exercising the right to represent and produce their own worlds.

Buen vivir and relationality

To approach the notion of *buen vivir* using the hegemonic academic methodologies would lead us to exercise the epistemic mechanisms of appropriation that have characterized modern/colonial epistemic violence (Vázquez, 2011). We would then be dealing with issues of classification and primarily with the task of defining *buen vivir* from within the parameters of modern epistemology. In other words, *buen vivir* would become intelligible as a particularity within the field of categories and the ontology of modern thought. We need to disobey these methodologies and proceed in a different way. The epistemic violence of modernity has meant the systematic disdain and epistemic nullification of 'other' people (Fornet-Betancourt, 2009: 18). When engaging with the *buen vivir* we do not seek to incorporate, define, classify, we seek to listen. We seek to approach the notion of *buen vivir*, from our location in western academia, as an open question, a question that challenges our parameters of understanding and modernity's semblance of totality.

'It is part of the own problem of Western monoculturalism that it cannot reach at a self-revelation as "idolatry" [ethnocentric arrogance, universalization of a culturally specific point of view] while it doesn't expose itself to the interpellation by other cultural paradigms' (Estermann, 2009: 136).

To be sure, the philosophies and thought from the peoples of Abya Yala are vast and diverse. But it is relevant to notice the key place that *buen vivir* has in the region. 'The holistic vision and the basic condition of *buen vivir*, have orientated the cosmovisions, philosophies and practices of the life of the peoples from Abya Yala and of the sons of

the African diaspora during centuries' (Walsh, 2009: 213)... In a way, due to its centrality in orienting indigenous communities and organizations, and also due to its conspicuous presence in political and philosophical debates, the *buen vivir* can be seen as an axial principle of the thought from the outside modernity.

Let us listen to the questions that the notion of *buen vivir* brings about vis-à-vis modern hegemonic knowledge. "The indigenous population of the Andean region conceive "sumak kawsay" or "buen vivir" as the participation of human beings in a vital collectivity of cosmic character, that is to say in close *relationality*, and also *armory*, with nature" (Cortez, 2009: 1)³⁴. This account of *buen vivir* already indicates a different conception of the human, where the human is always in relation with the cosmos and with nature. This relation designates a way of being in the world that does not follow the modern modes of appropriation and representation. To start with, it is not a mode in which the human becomes the center and the locus of explanation of the real. The notion of *buen vivir* challenges modernity's dichotomy between the human and nature, a dichotomy that has been central to subordinate and objectify nature for the sake of appropriation. "The Andean and Amazonic "sumak kawsay" is grounded in conceptions that imply a close relation with nature, in contrast with the western traditions that are based in a strict separation between human and non-human realities' (Cortez, 2009: 5). The critique of the separation between the human, nature and the cosmos is an example of how a thought grounded on the notion of *relationality* brings to question the dichotomic mechanisms of thinking that characterizes modernity.

'Andean philosophy departs ... from the concept of "non-dualism" of reality which is not the same as a metaphysical monism. Reality –the whole of what exists and is imagined– is not conceived as divided in incomparable or even contradictory aspects and spheres: the divine and the humane, the true and false, the heavenly and the earthly, the religious and the profane, the masculine and the feminine, the living and the inert, the eternal and the temporal' (Estermann, 2009: 138).

The notion of *buen vivir* and its philosophical configuration brings to question, on the one hand modernity's anthropocentrism and on the other modernity's dichotomic thinking. The separation between the human and nature (between reason and nature, between civilization and barbarism, etc.) is one of the ruling dichotomies of the modern/colonial order. This dichotomy posits an anthropocentric worldview. It sets the grounds for racial discourses, and production processes of ecological devastation. In the natural sciences this dichotomy drives the encyclopedic enterprise of classifying the totality of the natural world in order to objectify it and bring nature under the anthropocentric control of modernity. The human-nature dichotomy means the imposition of a hierarchy in which rational humanity rules sovereign in its opposition to the natural world. It is a driving dichotomy in the discourses of the Enlightenment and generally of modern western thought. Decolonial understanding needs to engage with a critique of modern dichotomic thinking. It faces the task of bringing into question a series of ruling dichotomies and their hierarchical mode of classification, such as the dichotomies between the human and nature, the subject and the object, male and female. Dichotomic thinking in dialogue with the notion of *buen vivir* appears not only as a limited form of understanding and representation of the real, but most importantly, it appears in its

3 All translations in the text are mine.

4 The notion of *buen vivir* can be found in many other philosophies and cosmologies of the peoples and the afro-descendants of the Abya Yala see (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010; Walsh, 2009).

coloniality as a functional mechanism to perpetuate the hegemony of modernity and the disavowal of other forms of understanding.

The principle of *relationality* advances from the outside a key philosophical question, namely the question of thinking *relationality* as prior to the subject, to the object, even ontologically, the challenge of thinking *relationality* prior to Being (Being as one or Being as difference). It is a question that extends itself from the formation of scientific discourses to their very metaphysical foundations. The notion of difference comes to the fore as being possible only in relation, as non-dichotomic difference, as an always already relational difference. Such a critique, would lead to the negation of the primacy of reason, of the subject, of males, of the human and thus the denial of validity of the major hierarchical formations of modernity. We sense here the possibility of a critical dialogue with for example the theological thinking of Raimon Panikkar and his notion of non-duality, that tells us "Reality is relation" (Panikkar, 2004: 89) "The person is relation" (Panikkar, 2004: 92).

Relationality and the political

The notion of *relationality* can also be seen as a pillar of alternative political thoughts and practices. Its political expressions invite to an intercultural dialogue that would challenge the canon of modern political thought. As previously argued, thinking in and through *relationality* is a way of overcoming modern dichotomies and moving towards non-dualities. In Zapatista political thought the notion of non-dualist difference is clearly expressed. For example in their teaching: 'somos iguales porque somos diferentes' [we are equal because we are different]⁵. Another expression of the principle of *relationality* is their conception of power. The Zapatistas conceive the exercise of political power as 'mandar obedeciendo' [ruling by obeying]. Reflecting on this idea Enrique Dussel speaks of 'obediencial power'. 'Obediential' power would therefore mean the delegated exercise of the power of all authority that fulfills the political justice claim' (Dussel, 2008: 26). It is a power that is substantiated in its *relationality* and thus it is orientated not towards domination but towards an ethics of social justice. It goes without saying that in order to make sense of such a political conception of power, we need first to understand that *relationality* is prior to the constitution of power and the actor that exercises it. Relationality in the social and political sphere takes the form of a togetherness where there is no dichotomy between master and slave. "The key concept for them is 'us' [togetherness], word that indicates semantically that there are no kings, chiefs, no caudillos, caciques or 'mandones' (patrons), words that don't exist in Tojolabal' (Lenkersdorf, 2011: 33). From this perspective, power only exists in *relationality*. Like all verballity, relational power as relational love, cannot be understood through the singular, it is always already a verballity, *relationality*. The notion of *buen vivir* that we translate as *living in plenitude* is not about 'good life' with 'life' as an object and 'good' as an adjective, it is about 'living in plenitude': 'living', a verballity, in active relationality with the whole, with 'plenitude'. In this light, modernity's dichotomic thinking appears as a thinking that functions in and by relating to the world as a series of objects, ultimately as an object, 'the real'.

Thinking *relationality* as prior to object or subject is fundamental to rethinking the political and to engage in adialogue with indigenous philosophies. Furthermore, in a decolonial

⁵ For a learned discussion of the importance of this idea in the Zapatista communities see Sylvia Marcos 2012, II Seminario Internacional de Reflexión y Análisis, December 30-31 y enero 1-2 en el Cideci, Chiapas. <http://radiozapatista.org/?p=4946>

critique it announces a radical break with the basic principles of western metaphysics. In our mind it intimates a beyond the metaphysics of unit of Kant, of Hegelian dialectics and of the Derridian *differance* as an ontological difference, as the unfolding of presencing. *Relationality* designates, yes difference, but precisely difference in *relationality*. And thus we venture to say that this *relationality* can be thought of as prior to difference, as the condition of possibility of difference.

Modernity's 'I conquer', that Enrique Dussel sees as a pragmatic fundament of the "I think" (2011: 19), requires the difference that separates, the dichotomic difference that configures modernity/coloniality. This same dichotomic thinking produces the abyssal lines that separate social reality between the real being 'this side of the line' and what vanishes as reality on 'the other side of the line' (Santos, 2007).

To be more precise, we are dealing with two distinct arenas, the internal and the colonial. Internally dichotomic differences structure modernity into hierarchies while the colonial dichotomy posits a radical difference, an 'abyssal'⁶ difference, that excludes 'the other' from visibility, from validity, from dignity, from the very notion of 'the real'. As we have seen, the self-confinement of modernity, its affirmation and claim over the totality of the real is made possible through coloniality's radical negation, the exclusion of 'the other' from 'the real'. The colonial difference is the historical form of this process (Mignolo, 2000). The colonial difference makes the self-confinement of modernity possible together with its enthronement as holding the monopoly over the real.

The horizon of the *buen vivir* offers us a vision of modernity as precisely constituted through the radical negation of *relationality*. *Relationality* shows us the possibility of thinking across the colonial difference and opening paths towards decolonial understanding.

Relationality and the task of Listening

Relationality can be the basis for the possibility of dialogue and understanding across the colonial difference. An understanding that challenges the enclosure of modernity, the negation of its outside that continues to perpetuate global injustice. In Tojolabal, Carlos Lenkersdorf (2011) tells us that, the act of speaking is inseparable from the act of listening. *Relationality* appears here in the basic conception of language. We could say that modernity's monopoly over representation is grounded on the negation of *listening*, that is, the negation of language as *relationality*. The negation of *relationality* materializes in the world of commodities as simulacrum, as a self-referential system of signification (Baudrillard, 1968).

The question of *listening*, a form of the question of *relationality*, poses a particular challenge to the epistemic enclosure of modernity. How to listen to conviviality? How to listen to the impoverished, to common people, to communities as sites of interpellation? How to listen to the voices, traditions, philosophies of the communities that present alternatives to modernity?

"Listening as critique" is not the artifice of a critique that judges and prescribes a utopia, nor the arrogance of a critique that denies hope; it is a critique that opens, that humbles, a critique that builds understanding in and through listening. It implies the recognition of

⁶ For a discussion of modern thought as abyssal thinking see (Santos, 2007)

the confinement of modernity, the finitude of its universalities, of its total validity claims. Such a critique strives for the dismantling of the mechanisms of negation, disdain and disavowal of the other. The question of listening is a direct challenge to the processes of silencing and oblivion. Can modernity listen to the other side of the colonial difference?

The task of listening presents itself also as an ethical orientation, towards knowledge as *relationality*. To listen means to bridge the colonial difference, the rift that separates the visible and the invisible, 'the real' and 'the absent'. It poses the challenge to listen to those who have been disavowed and silenced. But, can modernity listen to those that it has silenced? Would a modernity open towards an intercultural dialogue be recognizable as modernity? The practice of listening is an opening beyond the modern/colonial order.

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006) would say there cannot be modern solution to modern problems. It is in and from the outside of modernity that the alternatives, the beyond modernity/coloniality is being created. In line with the Theology of Liberation, it seems to us that the task of listening to the outside of modernity is one that recognizes the common people, the impoverished, in short all those that have been disdained, as the very source of decolonial critique. It is all those that modernity has materially exploited, categorized as 'other' along racial, economic and gender hierarchies, all those that have been made dispensable vis-à-vis the project of modernity, who are the source and foundation of a critique, of a contestation and of thought able to delink from the modern/colonial rule.

Under the sign of the task of listening modernity appears as a system that holds the monopoly of speaking, of broadcasting, the monopoly of non-listening. Modernity appears as a system that silences the other, or better that produces the other as silent, non-existent or as 'pure representation' (Vázquez, 2010).

Relationality and the critique of time

The humbling of modernity and decolonial critique, both point towards a liberation of those which have been denied a place in the present, that have been denied dignity and voice in modernity. In our mind the recognition, the avowal of those who have been denied existence in the present, leads to an understanding of the past as a force of liberation.

The decolonial critique of time seeks to liberate the past from the hegemonic representation of history. The discourse of history, in its affirmation of modernity, the negation of its exteriority and the disavowal of the 'other', has been a key mechanism of the modern/colonial control over representation. History as the monumentalization and in-scription of the past in textuality, produces a narrative of the past that functions as a teleology of the modern hegemony of the present⁷. Through it modernity makes possible the representation and the naturalization of the present as the whole of the real. This very same mechanism allows a form of temporal discrimination in which the 'other' is relegated as being either in the past (as barbarian, underdeveloped...) or simply negated as absent as outside of history (Vázquez, 2009).

⁷ It is important to mention that fundamentalist movements such Nazism and Stalinism, or sectarian or religious fundamentalisms often build on this form of relation to the past. They objectify and totalize the past into a monumental narrative, to legitimize an ideology. This instrumentalization of the past, also key in the formation of the modern nation-state, is at odds with the relationality with a past that is not opposed and ruled by the present, a relationality that keeps the present open and in dialogue with a plurality of times.

Let us see how the notion of *relationality* brings to the fore a different understanding of time, other than the past/present dichotomy. When speaking of the *muntú*, the philosophy of Colombian afro-descendants, Manuel Zapata Olivella says: 'The muntú conceive the family as the sum of those dead (ancestors) and those alive, united by the word to the animal, to the trees, to the minerals (land, water, fire, star) and to the tools, in a world that is indissoluble' (Zapata Olivella in Walsh, 2009: 221). This quote gives an example of how *relationality* is not limited to the relations with nature and the cosmos in the presence of the present. It implies a relationality beyond the present that reaches out to the past, to memory and the ancestors. That is, a relationality a verballity between present and past, we would say, between what is present and what *is* absent. It is not the modern dichotomy between past and present that equates the world to existence in the present and sees the past as non-existent, as outside of reality. Chronology brings the past into a numerical ordering, where it is reified, mathematized and made into an object of appropriation and representation. From the modern conception of time perspective the ancestors belong to fixed genealogies of the fiction of mythology.

The principle of *relationality* enables us to refute the discrediting of the past, it opens the possibility of an understanding for which the past is not fixed and already gone; for which the past is not a narrative nor an object of the present. The *relationality* of time sees the past as actively constituting the present. The past is alive; it is the binding force of many communities. It holds the memories of what has been denied and the suffering of oppression. It is the open colonial wound that speaks for justice. It is the place of birth.

The past is that which modernity is unable appropriate. Nonetheless, the modern/colonial politics of time have attempted to sever the past from the present with practices of oblivion: the imposition of a singular narrative and a chronology. It is a way of confining people's meaning to the ephemeral present, to the present where modernity rules sovereign. Oblivion, the denial of living memory, the coloniality of time, has been a necessary mechanism for implanting modernity's rule over the present as presence, over what it names 'the real'.

Juan Garcia, a heir and bearer of the Afro-Ecuadorian philosophy known as "ancestral mandate", says "It is a mandate of the elders that is carried out and transmitted because it reinforces the feeling of belonging of the collectivity that makes of this feeling its own. The ancestral coincides with the filiation that preceded our contemporaries" (Juan Garcia in Walsh, 2009: 222). These communities struggling against the hegemony of modernity pour their force, their clarity from an active relation to the past. Thus the role of the ancestors is not a passive or a conservative one, but rather an active source of meaning and struggle. The *relationality* between the ancestors and the living people is the source of strength and understanding.

Under the sight of the *relationality* of time, modernity, the age that has expelled the 'other' out of History appears as the age of amnesia, the age without history. Modernity comes in the image of a consumer shopping for the latest novelty.

The indigenous people of the Andes use the term *pachakutik* to refer to a radical turn of a historical age. This *pachakutik* is moved by a force that enacts the relationality of time, it is 'a past capable of renovating the future' (Walsh, 2009: 18). The act of remembrance, of relating to the past in the manner of listening, escapes the reduction of reality to presence; it escapes the modern colonial rule of representation and appropriation. It contains the possibility of breaking open the linear continuity of history, the chronology of domination.

Remembrance thought as an active relationality to the past is, to recall the words of Béatrice Faye, the possibility of going back to the source of alternatives. The overcoming of the coloniality of time sparks the hope for the natality, for the germination of the immense plurality of alternatives hosted in the past. We have reached the point in which the vocabulary of *relationality* appears to us as a challenge to modernity's vocabulary of presence, objectification and individuation. *Buen vivir*, relationality and *the task of listening* flourish as questions to modernity, questions to a system of oppression that holds the control over the production and representation of reality. They help us walk towards the humbling of modernity, decolonial understanding and the opening of intercultural dialogues.

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