

SOCIOLOGY

Sumak Kawsay as an Element of Local Decolonization in Ecuador

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The concept of *sumak kawsay*, *buen vivir* or “good life”—in Bolivia, *suma qamaña*, or *vivir bien*—has been widely diffused on an international level since the Ecuadorian Constituent Assembly in 2007–2008 and the Bolivian one in 2006–2009. Good life has been understood as an alternative to capitalist modernizing development that is based on the indigenous ideal of harmony between individual, society, and nature. Nevertheless, in the usage of the indigenous movement, which initiated the diffusion of this concept, good life is a local and territorial conception of a lifestyle. While this notion of locality is largely ignored or invisibilized by the Ecuadorian government and by nonindigenous intellectuals, and to some degree even by national indigenous organizations, local indigenous organizations integrated good life into their discourse of territorial autonomy in a pluralist state. Good life allows for local decolonialization, a concrete and local fight against the structures of “the coloniality of power” framed within a discursive panorama that includes concepts of plurality and autonomy. This text analyzes *sumak kawsay* as a key concept of local decolonialization, emphasizing its relation to similar concepts and the differences in its usage by different actors.

El concepto de *sumak kawsay*, o buen vivir —igual que su versión boliviana *suma qamaña*— ha experimentado desde la Constituyente ecuatoriana en 2007–2008 y la boliviana en 2006–2009 una amplia difusión a nivel internacional. El buen vivir ha sido entendido como una alternativa al desarrollo modernizante capitalista que se basa en el ideal indígena de una armonía entre individuo, sociedad y naturaleza. No obstante, en el uso del movimiento indígena —actor que inició la difusión de este concepto— el buen vivir es una concepción local y territorial de un estilo de vida. Mientras que en el uso por el gobierno ecuatoriano y por intelectuales no-indígenas —y en algún grado hasta en las organizaciones indígenas nacionales—, esta noción de localidad es ignorada o invisibilizada, las organizaciones indígenas locales integraron al buen vivir en su discurso de autonomía territorial en un Estado pluralista. El buen vivir permite una apertura en la perspectiva para una decolonialización local, una lucha concreta y localizada contra las estructuras de la colonialidad del poder enmarcada en un panorama discursivo que incluye conceptos de pluralidad y autonomía. Esta presentación va a analizar al *sumak kawsay* como concepto clave de una decolonialización local, poniendo énfasis en su relación con conceptos afines y en las diferencias de su uso por los diferentes actores discursivos.

Since the constituent assemblies in Ecuador (2007–2008) and Bolivia (2006–2009), the concept of *buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay*, good life (in Bolivia known as *suma qamaña*, or *vivir bien*), entered the global discourse on ecology and alternatives to development. In this context, it is understood as a non-Western concept that fits Western (or Northern) ideas of social justice, sustainability, and “degrowth” surprisingly well. Nevertheless, the meaning and background of good life is much more complex and challenging than this easy integration acknowledges. The present text posits that the good life as proposed by the indigenous movement in Ecuador is a decolonial concept rather than an ecological one, transcending Western ideas of ecology or equity. It was formed in the fight against persisting colonial power structures and, around 2000, inserted into a discourse that dated to the 1980s. This is why good life cannot be separated from the central political demands of territorial autonomies for the indigenous nationalities in the framework of a plurinational state that fosters an intercultural society.

This article parts from a conundrum: why has the complex concept of *sumak kawsay* been understood largely in a state-centered fashion? From the earliest academic discussions (in English, see Walsh 2010; Radcliffe 2012) to the latest publications (probably most insightful, Caria and Domínguez 2016), *sumak kawsay* is understood as a (possible) state politics. This is strange because most of the authors involved in the discussion are aware of post- or decolonial theories and the relationship of *sumak kawsay* to them. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have a problem with the obviously colonial structure of the state (Quijano 2006, 19) as main actor in producing a politics of *sumak kawsay*. If we stick with the tripartite division of the discourse on good life proposed by Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara (2014, 27) in socialist and statist, ecologist and postdevelopmentalist, and indigenist and “Pachamamist,” the following text focuses on the last stream, understanding the other two as derivations or manipulations of it.¹

This article wants to give a decolonial reading of the buzzword *good life*, stripping it of attempts to integrate it into Western discourses and accepting it as a political concept emerging out of one of the best-organized social movements worldwide. To do so, good life is understood here as part and manifestation of a wider discourse organized around the concepts of autonomy and self-determination as coined by a transnational indigenous movement in the 1970s and reworked in the Ecuadorian context ever since.² This discourse as such can be considered decolonial, as fighting coloniality of power with its different manifestations. The central argument here is that the decolonial character of this discourse in general and the concept of *sumak kawsay* in particular resides in its radically local nature—it is about a place-based everyday reality that is opposed to abstract and universalizing Western ideas of state, society, or public sphere. This is precisely the definition of territorial autonomy that will be discussed later in this article. Of course, this opens up problems of scale even for the indigenous movement itself.

To explore the decolonial core of good life and its surrounding discourse, the relationship between decolonial thought and indigenous movements has to be analyzed. Decolonial thought refers here to a wide field of academic debate that can be resumed in a few points that most decolonial thinkers share: the focus on modernity and its constitution from colonialism, imperialism, and the oppression of the Other as global and Eurocentric, which leads to the constitution of a colonial difference and coloniality of power as articulation of racism, capitalism, and other modes of marginalization and discrimination to the benefit of white Europeans that rises out of it (Escobar 2004, 217–218). Those decolonial thinkers will be highlighted that engaged at some point with the concept of good life as proposed by the indigenous movement in Ecuador, namely, Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Arturo Escobar, and Catherine Walsh. Since the beginning of this school of thought in Latin America in the early 1990s, its fascination with the indigenous movements of the continent was constant. Nevertheless, even if there are many references to be found in these texts, the indigenous movements themselves have developed their own brand of decolonial thought. The first section explores this decolonial thought by the excluded, comparing it to the results of the great thinkers in academia. In the second section, the special characteristic of locality as a discursive dispositive for the development of this discourse is analyzed. In the third one, these ideas are concentrated on the concept of good life and the question of why and how it is decolonial. This section serves as preparation for the fourth and final section and conclusion, where the relationship of decolonial thought, praxis, and locality is explored.

Decolonial Thought and Indigenous Movements

Indigenous movements have been very inspiring to decolonial thinkers—the most oppressed, excluded, and discriminated group organizes with its own means in order not only to fight for rights in a Western sense but also to propose an alternative to existing structures. However, as Grosfoguel (in Martínez Andrade 2013), a decolonial thinker himself, reminds us, this sympathy has itself become a type of intellectual colonization that does not comprehend the whole struggle of the indigenous movements.³ Rather, it takes certain parts of the discourse in question, deliberately ignoring others. Quijano’s (2010, 120) misinterpretation of *sumak kawsay* as “the oldest formulation of the ‘indigenous’ resistance against the Coloniality of Power”—referring to Guaman Poma de Ayala’s book of 1615—is a clear sign of that.⁴

¹ Note that this article rejects the term *indigenist* to make clear that *sumak kawsay* is about an effort of indigenous organizations by themselves.

² This has been analyzed without the decolonial focus by Altmann (2013b).

³ He later called this epistemic extractivism.

⁴ Walter Mignolo (2005, 19) engages in a similar reading of the same text.

The task of a decolonial theory that takes itself seriously is to look for decolonial thought “on the ground,” that is, within the social movements in question and not to reduce it to some big thinkers who generally have a rather close, even if critical, connection to Western theories and institutions. A weak point of most decolonial thinkers is the lack of integration of what economists call problem of scale: instead of looking for a channel of communication between the local and the global—or at least, defining what those concepts mean—local logics are simply put in relationship with global ones as if they were placed on the same level. Contradictions are solved with a denunciation of epistemic violence or as a recourse to coloniality as cause of those contradictions. The logic of the local is invoked but not thought through. The indigenous movements, and most notably, the Ecuadorian one, have developed their own ideas of how capitalist exploitation and ethnic or national domination, combined with racism, sexism, and other manifestations of discrimination, can be understood as one coherent phenomenon (among the first is Pacari 1984).

In Ecuador, those ideas started in the 1970s and were condensed into a clearly defined discourse in the 1980s. While there is an international background in the political current of Indianism, in the encounters of Barbados and a considerable number of international indigenous conferences between 1970 and 1980, the indigenous movement in Ecuador was able to build its own brand of political thought (see Altmann 2014). The first piece of this new line of thought was a text of the Amazonian Federación Interprovincial de Centros Shuar (FICSH 1976, 29) that defined the aim of its people as “the self-determination of the Shuar group in a new concept of pluralist Ecuadorian State.”⁵ The call for self-determination in Ecuador never stopped at the limits of the ethnic group in question; since that time, the restructuring of state and society (as discussed in Pacari 1984, 121) was a central part of the demands of the indigenous movement. The reintegration of the concept of indigenous nationalities in the late 1970s and early 1980s (though already in use as early as the 1930s by communist and socialist organizations) gave coherence and support to the fight for ethnic self-determination, providing a definition of the economic, political, cultural, and juridical structures of the indigenous peoples that would allow for such self-determination (see Pacari 1984, 115). The logical next step was to codify the demand for a pluralist political structure allowing for territorial self-determination of the different indigenous nationalities. The demand for a plurinational state was born (again, see Pacari 1984, 119) as “multinational.”

From the start, this discourse had a decolonial component that was made explicit in the 1990s, the zenith of the mass activities of the indigenous movement. In 1994, the biggest organization of the movement, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, or CONAIE), published its main demands in a “political project.” This project was revised in 1997, 2001, 2007, and 2013;⁶ however, the content relevant here was left basically intact. The text provides a clear definition of what the indigenous movement fights against: “The Uninational Bourgeois State, hegemonic in his juridical-political and economic nature, is exclusive, antidemocratic, repressive and pro-imperialist” (CONAIE 1994, 6). This state is characterized by “heavy problems of underdevelopment, dependency and political-administrative corruption” (CONAIE 1994, 1) that are an integral part of its structure from the origins. More specifically, the organisms and institutions of the state since independence have been “instruments of the dominant sector fulfilling the function of representative and defender of its political and economic interests” (CONAIE 1994, 18). In this sense, “the current public administration is inefficient, corrupt, immoral, segregationist and antidemocratic” (CONAIE 1994, 18). The indigenous movement does not stop at the level of the state understood as “exclusive, uninational, monocultural nation-state with colonial content” (CONAIE 2013, 31). It also conceptualizes capitalism as “the economic model that de-humanizes and destroys the equilibrium society-nature” (CONAIE 2013, 31). Both are based on the systematic exclusion of the vast majority of the population to the benefit of a small group. Not without resistance: “The original peoples and nationalities have achieved winning back the political space usurped in 1492, in order to question and uncover the social injustice and economic exploitation, the inefficient and obsolete legal-political and administrative system, as well as the antidemocratic character of the state and the institutions of power” (CONAIE 2013, 18).

The solution for the colonial situation would be the “transformation of the current power of the Uninational ... State” (CONAIE 1994, 7) toward a plurinational state. This “truly multinational and pluricultural state in which each nationality has the right to self-determination and the free choice of social,

⁵ A few years later, the organizations of the federation lost their status as protagonists within the indigenous movement, which is dominated with few exceptions by Kichwa organizations. This is why FICSH hardly participates in the discussion on good life that is detailed in this article.

⁶ Thanks to Marcela Arce for her help finding this text.

political and cultural alternatives" (Pacari 1984, 119) has to be built as a new state from the bottom up. A "reordering of the juridical-political, administrative and economic structures ... allows the full participation of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities, as well as that of other organized social sectors" (CONAIE 1994, 12). More than that, a plurinational democracy has to be based on consensus as the main mode of decision, tightly connected to a reordering of the legal, political, administrative, and economic structures in their very nature (CONAIE 2013, 30–31). This "Communitarian Plurinational Democracy ... will be, above all, anticolonial, anticapitalistic, anti-imperialist and anti-segregationist, that is, different to the ruling false representative democratic system" (CONAIE 1994, 12).

This direct critique of the "*independent states articulated with colonial societies*" (Quijano 2006, 18), that is, the dysfunctional nation-states in Latin America, combined with the reentry of "identity in politics" (Mignolo 2006, 120) has been understood as an epistemic "de-colonial option" (Mignolo 2006, 121)—the attempt to rethink society, nation, state, and democracy on other bases than Western ones. The plurinational state as a political project of indigenous movements breaks with the colonial logic of power of the states in Latin America (and the world), leaving behind the mechanics of integration and assimilation as equal individual citizens and creating spaces for "a multiple citizenship" (Quijano 2006, 37).

Until here, everything is fine. Quijano and Mignolo, two of the most influential decolonial thinkers,⁷ concur that the indigenous movements are decolonial both in their actions and in their discourse. But they (and most others) cannot leave behind the structural, abstract thinking and open up to the radically local, communitarian, and relational—after all, they cannot leave Hegel alone. For Quijano (2006, 25), the appearance of the "current 'indigenous movement' is the most clearly defined sign that the coloniality of power is in the biggest of its crisis since its constitution 500 years ago." Seemingly, coloniality of power is a structure that exists beyond concrete actions, discourses, ways of thinking and understanding the world—and not as something ever present and constantly (re)created in them. The indigenous peoples are the subject of historical change in this construction, occupying a "place and role in the epistemic/theoretical/aesthetical/ethical and political subversion of this model in crisis" (Quijano 2010, 120). While Mignolo (2005, 8) is much more complex—and abstract—in his thought, his idea of a marked break or turn that opens up thinking and cleans it of coloniality can hardly be combined with ever-local and ever-concrete struggles against ever-changing expressions of coloniality of power. As coloniality is constantly made and remade, it actually is—at least in part—born out of decolonial struggles and uses them to renew itself. Thirty years ago, indigenous persons could effectively not be politicians in Latin America, especially not on a high level and representing nonindigenous populations. Now, indigeneity is political capital—which does not necessarily go hand in hand with larger degrees of freedom, actual self-determination, and the decolonization of state and society.

It is hard to argue against both the theoretical bases of Quijano's coloniality of power (see Quijano 2006, 14–16) and his political horizon, marked by equality, redistribution, and liberty (Quijano 2010, 119)—as Grosfoguel remarks, in a certain sense an anarchist utopia. But the tendency to ignore the urgency of the local (Appadurai 1996, 191) puts into jeopardy his theoretical project.⁸ Something similar happens with Mignolo's decolonial turn: its contents are well established and its outcomes look promising—but locality as a challenge for Western-style theory building has to be included. From decolonial thought derives "the need to take seriously the epistemic force of local histories and to think theory through the political praxis of subaltern groups" (Escobar 2004, 217). If this level is not respected, the danger is that "the kinds of coherence and crystallization of forms ... that have arisen ... out of certain cultural and ontological commitments of European societies" (Escobar 2010, 9) and their characteristic bias for generalizations, abstraction and global views are perpetuated in failed attempts to criticize them. Decolonial metathinking can effectively turn into colonization. This is especially problematic as this "epistemic violence is [a] project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" that uses "the ferocious standardizing benevolence of most US and Western European human-scientific radicalism (recognition by assimilation)" (Spivak 1994, 76, 90). And all this while the silenced Other actually and strategically achieved a language as means of a political project: "The indigenous movement created conceptual instruments and we discussed the coherence of our theoretical proposals with the daily practice" (CONAIE 1989, 279).

These misunderstandings and acts of colonization of indigenous thought without a clear discussion of its origins, meanings, and political implications are key to understanding the systematic misunderstanding

⁷ And the two thinkers most criticized by Grosfoguel (in Martínez Andrade 2013).

⁸ As in "the tendency of communal association of the world population, in local, regional or global scale" (Quijano 2010, 119–120). Of course, there are exceptions; see, for instance, Quijano (2006, 38).

of *sumak kawsay* as another term that expresses the same thing. In this, the depoliticization of political demands and the desubjectivation of political subjects seem to be underlying, though perhaps unconscious, strategies. “Indigenous claims are usually taken as ‘beliefs’” (Escobar 2010, 40) that have to be translated in order to be understood. By this, the subaltern is constituted as representable by a hegemonic form of knowledge; he or she “belongs to the exploiter’s side of the international division of labor” (Spivak 1994, 75). The big, systematic thinkers engage in building systems of thought that, like most systems, have to be exclusive, colonizing, and subordinating to work as such. They cannot open up to the concrete and local as anything but examples for their logic and proofs that they, ultimately, are right.

Locality as a Dispositive

The central political innovation of the indigenous movement in Ecuador and its allies in other countries that can be traced in the discursive changes of the 1970s and 1980s is not so much the politicization of ethnicity or the cult of the communal, which Indianism shows clearer than any other stream of thought, but rather the break with big narratives (of national revolution, of indigenous states, of traditional anti-imperialism) in favor of building local alternatives. At the center of this break is the vindication of territorial autonomy for indigenous peoples and nationalities. It is no longer about fair distribution of land as a means of production but rather communal land tenure in accordance with the traditions of the indigenous people in question (Viteri 1983, 46). In this sense, “the property of its territory should be guaranteed to each one of the nationalities, registering it orderly in a collective manner, inalienable and sufficiently extensive to ensure its demographic growth and its cultural development” (Pacari 1984, 122). It is this conception of territory that gives to the indigenous peoples its strength and unity (Unión de Nativos de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana, UNAE, n.d., 18). In other words:

The land for the native doesn’t mean the lot that the law can assign to him, or the family patrimony The land means a certain place where he lives and finds the reason for his existence. His concept of land is that of a territory, an extensive home country in which he mobilizes freely in relation to the other members of the group. A territory whose concept is basically integrated by the forest (*sacha pacha*). Inside the *sacha pacha* (forest) is everything, included, as a further element, the land (*allpa*). The *sacha pacha* (the forest) is an extensive territory that has preserved itself, that has defended itself for the group and in which can be found freely and roaming in all its scope, more than the ashes and bones of their ancestors, their souls, the powers and spirits that guide their life and their destiny. (UNAE n.d., 34)

It is here where the indigenous nationalities with their political, economic, cultural and juridical structures develop, always tied to their territory, as “the territoriality, the origin of man, the historical development as its purpose manifest themselves within a culture, a knowledge and unique cosmovision” (UNAE n.d., 47). And it is here where the communal comes to life and becomes meaningful. The communitarian structures at work cannot be reduced to some kind of ad hoc ministration to immediate needs; they and their political conceptualization by the movement offer another vision of politics: “Communitarianism has to do with the territorial, the political and the cultural, it is a different economic model and life system, it is the principle of life of all the original Nations and Peoples, based on reciprocity, solidarity, complementarity, proportionality, relationality, integrality, equity and self-administration. This is why communitarianism constitutes a regime of property and systems of economic and socio-political organization of a collective character that furthers the active participation and the well-being of all members” (CONAIE 2013, 29).

In those communitarian territories “all elements of the natural community” (CONAIE 2013, 28) are considered part, that is, both human beings and nonhuman ones. Therefore, the indigenous nationalities “did not provoke a break with the Pacha Mama, until today, they consider themselves and live as part of her” (CONAIE 2013, 28). Therefore, an ecological understanding of the indigenous movements as guardians of whatever or ecological Indians is a misrepresentation. Ecology does not make sense if there is no separation between nature and culture. The radically local and relational understanding of territory and community “is also a deterrent against essentialized readings” (Escobar 2010, 43)—community and territory construct each other mutually and continuously.

The core of the political structure of the indigenous peoples is the extended family, or *ayllu* (in Kichwa), which are interconnected via *llacta ayllu* and *mama ayllu* (wider community and people) in a multifold manner. The latter, *mama ayllu*, is defined by “a common language, a common culture, a common territory

and common economic ties" (Pacari 1984, 115). This political structure is completed with a juridical structure that is specific to each level of community and at the same time harmonized by a common moral standpoint (Pacari 1984, 115). While Pacari does present this structure as something close to Western-style federalism—that is, local autonomies limited by regional and national structures—in order to demand autonomy and self-determination, it is closer to an ever-changing system of free associations from below, very similar to the organizational system of the indigenous movement (based on the communities and their connections). The structure of the *ayllus* is not constructed *toward* unity (the state) but *from* unity (family and the community).⁹ While the state tends to make smaller units superfluous, the state itself can be made superfluous by the communities that form it. The key is the radically local conception of politics (and economics, culture, and so on), something that makes translation or adaption to Western structures difficult. This is recognized but not sufficiently theorized by decolonial thinkers. For instance, Quijano (2006, 38) sees a deeper democracy in those bottom-up structures of communal authority. It is important to understand the indigenous fights as "fights for defense of the territory ..., fights for the socio-cultural and organizational independence; fights for the freedom of a system of colonial oppression, for a free people" (UNAE n.d., 22). The fight for the "ethnic-cultural liberation" (UNAE n.d., 46) of the indigenous nationalities is based on the development of an ethnic consciousness (UNAE n.d., 22–23) expressed by the concept of nationality with the right and ability to self-determination in one's own autonomous territory framed by a pluralist or plurinational state (UNAE n.d., 43). This fight necessarily happens on a local stage, in concrete encounters, and by clearly defined actors. Territory, as it is claimed by the indigenous movement, is always local and defined by the relation to the people living there; it is not to be understood as some abstract extension of land under the control of this or that group. It is important to highlight this local character of the central demands of the indigenous movement in order to grasp fully the role of *sumak kawsay* in this discourse.

This radically local conception of social and political organization aggravates the tension between nation-state and local realities. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996, 189) makes clear: "The nation-state relies for its legitimacy on the intensity of its meaningful presence in a continuous body of bounded territory." This refers not only to a reluctance to accept territorial autonomies on an administrative level, reflected by the much-repeated, and often refuted, accusation that plurinationality means the creation of indigenous states on Ecuadorian ground. The nation-state has to create actively its territory and its multiple localities. This is why the fight for local territorial autonomies that are neither aligned to nor detached from the state, but rather a reality apart—*autonomous* in the strictest sense—is necessarily at odds with the Western model of nation-states. The production of locality in itself is a political and (potentially) decolonial act when "the system of nation-states is the normative hinge for the production of both local and translocal activities" (Appadurai 1996, 188). When indigenous organizations claim territorial autonomy to build an alternative state and an alternative society literally from below, they reject, implicitly or openly, the colonial logic of the nation-state with its rituals, institutions and "sites of sacredness" (Appadurai 1996, 190).

In this sense, the dispositive of locality provides political actors with tools to fight "the state," but it also changes the logic of politics, discourse, and the production of contexts (Appadurai 1996, 198) where it is engaged. Locality, understood this way, is the base for relational ontologies that "eschew the divisions between nature and culture, individual and community, us and them" (Escobar 2010, 39) and call into question the constitution of humanness and society itself. If the state is to be understood as a product and producer of coloniality—that is, if we can talk about colonial states as Quijano and Mignolo do—the decolonial turn is the break with the territorial logic of the state. Indigenous organizations that claim territorial autonomy and at the same time build up such an autonomy without consideration of the state and its actions (Büschges 2009, 49–50) have to be considered decolonial actors that, while acting locally, always have global effects. Their struggles have to be understood as "the defense of particular, place-based historical conceptions of the world and practices of world-making," something Escobar (2004, 222–223) calls "politics of place." They constitute locality as a wider, general dispositive to fight against coloniality of power, against racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of excluding inclusion associated with it, an open dispositive that can be used anywhere.

⁹ It should be mentioned that Pacari's model is a political one in relation to the Kichwa and not an anthropological description of something that applies to all indigenous communities.

***Sumak kawsay* as a Concept of Local Decolonization**

Sumak kawsay (which CONAIE [2013, 38] translates as “life in plenty”) as a political concept is relatively new, originating as such basically after the year 2000.¹⁰ While the concept is new, its contents and the demands associated with it are not. It is deeply embedded in the radically local and relational conception of territory as producer and condition of local social structures that only in a second step are turned into the structures of an indigenous people or nationality. Besides that, it reformulates an older vindication of the indigenous movements, one that has been diffused above all by Indianism in the late 1970s and early 1980s: the idea that the indigenous peoples live in a special harmony with nature as in an “Integral Humanism where man and nature in close and harmonic interrelation guarantee life” (CONAIE 1994, 11). More concretely, it is about “the harmonic relationship of PACHAMAMA-ALLPAMAMA-RUNA (Universe-Land-Man)” (Pacari 1984, 115) that, among other factors, “allows a harmonic and equilibrated management of natural resources” (CONAIE 1994, 20) to the indigenous nationalities in their territories.

In this sense, the Western conception of development is rejected or simply absent from the thinking of indigenous communities. Instead, “there exists a holistic vision of what should be the objective or mission of all human effort, that consists in searching for and creating the material and spiritual conditions to build and maintain the ‘buen vivir’, that is also defined as ‘harmonic life’, that in languages like the runa shimi (Kichwa) is defined as the ‘alli káusai’ or ‘súmac káusai’” (Viteri 2002, 1).¹¹

Sumak kawsay, “a category in permanent construction” (Viteri 2002, 1), does openly adapt foreign visions and ideas while preserving its conceptual core (Viteri 2002, 5)—the idea that “forest and land are layers that connect physical spaces with the untouchable, the material with the spiritual, whose mediator is the wise person (yachac in runa shimi)” (Viteri 2002, 3). In an interconnected world beyond a clear separation of material and spiritual sphere, “there is a communion of man with the ecosystem” (Plan Amazanga, 3, in Silva 2003, 85). These ideas are central to the understanding of *sumak kawsay*; its radically relational perspective calls into question the very bases of Western thinking, namely, the strict separation and hierarchization of spirit and body or form and content. If Western thinking since ancient Greece can be understood as a thinking of separation—with its logical consequence, dialectics, as one outcome—the indigenous thinking, expressed in *sumak kawsay*, is a thinking of connectedness. This aspect of “Sumak Kawsay, the life in plenty” (Sarayaku 2003, 10) is developed in a later text:

Our main divinities, *Amazanga* and *Nunguli*, remind us that we should only use the necessary from the forest if we want to have a future. They never accepted that we hunt more than the allowed or that we sow without respecting the rules of the *Ukupacha* and the *Kaypacha*. Their wraths, pleasures and wisdoms have been revealed to us through our wise men and women, who taught us about the secrets to achieve the harmony of one with himself and with the nature, our maxim of the *Sumak Kawsay*. So, a time of regeneration has to be given to the nature, in order to be able to renew our own life. We have been in constant movement, allowing us and the other forms of life to continue their circle. *Mushuk Allpa*, the land in permanent renovation, has been a fundamental premise of the *Sumak Kawsay* This living together and harmony taught us to understand the multiple dimensions that compose the *Sumak Allpa*. The *muskuy* (knowledge and understanding) allowed us to adapt appropriately to the conditions of life in the forest and to define our presence in these territories, since hundreds of years ago. (Sarayaku 2003, 3–4)¹²

The *sumak allpa*, “prodigious land without evil” (Viteri 1993, 150), is defined by the use of the land:

The cyclic rotation of our growings and the permanent mobility of the human settlement allow a constant renovation and recreation of the soils, of the territory and of its lives. This search for the *sumak allpa* implies a deep communion of man with his environment, norming its use and administration, avoiding like this any alteration like the contamination or looting, in the framework

¹⁰ The concrete origins and the development of this concept have been studied in Altmann (2013a, 2013b). Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán (2015) give a complete revision of the development of the concept as a genuinely Amazonian one. Inuca (2017) establishes the prehistory of the concept within the indigenous movement since the 1930s.

¹¹ It should be noted that Carlos Viteri Gualinga, probably the most important thinker of *sumak kawsay*, started to work for different development agencies after 2003 and is a prominent member of the government of Rafael Correa (Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán 2015, 314–315).

¹² *Amazanga* is the superior being of the spiritual entities of nature and generator of knowledge and wisdom. He also punishes any attack on the harmony. *Nunguli* “is the women superior-spirit of the fertility of the land” (Viteri 1993, 149).

of an equilibrium and a permanent dialogue between runa and the spiritual dimension of nature. All this represents the essence of the sumac causai or harmonious life, based on the egalitarian, solidary and reciprocal character of the society. There is no sumac causai without sumac allpa. (Viteri 1993, 150)

Therefore, it is a concrete, palpable territory where the good life can be pursued, based on a certain knowledge and a certain way of knowing (*sacha kawsai riksina*) tied to territory (Silva 2003, 86) that allows for keeping the land fertile (*munai allpa*, or “desirable or ideal land”) (Viteri 2003, 48–49).¹³ This way of life is endangered by contact with nonindigenous society. Nevertheless, this contact is also an opportunity to “go a renovated way towards the sumac allpa” (Viteri 1993, 150) that is key for indigenous and nonindigenous peoples to maintain their life as such. *Sumak kawsay* is actually a proposal for the whole society and not just the indigenous peoples.¹⁴ This opens up the same problem of scale as does territorial autonomy, a fundamental condition for *sumak kawsay*. This is why it is inscribed from the beginning in the demand for the “construction of a Plurinational State” (Sarayaku 2003, 1) with territorial autonomies.

The concrete proposal of Sarayaku gives some hints on how good life can be pursued within a plurinational state.¹⁵ They demand an “economic and ecological zonification of [their] territory” (Sarayaku 2003, 26–27) in relation to the ecological characteristics of the different parts of their territory, the ancestral customs, and the needs of the population. At least three types of differently protected zones would be established where religious, productive, and touristic activities would be concentrated and managed under communitarian authority (Sarayaku 2003, 26–27).¹⁶ The construction of locality is thus neither a mere political demand of others nor simply a local need; it is a politics in practice. This is why *sumak kawsay* has to be understood as “the strongest sustained weapon that the *sarayakuruna* [or people of Sarayaku] have in this unequal economic and epistemologic ‘war’” (Viteri 2003, 85). It implies “the strengthening and recuperation of values as the base of the cognitive and identitarian strength” (Viteri 2003, 85). Therefore, the concept of good life cannot be separated from its background “as axis of a real self-determination” (Viteri 2003, iv). It is a local concept inscribed into a long political fight of concrete actors and their culture, inseparable from this fight and the concept itself.

Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán (2015, 329) argue that *sumak kawsay* is “a social phenomenon of the Ecuadorian Amazon,” related directly to ecology (312), long existent as cultural representation in Sarayaku (313), and hardly known among the non-Amazonian Kichwa until after 2000 (305). For them, there is an anthropological connection to similar concepts among the Achuar and Shuar as described by several researchers, accelerated by the constitution of regional organizations of the indigenous movement since the late 1970s (308). CONAIE (2013, 40) itself understands this correlation as articulation of *sumak kawsay* with other indigenous principles that refer to “a land/territory ‘without evil’” and gives examples that transcend the mere translation “like Sumak Sacha, Sumak Yaku, Sumak Jita (territories in plenty, forest in plenty with clean woods, biodiversity, and rivers, etc ...); omepo wareñemente kiwiña amopa (in waoterero); penker nunka (good land in shuar cicham).”

The latest revision of the political project of CONAIE finally does include *sumak kawsay*, distinguishing it from other concepts like the state’s *buen vivir*:

Sumak Kawsay expresses the magnificence, the beauty, the happiness, the harmony, the internal and external equilibrium of the living community. It is a permanent process of life, of the totality of existence. Sumak Kawsay is community life, knowledge and culture of life Sumak Kawsay is an institution, an experience that develops on the inside of the communitarian life system Sumak Kawsay originates from the family and communitarian matrix, in the millenarian historical process, it is based on the collective and communitarian vision of the goods, means of production. It is born

¹³ The organization of Sarayaku and its actor completed those definitions since 2005 (Gualinga 2005) with the concept of *kawsay sacha* (living forest) (Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán 2015, 312). On this concept, see further Kohn (2016).

¹⁴ The possibility to integrate it into a different vision of economy is pointed out in the Plan Amazanga (58, in Silva 2003, 87) and Viteri (2003, 86).

¹⁵ The demands of the organization correspond with the ethnographic findings in the community (Ramírez-Cendrero, García, and Santillán 2017).

¹⁶ This demand for a zonification already appears in the Plan Amazanga of 1992 (Silva 2003, 99) and has been repeated ever since, for instance, in Gualinga (2005).

out of the communitarian regime, where there is no concept of property nor the private, but where the means and property are of communitarian character. (CONAIE 2013, 38–39)

As such, it is a proposal and way of life that could replace capitalism and other destructive models of development: “Sumak Kawsay is a system of life that proposes to guarantee life of human beings in harmonic relationship with nature” (CONAIE 2013, 39–40).

While Quijano (2010, 113) is right to understand *buen vivir* as “a complex of social practices oriented towards the democratic production and reproduction of a democratic society,” he and most other decolonial thinkers fail to fully comprehend the radically local constitution of the ideas and proposals subsumed under the concept of *sumak kawsay*. Just as plurinationality and interculturality, good life needs “be explicitly thought about as spatial process[] that reach[es] out from the local to the global, and from the human to the non-human” (Escobar 2010, 42). Of course, “today, the Buen Vivir only can make sense as an alternative social existence, as a De/Coloniality or redistribution of power” (Quijano 2010, 113). But this alternative does not only part from the fact that the excluded and marginalized claim more than their voice, the legitimacy of their practices. It is based on “a system of social, political, economic, environmental and spiritual relationships” (Viteri 2003, iii) and therefore is always changing, always open, and always local.

The radically local and relational character of good life is precisely what gets lost if it is understood exclusively as an alternative to development or a purely ecological proposal. Escobar describes good life as relational ontology that puts into question Eurocentric dualist ontologies that are the basis of our relation to nature and to ourselves. Parting from *sumak kawsay*, “there only exist subjects in relation, including the relations between humans and nonhumans” (Escobar 2010, 39). Therefore, it becomes impossible to speak of clearly separated subjects and objects. Actually, politics, economy, ecology, and many other spheres of thought have to be remade from the bottom up. In the case of ecology, it is easy to see that it has to be rethought if *sumak kawsay* parts from “the break with the nature/culture divide” (Escobar 2010, 41) and understands “the world [as] a pluriverse, ceaselessly in movement, an everchanging web of inter-relations involving humans and non-humans” (Escobar 2010, 9).

Conclusion

The buzz phrases *good life*, *buen vivir*, and *sumak kawsay* as they are developed and proposed by the indigenous movement in Ecuador involve a profoundly decolonial concept that calls into question coloniality of power as a matrix of racist exclusion, capitalist exploitation, and Eurocentric epistemicide. The indigenous peoples are able and willing to live their lives the way they want to, in different forms of territorial autonomy. While the central role of *sumak kawsay* in the fight against coloniality was understood rather early by the decolonial thinkers, its core meaning, the radically local and relational definition of life, has not been integrated sufficiently in theory building. *Sumak kawsay* is not just another piece in the critique of coloniality, it is a true alternative but one so alternative that it contradicts the Western style of understanding the world via abstraction and theorization, based on a thinking of separation. As Spivak (1994, 84) claimed more than thirty years ago: “the Third World can enter the resistance program of an alliance politics directed against a ‘unified repression’ only when it is confined to the third-world groups that are directly accessible to the First World.” Theory is therefore subordinating translation. And *sumak kawsay* is, in fact, an antitheory that breaks with the bases of Western epistemology: the separation between human culture and nature, form and content, spirit and body (see also Escobar 2010, 41).

To do so, *sumak kawsay* draws on locality as a dispositive that is implicitly and explicitly directed against supralocal structures, ideas, and theories. This reading of locality turns it into a decolonial anti-episteme that allows for a rethinking—or better, a de-thinking—of the very bases of our understanding of the world, the same bases that constitute coloniality of power. This is what makes *sumak kawsay* so apparently weak. As it is a radical alternative that breaks with the basic principles of thinking as we do it, it can easily be misunderstood as an anthropological artifact, as an empty signifier or invented tradition. A theoretical reflection on *sumak kawsay* that does not take into account its necessary local character will always turn into a decolonial colonization, the (probably well-intentioned) globalizing appropriation of a nonglobal political concept.

Of course, all this cannot happen if we stick to the state as central institution for a politics of good life (as Walsh [2010] and Radcliffe [2012], even if they express early doubts). This is why a decolonial critique of the state is needed—there cannot be a decolonial state, for every “state remains in practice a colonial state, unwilling to cede autonomy and territorial rights to collective citizens” (Radcliffe 2012, 248). The necessarily territorial character of the modern nation-state (Appadurai 1996) is precisely why this decolonial critique

has to take into account locality or politics of place: if we ignore the urgency of the local, we are condemned to destroy it in favor of some globality that will be Eurocentric.

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