



Methodological and Ideological Options

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. *Buen Vivir*

Buen vivir emerges as a discourse in the late 1990s, driven by three important factors: the Latin-American social movements of the time (particularly the indigenous movement against late twentieth century neoliberalism); the convergence between the said movements and the ideologies of certain global movements (especially the anti-/alter-globalization and the environmental movements); and the widespread disenchantment with the idea of development. According to Eduardo Gudynas and Alberto Acosta, *Buen vivir* can be defined as an “opportunity to build a different society sustained in the coexistence of human beings in their diversity and in harmony with nature, based on recognition of the diverse cultural values existing in each country and worldwide”⁸ (Gudynas and Acosta, 2011, p. 103). It arises out of a combination (1) of the ethical principles of ancient Andean–Amazonian cultures, (2) of the contributions of contemporary critical intellectuals, and (3) of an incipient assimilation of both these sources by the political sphere. The latter is especially visible in Bolivia and Ecuador, which recently accorded the principle of *Buen vivir* constitutional rank.

The *Buen vivir* discourse performs a dual role as a critique of European modernity, on the one hand, and as a proposal for a cultural, social and political renewal on the other (Houtart, 2011). It includes the idea of interdependence between society and its natural environment and a conception of the ‘universal’ as plural reality. It thus implies a fundamental break with modern Western ideologies, mainly those of society–nature dualism and Eurocentric universalism. Similarly, *Buen vivir* cannot be equated to the western idea of continued progress towards welfare, where the idea of ‘progress’ refers to an indefinite future. It is rather a way of living the present in harmony, that is, assuming and respecting differences and complementarities (among humans and between humans and non-humans) from an ecological perspective that could be described as holistic and mutualistic. Hence *Buen vivir* breaks away from the reductionist Cartesian worldview to adopt a systemic perspective encompassing the entire ecosphere (including abiotic components). It also breaks away from the idea of cultural and social homogeneity, assuming its logical impossibility in an inevitably diverse world, and posits instead a path of harmony and “unity in diversity”⁹.

To be sure, as a discourse it is still a work-in-progress in search of legitimacy, but it can henceforth be safely regarded as part of a critical current towards the ideologies of progress, rationalization and universalism, typical of European modernity.

3.1. *Indigenous Origins*

The concept of ‘*Buen vivir*’ (sometimes also termed ‘*Vivir bien*’ or *good living*) is an extrapolation of the Quechua concept “*Sumak Kawsay*” and of similar notions from other indigenous peoples in Latin America: the Aymara (“*Suma Qamaña*”), the Guarani (“*Ñandereko*”), the Ashuar (“*Shiir waras*”) and the Mapuche (“*Küme Mongen*”) (Jiménez, 2011). All these indigenous concepts broadly converge in a principle which could be synthesized as “living in plenitude, knowing how to live in harmony with the cycles of Mother Earth, of the cosmos, of life and of history, and in balance with every form of existence in a state of permanent respect” (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010, p. 32). The transposition of such a principle into a modern framework through the *Buen vivir* discourse is thus necessarily reductive and cannot account for the semantic richness of the original concept (for more detail see Beling et al., in press).

⁸ Citations in languages other than English have been translated by the authors.

⁹ This latter dimension of *Buen vivir* resonates with the pluralist sociological theories of modernity (Arnason, 2003; Dirlik, 2007; Eisenstadt, 2000; Larraín, 2007; Therborn, 2003; Wagner, 2010, 2008, 1996; Wittrock, 2000) which attempt to overcome both (homogenizing) universalism and (divisive) particularism, seen as two forms of reductionism (Pieterse, 2009; Rehbein, 2013, 2010). Moreover, the radicalized antinomy between universalism and particularism would lead to insurmountable aporias.

We argue, however, that the attention currently captured by *Buen vivir* is the result of a double process of its emancipation from its original cosmological framework and of its academic and political reelaboration, which makes of *Buen vivir* a contemporary discourse and places it within the worldwide flow of discursive interactions around the imperative of sustainability and the idea of development.

3.2. *Emersion in the Political Sphere*

Since the 1990s, neoliberal projects started to face strong popular reaction in many Latin-American countries (Yashar, 2005). Indigenous communities self-organized at the national level (e.g. the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador, CONAIE, since 1986, or the Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia, CIDOB, since 1982) and, more recently, at the regional level (Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas, CAOI, since 2006¹⁰), became essential political actors in the process of renewed state-building. The emergence of these indigenous voices results from the empowerment of indigenous communities in the Andean countries, but also from the affinity of their worldviews with those of different national NGO's and global contemporary social movements, in particular the anti-/alter-globalization, Human Rights and environmental movements.¹¹ In this way, the indigenous movements of Latin America at the end of the 20th century came to participate – driven by their particular recognition struggles – in the global debate around sustainability and development. In this context, the *Buen vivir* discourse started gaining importance in Ecuador and Bolivia – two countries whose populations are mostly of indigenous origin and strongly identify with their ancestral traditions – to the point of becoming a central reference for their new National Constitutions, as well as for the first National Plan of Development in Ecuador, the “Plan Nacional para el *Buen vivir* 2009–2013” (SENPLADES, 2009), and its follow-up version (20132017), which was approved in June 2013 by the National Planning Council of Ecuador (SENPLADES, 2013).

In the new National Constitution of Ecuador, the first reference to *Buen vivir* appears in the preamble, which underlines the country's decision to build “a new form of citizen coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature, to achieve good living (*Buen vivir*), *sumak kawsay*” (p. 15). Beyond this transversal reference, *Buen vivir* has its own regime, detailed in the chapter “*Derechos del Buen vivir*” (*Buen vivir* rights/Title II – chapter II) and in the “*Régimen del Buen vivir*” (*Buen vivir* regime/Title VII), with over 75 articles covering diverse topics such as water and nourishment, a healthy environment, culture, science, education, health, ancestral knowledge, and biodiversity, *i.a.* The Ecuadorian Constitution also includes a “Development regime” (Title VI), which is characterized as follows:

¹⁰ It needs to be noted, however, that indigenous groups first gathered at the regional level in the year 2000 at the First Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nations: Abya Yala, held in the city of Teotihuacán, Mexico.

¹¹ For example in the case of Ecuador: environmental NGO's such as *Acción Ecológica*, *Fundación Pachamama*, *Fundación Natura*, and the international Oilwatch network. These NGO's together with indigenous communities played an important role in bringing forward the idea of a post-oil economy on the political agenda, starting in 1993 with a lawsuit against Texaco/Chevron which came to be known as “the trial of the century”. In a context otherwise favorable to the expansion of the oil extraction frontier, local social movements (with the support of Oilwatch) proposed the establishment of a moratorium on oil-extraction in the center-south region of the Ecuadorian Amazon. This proposal, formulated in various spaces and forums, achieved public status through the book *El Ecuador Post-Petrolero* (Post-Oil Ecuador) in 2000 (Acosta, 2000). In 2003, the moratorium proposal was formally presented to the Ministry of the Environment by several environmental NGO's. Shortly after, in 2005, at an Oilwatch meeting in Italy, the document “An ecological call for conservation, climate and rights” posed the need to link the issues of conservation of biodiversity, climate change and the rights of indigenous peoples in a common strategy to save the areas of greatest diversity, and suggests the application of this strategy to the Yasuni Biosphere reserve. This is the background of the Yasuni Initiative officially presented by Ecuadorian government in the year 2007, launched (with the support of the UNDP) in 2010, and canceled in August 2013 (see more details about this in section Nr. 5 of this article “*Paradoxes in the political appropriations of Buen vivir*”).

The development regime is the organized, sustainable and dynamic ensemble of the economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems that guarantee the realization of good living, *sumak kawsay*. [...]

Good living will require that the people, communities, peoples and nationalities effectively enjoy their rights and exercise responsibilities in the context of intercultural sensitivity, respect for diversity, and harmonious coexistence with nature (art. 275).

As can be seen, the “development regime” overlaps in a somewhat opaque way with reference to *Buen vivir*, aiming at a new type of social, political, economic and eco-friendly development. Indeed, despite originally having proclaimed itself as an “alternative to development”, what can be actually observed in its political translations is that the relationship between the *Buen vivir* and SD discourses is rather of a dialogical type (though largely unspecified). The reference to development and sustainability has not disappeared from the political jargon. In fact, ‘sustainability’ appears at least ten times in the Constitution. The same conclusion can be drawn after reading the *Plan Nacional para el Buen vivir 2009–2013*, which provides a socio-historical contextualization for the irruption of *Buen vivir* in the “search for alternative ways of life that has been driven particularly by the social actors of Latin America over the last decades, demanding vindication against the neoliberal economic model” (SENPLADES, 2009, p. 10). In this instrument of National Planning, *Buen vivir* is defined as:

a commitment to change [...] that allows for the application of a new economic paradigm whose end does not focus on the material, mechanistic and seemingly endless accumulation of goods, but instead promotes an inclusive, sustainable and democratic economic strategy. [...] Also, ‘good living’ is built [...] on transition from current anthropocentrism towards biopluralism [...]. Finally, ‘good living’ also builds on the demands for equality and social justice, and on the recognition, evaluation and dialog of the peoples and their cultures, forms of knowledge and ways of life (SENPLADES, 2009, p. 10).

In the brand-new *Plan nacional para el Buen vivir 2013–2017*, the reference to *Buen vivir* remains central and openly opposed to the neoliberal economic model and the modern Eurocentric tradition. In this updated document, *Buen vivir* is defined as:

the way of life that invites happiness and the permanence of cultural and environmental diversity, [*Buen vivir*] is harmony, equality, equity and solidarity. Not looking for opulence and infinite economic growth (SENPLADES, 2013, p. 6).

Buen vivir is not a new development paradigm, but a liberating social alternative that proposes other priorities for social organization, other than mere economic growth implicit in the development paradigm (SENPLADES, 2013, p. 6).

However, the 2013 plan introduces a new type of semantics by coupling the concepts of “*Buen vivir*” and “socialism” in the expression “Socialism of *Buen vivir*”. This is the basic idea informing the political platform of the *Movimiento Alianza PAIS*,¹² which “articulates the struggle for social justice, equality and the abolition of privileges, with the construction of a society that respects diversity and nature. In such a society we can build our skills and live in dignity and freely. The goal of the Socialism of *Buen vivir* is to defend and strengthen society, work, and life in all its forms. The first step is to solve the access to goods, opportunities and conditions that guarantee – to individual, community and future generations – a dignified life without harming nature” (SENPLADES, 2013, p. 16).

¹² *Movimiento Alianza PAIS* is the name of the Ecuadorian political coalition led by President Rafael Correa (formally launched in Quito on February 19, 2006). Its political project goes by the name “Revolución Ciudadana” (Citizen Revolution), and its normative horizon is the “socialism of the twenty-first century”.

Drawing a parallel with the Bolivian case – nuanced differences notwithstanding – the foundations of the Bolivian Constitution enacted on 7th February 2009 share the same orientation towards what has been described here as the *Buen vivir* discourse. In this Constitution, the *Suma qamaña* or “*Vivir bien*” (‘living well’) also plays a transversal role. It is first introduced in the preamble, and informs the whole document as a guiding principle, together with the idea of a “plural economy”: “the Bolivian economic model is plural and aims to improve the quality of life and the ‘well living’ of all Bolivians” (art. 306). On the other hand, unlike the case in Ecuador, the Bolivian Constitution does not grant any rights to nature. However, in December 2010, the Bolivian government issued the *Law of Rights of Mother Earth*, which recognizes “the rights of Mother Earth, as well as the duties and obligations of the Plurinational State and of society to ensure respect for such rights” (art. 1).

As has been the case with many radical transformative discourses throughout history, it should come as no surprise that the new social and political utopia of *Buen vivir* falls short of its promise when brought down to political, economic, and social praxis. However, we argue that the reductive and ambiguous equalization between the concepts of ‘*Buen vivir*’ and ‘development’ in the building of political and legal institutional foundations – which is a common feature of both the Ecuadorean and the Bolivian cases – amounts to neglecting inbuilt tensions between these two concepts, which paves the way for possible dilution of the *Buen vivir* discourse into the fold of *status-quo*-prone developmental discourses, including washed-out versions of SD. We engage in a deeper exploration of possible discursive inconsistencies and of the tension between discourse and practice of *Buen vivir* in section Nr. 5 of this article (“*Paradoxes in the political appropriations of Buen vivir*”).

3.3. Connection with the Academic Sphere

In parallel to its diffusion in the political sphere, *Buen vivir* also feeds academic discussions, which in turn feeds back into its own discursive construction. In general, the dimension of *Buen vivir* emphasized in the academia is that of an antithesis or “negative of development” (generally equated with the Eurocentric conception). It is this latter dimension, in combination with its ‘decolonizing’ or ‘alternative’ potential, which predominantly animates intellectual reflections around this new discourse. As stated, political definitions generally emphasize the idea of “unity in diversity” and transcend the communitarian or national framework, reaching out to a “global polity”. In this sense, they lean more towards a pluralistic synthesis. In the academic sphere, in turn, approaches to *Buen vivir* are more heterogeneous, even contrasting. Scholars can be divided between a radical position that reinforces a particularistic (largely anti-modern) trend, and a more moderate stance (potentially dialogical and pluralist).

Following the first of these positions, there would be no distinction between *Buen vivir* and its indigenous origins. The ancestral wisdom of the Andean peoples (conceived of in an essentialist way) would be directly retrievable, thus allowing for a “decolonization of knowledge” and of indigenous peoples’ traditions. Many of the scholars associated with the Modernity/Coloniality Group wrote more or less extensively about *Buen vivir*, among them Aníbal Quijano (2011), Edgardo Lander (2010) and Catherine Walsh (2010), but also Walter Mignolo (2010, 2008) and Enrique Dussel (2012). The indicated propensity to interpret *Buen vivir* as an opportunity for the decolonization of knowledge would seem reasonable, since *Buen vivir* emerges as a self-proclaimed alternative to development. However, it seems difficult to integrate this view with the pluralist perspective that emerges from the aforementioned political translations. “It is what J. Medina calls ‘post-modernism of *Buen vivir*’, and what others, less indulgently, termed ‘pachamamism’” (Houtart, 2011). In other words, this radicalized position diametrically opposes *Buen vivir* to modernity (understood exclusively in terms of European diffusionism) and uses it as leverage for the anti-modern/anti-colonial struggle. Needless to say, this perspective appears less compatible with the vision of a world that is, first and foremost, plural. It assumes a version of *Buen vivir* which folds upon itself and would thus

be irrelevant to any different cultural-geographic context. For this reason, such a fundamentalist critique can be regarded as a potential drift of the *Buen vivir* discourse, because instead of offering a new philosophical foundation for the organization of collective life (as an alternative to and beyond the Western idea of ‘progress’, but without rejecting ‘modernity’ as a whole), it remains anchored in the sterile Universalism/Particularism dichotomy. How could *Buen vivir* possibly participate effectively in the global debates on development if it posits an *a priori* wholesale rejection of modernity?

On the other hand, scholars directly or indirectly involved in political change processes portray *Buen vivir* in a more dialogical and inclusive light. This is clearly the case with Alberto Acosta, who acted as President of the Constituent Assembly of 2008 in Ecuador. It is also the case with Pablo Dávalos and René Ramírez; and, in Bolivia, David Choquehuanca Céspedes, and Pablo Mamani Ramírez, *i.a.* These ‘moderate’ authors emphasize the opportunity that *Buen vivir* offers to dialogically deconstruct the currently dominant model of development, without claiming its incompatibility with modernity (understood here as multiple and entangled). What is emphasized here is that “discussion of *Buen vivir* cannot be confined to the Andean realities” (Acosta, 2010), but should rather be shared and discussed at the global level.

To be sure, this hermeneutic/ideological rift has not precluded ‘moderate’ authors from often aligning themselves with their more radical colleagues with the purpose of potentiating their own arguments. Such discursive coalition between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ scholars is understandable, despite their differences, in a context characterized by the domination of the (Eurocentric and universalistic) most conservative versions of (sustainable) development, which are thus regarded as the ‘common enemy’. Nevertheless, moderate authors keep insisting that the conceptualization of *Buen vivir* is a work-in-progress, directly related to a form of intercultural dialog towards the ideal of sustainability; an inter-discursive dialog that includes other critical (western and non-western) variants in the discursive field of sustainable development. According to them, the cases of Bolivia and Ecuador show that:

There is an ongoing dialog with indigenous cultural traditions, and they can create or re-create new conceptualizations adapted to the current circumstances. This is not a simple return to the ideas of a distant past. On the other hand, also involved in this dialog are some western traditions which have challenged various assumptions of the dominant [understanding of] modernity (Gudynas and Acosta, 2011, p. 106).

This kind of ambiguous dynamics (sometimes synergistic; sometimes conflictive) within the academic sphere and between the academic and political spheres can also be observed in the interaction between governments and grassroots movements, thus configuring a rather novel constellation of actors that together interactively shape the *Buen vivir* discourse. For example, in 2010, the Bolivian government acted as a convener of the *World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth*, in response to the disappointment of the COP 15 UNFCCC Summit in Copenhagen. In 2012 at the UN Conference Rio + 20 it was the Ecuadorean government who uphold a strong critical discourse (backed to some extent by Uruguay and Bolivia), which resonated symbiotically with the parallel *Peoples Summit for Social and Environmental Justice in Defense of the Commons*, whose final declaration makes also reference to *Buen vivir*. These side-events to official UN summits can be safely assumed to represent the voice of the grassroots, including indigenous groups.¹³ In the recent *Summit of the Peoples of Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe* held in Santiago de Chile in January 2013, *Buen vivir* was once again reasserted, indicating that it is being appropriated by diverse social groups as a vision of their own. An example of cross-pollination with the intellectual sphere

is the case of the *International Symposium on Crisis of civilization, ecosocialism and ‘buen vivir’* recently held by Ecuador's National Institute of Advanced Studies with the participation of an international board of eco-socialist intellectuals and government representatives.¹⁴

4. Sustainable Development Versus *Buen Vivir*

In spite of the progressive suppression of ecological contents in mainstream sustainability discussions – from the *Ecodevelopment* proposal of 1972 to the *Green Economy* of Rio + 20 – the validity of the ‘SD-formula’ as a regulative ideal has hardly ever been successfully questioned. Nevertheless, as has been argued, the sharp inconsistencies resulting from its diverse forms of articulation and appropriation have thus far prevented it from overcoming certain normative and practical limits and thus from achieving its central goal, namely to allow for the satisfaction of the needs of all human beings so that they live a dignified life without jeopardizing the possibility of future generations to meet their own needs. Yet after nearly 40 years of debates around environment and development issues, “sustainable development is back in focus in international policy discourse, with the concept of Sustainable Development Goals which set to replace or complement the Millennium Development Goals that will expire in 2015” (Lélé, 2013, p. 311).

Given the polysemic nature of SD, the prevalence of the reference gives little indication as to its content. We can therefore ask, in a pluralistic perspective, how does *Buen vivir* fit this framework, if at all, and (if so) what can be expected from it as a contribution? On the one hand, the *Buen vivir* discourse can be said to fit the global discursive field of SD insofar it looks at the relationship of mutual dependence between humans and their natural environment in a specific manner. On the other hand, however, it requires overcoming the society/nature dualism, typical of European modernity. Following this line, Eduardo Gudynas talks of a *biocentric turn*: “The good living of humans is only possible if the survival and integrity of the web of life of nature can be guaranteed” (Gudynas, 2009, p. 52). This view seems to resemble the *pathos* of Deep Ecology, since it visualizes the “web of life of nature” and the Earth as a single organism. At the same time, however, it breaks away from this current because it does not hold humans to be subordinated to nature, but rather recognizes their mutual interdependence and the need for their harmonization on the basis of a principle of reciprocity¹⁵: nature is not something surrounding human beings; rather humans are an integral part of nature. In anthropological terms this would amount to overcoming the idea of humans as an ontologically superior entity that utilizes nature insofar as it provides the goods and services needed for the satisfaction of human needs/wants (the so-called ‘ecosystem-services’); reframing the relation between human and the whole living and non-living world as a life symbiosis, just the way that *Pachamama* (‘Mother Earth’) is conceived by the Andean indigenous peoples.

This perspective is of course not exclusive to the *Buen vivir* discourse. Similar arguments can be retrieved from a whole range of literature critical of the western nature/society divide. For example, in the context of the debates about global modernities of the early 1990s, Bruno Latour (1991) published a controversial essay on “symmetrical anthropology”. The controversy turns the modern nature–culture dichotomy upside down. Indeed, Latour goes as far as claiming that this seminal divide – which underscores historical denialism of the interdependent relationship between natural and cultural entities – undermines the very plausibility of full realization of the modern project, namely, the rise of

¹⁴ See <http://climateandcapitalism.com/2013/06/20/quito-declaration-ecosocialism-and-buen-vivir/> (last accessed December 17, 2013).

¹⁵ This ‘harmonious’ relationship is thus based on the principle of mutualism, rather than competition, between communities and between mankind and the entire cosmos. In the concept of *Sumak Kawsay*, this idea of reciprocity is embodied in the principles of *Rari-Rari*, *Ruray*, *Maki Maki* or else *Yachay* (for a full-fledged elaboration on this point Beling et al., in press; & Estermann, 2006, 1998).

¹³ See for example <http://rio20.net/propuestas/por-la-construccion-de-un-nuevo-paradigma-civilizatorio> (available only in Spanish, last accessed December 17, 2013).

self-governing societies. More generally, this critique of the nature/society divide is the core issue of both the academic disciplines of Environmental Ethics (which seeks to reframe the relationship between humans and the environment from the standpoint of morality) and Political Ecology (which considers nature as an objective condition for the existence of human societies and should therefore be considered a part of the public and political space). Similar arguments can also be retrieved from the work of Latin-American thinkers, such as Enrique Leff's (2004, 1999) "environmental rationality", Victor Toledo's (2003) "species consciousness" or Leonardo Boff's (2002, 1997) "cosmological biocentrism", i.a. Indeed, many of the discourses that Hopwood et al. (2005) would categorize as "transformative" within the SD discursive field in fact echo the critique that *Buen vivir* addresses towards the anthropocentric and expansionist conceptions of development, rooted in an Eurocentric Cartesian worldview.

As can be inferred from the foregoing, and again in line with other 'transformative' discourses, the normative translations configuring the *Buen vivir* discourse imply a necessary transformation of economic structures, as well as *inter-* and *intra-*societal power relations. In this regard, it competes with the dominant interpretations of the SD discourse that, in practice, advocate the *status quo* or the (incremental) reform of the existing system (Dryzek, 2005; Hopwood et al., 2005; Lélé, 2013; Sneddon et al., 2006), without problematizing the inheritance from Eurocentric modernization or the idea of development as a whole. The fact remains that 25 years after the canonization of SD, the controversies that gave rise to it remain virtually untouched (if they have not worsened), and the irruption of *Buen vivir* in global debates about society and environment aims at contributing (from a Latin-American perspective) to re-contextualize our collective thinking about the socio-economic and ecological drifts of the 'development' project and about the feasibility of a 'sustainable' form of development, inviting to look deeper into and beyond current understandings.

In this sense, *Buen vivir* can be understood as a distinctive Latin-American pathway towards global socio-environmental sustainability, as suggested in the Quito Declaration,¹⁶ the latest works of ECLAC/CEPAL in preparation to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20) (CEPAL, 2012), as well as in the official speeches pronounced by the representatives of Ecuador and Bolivia at that conference, and in several interventions at the People's Summit (*Cúpula dos povos*).

This view openly contrasts with the general direction adopted by the UN at Rio + 20, as a standard bearer for another emerging discourse: the 'Green Economy'. Conceived by the international political mainstream as a renewal of the discourse of SD, this 'reloaded' version presents both opportunities and threats (Serrano Mancilla and Carrillo, 2011). The Green Economy is aimed at the reform of the economic system in order to minimize its impact on ecosystems and to mitigate the polarization of wealth. This discourse acknowledges the need to achieve a better equilibrium between humans and their natural environment, mainly with the aim of guaranteeing the continuity of the so called 'ecological services' and the economic benefits that they provide.

The Green Economy is regarded by many as the most realistic and pragmatic proposal in the search for an appropriate balance between the modern economy and its natural environment. Others (mainly social movements, some NGOs and critical academics, but also the governments of some Latin-American countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador and even Uruguay), by contrast, view it as the continuation of the paradigm that gave rise to current environmental problems, and point to a lack of arguments or persuasive indicators that would allow to anticipate a

substantial reduction of the 'ecological footprint' in accordance with the requirements of science. This anthropocentric and Eurocentric grounding thus seems to situate the Green Economy in the antipodes of *Buen vivir*.

Furthermore, the final document ratified in Rio + 20 does not exhibit any significant progress as compared to the meager results of other recent multilateral environmental summits; while rather insisting on a "single model of sustainable development which does not account for cultural diversity and refuses to recognize Mother Earth as a subject of rights" (CAOI, 2012), notwithstanding the observations of paragraph 39 (promoted by Ecuador, Bolivia, and ALBA through the G77), which underscores the existence of such recognition in "some countries".

5. Paradoxes in the Political Appropriations of *Buen vivir*

Without prejudice to the vitality of the above-mentioned social disputes around the normative ideals of Latin-American politics at the beginning of the century, and despite the prevalence of self-denominated leftist and "postneoliberal" governments in the region (Pelfini, 2008; Yashar, 2005), which uphold a political discourse that favors the aspirations of the larger (and historically marginalized) strata of the population, the goal of development (understood in most conservative fashion as giving absolute priority to economic growth) remains the "holy grail" of politics, as much in the national sphere as in the dominant vision of regional integration. Even if the discourse of respect for and worthiness of cultural differences has become an indispensable rhetorical resource on the international political stage, political decisions rarely emerge from popular and communal proposals, but rather from a standardized repertoire of 'best practices' fitting the mainstream discourse of development. *Buen vivir*, in contrast, is proposed as the driving principle for a cultural, social, and political re-constitutionalization process, and refers – as shown by the analysis of the Ecuadorean and Bolivian constitutions – to a series of basic social, economic, and environmental rights. In the event of any practical application of the *Buen vivir* discourse, both the state and the market would need to be transformed and subject to regulations that are compatible with actual social and ecological needs.¹⁷

The state would need to adjust to the criterion of "multicultural citizenship" (Kymlicka, 1996) and move from the idea of a Nation-state to that of a "multinational" or "plurinational" state. According to Kymlicka, most states are currently *de facto* multicultural. Hence, the efforts of Ecuador and Bolivia to expand the recognition of cultural diversity are a valuable contribution to rethinking the state in the current world context. Such new configurations seek to favor a recovered protagonism of the citizenry in policy-making at the state-level.¹⁸ On the other hand, the market needs to be "democratized" to become responsive to the needs of the majority of individuals and communities, beyond the single bottom-line of shareholder value maximization. In short, the state needs to become "citizenized" and the market "civilized" (Acosta, 2010).

Such transformation of both state and markets is currently, of course, a major topic of debate, and research throughout the social sciences and philosophy, and thus far exceeds the scope of this article. Worth emphasizing here is, however, that it is precisely this complex equation what the Ecuadorean and Bolivian government claim to be seeking to reframe (rather than strictly 'resolve') through the principle of *Buen vivir*. Even if there does exist a governmental plan named after it in Ecuador, one should keep in mind that *Buen vivir* is not a programmatic concept in and of itself; but rather a comprehensive philosophy with normative

¹⁶ See point Nr. 18 of the Quito Declaration, annex to the Final Report of the XVIII Reunion of the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean (Quito, Ecuador, 31st January to 3rd February 2012), UNEP. Quote: "That, in the framework of the Rio + 20 Conference, a universal declaration of the rights of nature should be discussed as an instrument to achieve good living". See more at: <http://www.unccd2012.org/index.php?page=view&nr=843&type=230&menu=38#sthash.rAbAvjtM.dpuf> (last accessed December 17, 2013).

¹⁷ The definition of social and ecological needs is, again, a contested issue; yet, since the 1990s (and especially the call to develop official indicators in Rio92), important work is being carried out in order to define several bottom-line indicators covering the multiple dimensions of SD. Many indicators have been developed since then (see the overviews proposed by Böhringer and Jochem, 2007; Ness et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2009). Recently, we can refer to the work of the joint UN-ECE, OECD and Eurostat taskforce on *Measuring Sustainable Development* (UNECE et al., 2009), and its follow-up version (2013).

¹⁸ For further discussion on "multicultural citizenship", see Will Kymlicka (2003, 1996).

ascendance over the political debate and administration, whose value added consists in enabling the “consideration [of] worldviews marginalized or excluded by the dominant Eurocentric modernity, and the emergence of new rationalities situated at the midway between the disenchantment of the traditional world and the reenchantment of the modern world; between science and spirituality; between metaphysics and reason” (Beling et al., *in press*). In practice, however, the contradictions between *Buen vivir* and neextractivism¹⁹ discredit the capacity of governments to effectively challenge the omnipotence of markets and their neoliberal foundations.

Arguably, Ecuador and Bolivia, the breeding grounds of the *Buen vivir* discourse, increasingly resemble textbook illustrations of neo-extractive economic agendas. After having attained office by appealing to the larger and historically underprivileged or marginalized population strata (invoking, *i.a.*, the indigenous heritage of *Sumak kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña*), the administrations of President Correa in Ecuador and of President Morales in Bolivia are currently rather following a pathway of economic development that reinforces well-worn (neo)extractivist practices (mainly oil exploitation but also large-scale mining). This contradiction between discourse and practice is increasingly arousing the disappointment and indignation of former supporters in many civil society strands (Hollender, 2012).

The root of such contradictions might well lie in a certain level of indefiniteness of the *Buen vivir* discourse itself. If it is true – as argued earlier – that pouring the indigenous *Sumak kawsay* into the modern clothing of *Buen vivir* unavoidably implies a loss of semantic richness, it is not less true that “the translation of the principles of *buen vivir* into the political arena (rather than simply in the ‘development debate’) implies a certain degree of ideologization, that may be needed in order to define a political perspective at the price of introducing a level of rigidity” (Monni and Pallottino, 2013, p. 13).

According to Monni and Pallottino (2013), being a conceptual work-in-progress, the “*Buen vivir*” label is distinctively applied to a heterogeneous set of political and philosophical–anthropological ideas and institutions, ranging from narrow equalizations with a particular governmental agenda all the way up to abstract conceptions of a post-paradigmatic cosmology, which turns the *Buen vivir* discourse itself into a field of struggle about its meaning and raises the question about whether and how *Buen vivir* can be realistically expected to escape the evanescent fate of sustainable development. The extent to which the diverse heterogeneous elements poured under the umbrella of *Buen vivir* are compatible with each other is an empirical matter to be observed throughout continued dialogical interaction. Yet hermeneutical variability is constrained by its filiation with *Sumak Kawsay*. Indeed, as can be clearly derived from its social and academic appropriations, the *ethos* of *Buen vivir* is fundamentally critical and transformative, and thus cannot be consistently used to justify conservative politics. The question that obviously arises is where the limit lies between heterogeneity in appropriation and outright cooptation of the discourse. While the precise definition of such limits is a matter open to debate, no possible definition could justifiably overlook the principles of

complementarity and reciprocity among humans and between humans and the rest of nature, which are axial to the *ethos* of *Buen vivir* as rooted in *Sumak Kawsay*. But the fluidity of its semantic contours makes *Buen vivir* vulnerable to instrumental exploitation or cooptation with the purpose of legitimizing political decisions and socio-economic configurations clearly alien to this *ethos*. Arguably, this rift between principle and political implementation became especially visible with the recent cancelation of the emblematic Yasuni-ITT Initiative. The initiative had been officially launched in 2010 following an international agreement and the creation of the Yasuni Fund under the aegis of the UNDP. However, on August 15, 2013, President Correa announced the cancelation of the initiative, invoking arguments such as the lack of support by the international community and the need for oil revenues to fight poverty. The failure of Yasuni-ITT clearly shows that, at least for the time being, the neo-extractivist logic of the “Commodity Consensus” prevails in government agendas over the regulative ideal of *Buen vivir*.

Neither suspicion nor discredit possibly arising from the Bolivian and Ecuadorean government projects, however, invalidates *Buen vivir* as a discourse. Indeed, despite the difficulties and disappointments with state-led attempts at practical implementation of *Buen vivir*, the idea remains clearly not only alive with its original proponents in Ecuador and Bolivia, but keeps diffusing to new actors in the public, political and academic spheres. Moreover, *Buen vivir* has begun to gain resonance on a global scale and to influence various groups and social movements that are looking for viable alternatives to the dominant discourse of development based on economic rationality and the Modern-European ideal of progress.

Furthermore, the process of constitutional assembly and the inclusion of historically marginalized population strata in the deliberative process can be seen as steps towards “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1995) or towards a “Political Ecology”, as advocated by Latour (2004) and Beck (1992), who propose to democratically broaden the spectrum of institutionalized voices speaking for nature and future generations within (Beck) or beyond (Latour) the scientific sphere, in order to increase legitimacy of environmental decision-making. Ultimately, the legitimation and potential of *Buen vivir* rest on the building of a real space for citizen participation and on the emergence of collective learning processes²⁰ (Eder, 1999, 1985; Miller, 1986; Pelfini, 2007; see also the concept of “sustainability learning” in Tàbara and Pahl-Wostl, 2007) by concrete social groups, thereby expanding the frontiers of what is speakable, of what is deemed desirable or even conceivable. This expansion of collectively shared cultural and cognitive templates is a precondition potentially enabling for the realization of the ideal of harmonious plural and ecologically sustainable societies underlying the ideal of *Buen vivir*.

In this sense, the granting of constitutional rights to “nature” in the Montecristi Ecuadorean Constitution cannot be emphasized strongly enough as a ground-breaking step forward in terms of expanding not only the content but also the frame-boundaries of the debate around ecological sustainability, even if hitherto rather in symbolic than in operational terms. It would indeed be difficult to conceive of the possibility of immediate implementation of these principles, since there is no provision in the constitutional text (or in any of the derived legal or administrative documents) that would even attempt at defining the boundaries of the concept of “nature” as bearer of rights; or as to who will draw these contours concretely and how. Who can legitimately represent the natural non-human entities in the political debate? How should conflicts between the rights of nature and the rights of human

¹⁹ “Extractivism” refers to a development model based on the extraction of raw material to be traded on the world market. Historically, it is the dominant economic model in Latin America, where the dynamics of national economies is mainly based on the binomial extracting–exporting. “Neo-Extractivism” refers to the revised model implemented by left-wing governments of the early twenty-first century in Latin America. The reinstatement of the State is precisely what distinguishes neextractivism from ‘classical’ extractivism, while the extractive model (and its environmental impacts) remains unaltered; worse: it is even reinforced (Gudynas, 2012, 2011). The official discourse, however, stresses the greater government effort in social investment and income redistribution, accompanied by a critical stance toward the neoliberal agenda of the Washington Consensus, all this coupled with a reappraisal of the Humans Rights discourse. This led to what Maristella Svampa called the “Commodity Consensus” (Svampa, 2013, 2012), *i.e.* the expansion of the extractive frontier insofar as it is considered essential for growth, stability, and a more equitable income redistribution; that is, a series of ‘positive externalities’ that take precedence over the preservation of the environment further reinforcing, in practice, an unsustainable model of development.

²⁰ Collective learning theory deals with interactional processes of cultural and cognitive de-centering, and their corresponding socio-moral and practical competences. The term “interactional” intends to distinguish this theoretical approach from classical rationalistic and cognitive-psychological approaches with regard to the question of *who is the subject* of learning. At stake is a shift from the single-actor perspective to an interaction perspective: against rationalist assumptions it is argued that in order to learn people need a narratively shared world, and that this narrative is collectively produced, reproduced and transformed.

individuals and/or communities be handled? Despite the lack of answers to these and similar questions, however, the mere symbolic expansion of the frontiers of the modern legal and constitutional tradition, which has never before granted rights to any non-human entity, should arguably be regarded as no minor achievement *per se*. The key implications of *Buen vivir*, in this regard, should thus be measured not so much by the (more or less successful) attempts at its legal and practical implementation, but by its actual contribution to destabilizing dominant existing cognitive and cultural templates²¹ and to the opening of new spaces for the emergence of new ones (including nature as a political subject).

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have presented *Buen vivir* as the contemporary discourse emerging from an axial principle of the cosmology of ancient indigenous cultures in Latin America: the *Sumak Kawsay* of the Quechuas (as well as analogous principles from others indigenous groups). The *Buen vivir* discourse presents itself as a dialogical alternative to the well-worn discourse of SD, arising at a global historical-political juncture where the capacity of the development paradigm (or the enlightened idea of progress itself) to offer satisfactory responses to the grave social, environmental, and economic challenges of our time is starting to lose ground and is no longer taken for granted.

Sumak Kawsay, as a principle belonging to an incommensurable cosmology alien to Western modernity, can hardly be conceived of, in the full-density of its original meaning, as regulative principle for the organization of collective life in modern societies. Instead, we have suggested that its discursive reelaboration by the academic and political spheres under the Spanish name of *Buen vivir* would be a much more versatile and promising version. Throughout this article, it has been argued that the *Buen vivir* discourse differs just as much from the more conservative versions of the SD discourse, as it is consistent with some of the more transformative ones. We thus seek to further enquire into the extent to which it constitutes a distinctive and fruitful contribution to the already heterogeneous discursive field of SD, and whether this distinctiveness would be conducive to a fundamental break with this field altogether, or rather allow for fresh and promising extensions of existing trends of thought *within* the field.

Our analysis led to the conclusion that *Buen vivir* does indeed resonate with many contemporary discourses aimed at transforming the forms of social organization and the currently prevailing production and consumption patterns in order to make them compatible with the (social and ecological) sustainability imperative. In other words, we found that intersection areas between *Buen vivir* discourse and other variants of the SD discourse can be identified and exhibit significant potential for synergies. Hence, beyond the possibility of any fundamentalist drifts restorative of an essentialized ancestral past – and notwithstanding the risk of its cooptation by narrow political interests – the greatest potential of *Buen vivir* lies in the opportunities it generates for dialog with other modern discourses and the current forms of development, by enlarging the frame of current debates and allowing for the potential emergence of novel conceptions, institutions and practices through collective learning. Such learning is moreover fostered by the historically singular constellation of actors interactively shaping the *Buen vivir* discourse, what could be called – in a free analogy with Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz model of innovation (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 2003, 1996) – a “Latin-American triple helix” of indigenous knowledge, state, and Academia relationships. Furthermore, the interweaving of *Buen vivir* with multicultural theories and with the diverse theories and contemporary expressions critical of mainstream development (such as ecological economics, political ecology, de-growth, eco-

socialism, ecofeminism, environmental justice, *i.a.*) appears as a necessary and promising scholarly and political enterprise in order to assess the potential of *Buen vivir* to inform the search for a regulative ideal to drive a global transition to sustainability.

However, before *Buen vivir* can become a truly effective guide for action, it is essential to further clarify its contours and consider its potential for specific applications. As argued here, the critique of development started from the analysis of empirical reality and then led to more conceptual and normative criticism. Similarly, *Buen vivir* derives from a specific experience of social contestation that was translated later into normative principles, drawing from an ancient cultural reservoir. The feasibility of *Buen vivir* to be translated into concrete tools and provide effective answers to the multiple contemporary crises is yet to be shown.

Lastly, even if the continuing validity of the SD discourse proved evident after its reaffirmation at the Rio +20 summit, such re-assertion does not remove the doubts sedimented since its consecration in 1987, and later popularization through the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 1992, with respect to its ability to respond to the planetary challenges of today's world. The emergence of *Buen vivir* comes to reinforce the multiple voices that are already challenging the anthropocentric and expansionist bias of the Eurocentric conceptions of development and progress, inherited by some versions of SD. Furthermore, the mainstream SD discourse increasingly seems to lean towards (rather than questioning) *business-as-usual* conceptions of the socio-economic world order (as early stressed by Lélé in 1991, recently reaffirmed in Lélé, 2013 and regularly underlined by various authors as we have shown here). But even if conservative understandings of SD remain dominant, they continue slowly to lose ascendancy over global debates in the discursive field of SD, as the growing emergence of alternative discourses (and their coalitions) proves. Hence, *Buen vivir* offers fresh and real potential, as long as it is understood as a discourse-in-dialog with the diversity of contemporary outlooks in search of a sustainable future, and not as the nostalgic echo of a remote past disconnected from contemporary debates. If looked at in this manner, *Buen vivir* offers a new call to a necessary civilizational reform, breaking away from and yet simultaneously following in the steps of SD.

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²¹ In addition to the nature–society divide discussed in this paper, see Beling et al. (in press) for an in-depth discussion of the anthropological–philosophical implications of *Buen vivir* for the Modern-European cosmology.

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