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Decentralized Wellbeing: Towards a Possibility of Change from a Latin American Perspective

Hacia un bienestar descentrado: una posibilidad de cambio desde una perspectiva latinoamericana

Adrian Razvan SANDRU*

Abstract: The article first examines the philosophical meaning of the Andean concept of “Buen vivir” and contextualises it within the philosophical horizon of Latin America. It compares “Buen vivir” with Mexican existentialism and with the philosophy and theology of liberation in order to show that “Buen vivir” is not a local phenomenon, but is part of an anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist tradition inspired by indigenous concepts, which advocates, in dialogue with Western philosophy, a decentralisation of the subject and a positive openness (suspension of determinations) towards the world. This openness is understood in this essay as the communal, which first enables well-being. Well-being is understood as an individual responsibility, which is rooted in the ontological implications of the communal as such. In a second step, the essay aims to show how these Latin American resignifications of well-being can bring fresh air into the Western discourse of well-being and how a change can be brought about in what seems to be a monolithic landscape of political and philosophical thought. It draws on Badiou’s mathematical realism to show how a “Buen vivir” approach can bring the individualistic approaches of Western thought into a substantial contradiction which, in turn, can generate a positive and essential shift towards an inclusive and just society.

Keywords: Wellbeing; Buen vivir; communal; Badiou

Resumen: El artículo examina en una primera etapa el significado filosófico del concepto andino de “Buen vivir” y lo contextualiza en el horizonte filosófico de América Latina. Compara el “Buen vivir” con el existencialismo mexicano y con la filosofía y la teología de la liberación, buscando mostrar que el “Buen vivir” no es un fenómeno local, sino que forma parte de una tradición anticapitalista y anticolonialista inspirada en conceptos indígenas, que aboga, en diálogo con la filosofía occidental, por una descentralización del tema y por una apertura positiva (suspensión de determinaciones) hacia el mundo. Esta apertura es entendida como “lo comunal”, que primero permite el bienestar. El bienestar se entiende como una responsabilidad individual, con raíces en las implicaciones ontológicas de lo comunal. En un segundo paso, el ensayo pretende mostrar cómo estas resignificaciones del bienestar de América Latina pueden aportar aire fresco en el discurso occidental del bienestar y cómo se puede producir un cambio en lo que parece ser un paisaje

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monolítico del pensamiento político y filosófico. Se recurre al realismo matemático de Badiou para mostrar cómo un enfoque del tipo “Buen vivir” puede llevar los planteamientos individualistas del pensamiento occidental a una contradicción sustancial que, a su vez, puede generar un cambio positivo y esencial hacia una sociedad inclusiva y justa.

Palabras clave: Bienestar; Buen vivir; comunidad; Badiou

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Many of today's constitutions of Western countries include at least one paragraph concerning the wellbeing of their citizens. From the ‘pursuit of happiness’ of the French and US constitutions to the ‘intergenerational wellbeing’ of the Portuguese one, the right to a good life seems to be of major importance. Few of these constitutions define however how wellbeing is to be understood. They all seem though to have a common denominator in their descriptions, namely, to follow the illuminist ideals of a self-determined political subject who achieves wellbeing via its political and financial autonomy, which also reflects in the autonomy of the society the subject lives in. Wellbeing for the modern subject means to be able to determine one's own will and beliefs, which further on means to be able to be one's own normative center –this ability being guaranteed by an autonomous state centered on the idea of warrant of human's rights to be autonomous. This logic leads to a centralized society in which individualism becomes the ideal of wellbeing –as will be explained in the next section.

The above view has been however recently confronted with decentralized perspectives of wellbeing. The introduction of the concept of “Buen vivir” in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions promotes a wellbeing intrinsically connected to one's environment and community. In these versions of wellbeing, humans achieve a good life by being responsible first for their environment and community, which is a necessary condition for their own wellbeing.

This paper aims in a first step to examine the philosophical implications of the Andean concept of “Buen vivir”¹ and to contextualize it in the philosophical horizon of Latin America. For this purpose, “Buen vivir” will be compared with Mexican existentialism and with Liberation philosophy and theology. This will show that “Buen vivir” is not a local phenomenon, but is part of an anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist tradition,² inspired by indigenous concepts, arguing in dialogue³ with Western philosophy for a decentralization of the subject and for a positive openness (suspension of determinations) towards the world. This openness is understood in this essay as the communal that first enables wellbeing. Thus, wellbeing is understood as an individual

¹ *Sumak kawsay* (Quechua), *suma qamaña* (Aymara) or *ñandareko* (guaraní) (Gudynas, 2011, 103).

² Understood as the theories and practices that lead to an appropriation of reality as exploitation (epistemically as representation) (Vásquez, 2012).

³ This point is essential for Latin American philosophy. Latin America has experienced a continuous process of cultural colonization which has led to the extinction of most pre-colonial concepts and ideas. For this reason, post-colonial thinking constitutes itself as a reaction to cultural colonialism and simultaneously as a dialog with the colonizing culture (De Sousa Santos, 2018).

responsibility, that is rooted in the ontological implications of the communal as such.⁴ In a second step, this paper aims to show how these resignifications of wellbeing from Latin America can breathe fresh air in the Western discourse of wellbeing and how change can occur in what seems to be becoming a monolithic landscape of political and philosophical thought.

Centralized Wellbeing

Why should we care about decentralized ideas of wellbeing? Why should we move beyond the Western conceptions of a good life? As Hartmut Rosa (2019) argues, the western concept of happiness or good life has slowly been replaced by the concept of autonomy. A happy subject is a free subject –or so seems to sound the general dictum of wellbeing in modern Western societies. Freedom here is understood as the liberty, the right or privilege to self-determine one's own will. This understanding mostly relies on the French illuminists' concept of self-determination, which has later been perfected by Immanuel Kant. Kant envisioned an entire epistemological system meant to enable freedom as autonomy. While our cognition and everyday experience of the world is conditioned by our perceptive, reflective, and conceptual structures and thus can never access things as they are in themselves, morality is the domain where practical acts can be developed as things in themselves, grounded in the self-determination of the subject. This distinction between epistemological limitation and moral freedom relies on the distinction between a strict natural causation and the possibility of reason to escape said causation. While our empirical selves and our cognitive experience of the world are bound to the laws of nature, reason can envision and think concepts of totality that escape the strict limitation of the empirical. Reason can think free of the shackles of everyday experience and thus has the potential of pure spontaneity. This pure spontaneity can become moral freedom if it is bound by a moral law, that reason itself needs to prescribe to itself. Moral freedom for Kant means being determined by one's own moral law and acting according to the maxims, i.e., practical laws of actions, derived from this one moral law. The moral law is however not a purely subjective dictum, but needs to be universally valid, i.e., it must ensure that acts are done in the guise of the good in any situation possible. This universality of the moral law ensures that actions are not guided by personal desires or needs, nor by exterior pressures that one might experience. One is thus autonomous only when one's moral law is universal and not subjected to fleeting, exterior desires, nor by one's own subjective interests. Happiness would be according to this a life of full self-determination.

Kant is however criticized by Hegel and the early materialists for not realizing the intrinsic connection between morality –the self-determination– to the contextual ethics in which the former is developed (Horstmann, 1999). Hegel argues more precisely that any subject is determined by the socio-empirical context in which it lives before being able to develop any moral law. The early materialists argue following suite with Hegel that the morality of self-determination privileges those who have financial and political stability and are thus not predisposed to issues that might interfere with their moral decisions. It is indeed easy to imagine how a well-off person can more easily

⁴ It is important to point out that this paper does not wish to make any claims about the plausibility of the use of native terms. Rather, attention will be drawn to the discourses that use pre-colonial indigenous terms to argue for a particular theory. In this respect, it will be shown here that the above-mentioned terms merely serve as a source of inspiration for a postcolonial theory. Thus, they in no way claim an anachronistic return to a pre-colonial culture (Gudynas, 2011: 106).

decide not to break the law when not faced with severe financial struggles. Without paying too much attention to the plausibility of Hegel's critique and focusing more on the historical development of self-determination and its political signification we can notice a worrying trend. As Max Weber (2013) noticed, moral self-determination risks to be re-appropriated as financial autonomy and function as a conceptual engine for the society of success and/or progress. The more financial, political, technological success a person (or a state) might have, the more freedom can that person exert and the more can that person distance themselves from natural restrictions (such as hunger, thirst, sickness, etc.) or societal obstacles (career perspectives, housing, infrastructure, access to services). This view can quickly lead one to understand autonomy and freedom as the protection and development of one's own interests.⁵ Freedom becomes individualism, which in our profit oriented geopolitical landscape quickly leads to economic, political, and societal divides: those who have the means to autonomy and those who don't.

Beyond the social injustices that a society centered on autonomy⁶ seems to bring with it, it also gives rise to individual pains that seem to be more and more present in our contemporary world. As Rosa (2019) carefully depicts, autonomy and individualism rely on a strict delimitation of the subject from its natural needs and its societal restrictions. A free subject is only free if it is not strictly subjected to the laws of nature nor to its social relations. A subject is free only if it can subtract itself from its social and natural context and determine on its own accord –based on rational processes alone– how to act. Such a subject can thus only be free if it alienates itself from the world it lives in. This alienation process has led according to many (Badiou, 2015; Rosa, 2019) to a modern subject suffering from social pathologies such as anxiety or depression. Furthermore, as we have seen, autonomy is easily associated with success and progress. The more one produces and the more one accumulates wealth, the freer and happier one can (seem to) be. This dynamic leads for Byung-Chul Han (2015) to a society of burnout, where the autonomy of subjects becomes the voluntary self-exploitation of subjects for the improvement of one's efficiency. Burnout is the continuous self-exploitation for the sake of a freedom and happiness that never comes.

The above twofold concerns –social divide and individual pains– associated with wellbeing understood under the aegis of autonomy warrants us to look for alternative concepts of wellbeing that decentralize the responsibility of subjects and grounds it in the relations one has with their world. For this we turn to the concept of “Buen vivir” and its variations.

“Buen vivir”

The Andean concept of “Buen vivir”⁷ has recently gained attention as a reaction to the capitalist, neo-liberal aspects of cultural colonization and to the progress-society.⁸ The term was introduced

⁵ Which clearly contradicts Kant's concept of autonomy based in moral universality.

⁶ I wish to highlight here that this paper does not argue against any form of autonomy, but only against socio-political forms of living that center on autonomy alone. As it will be argued in the subsequent sections, autonomy can be balanced out by a responsibility to the intrinsic connections a subject has to its environment and community.

⁷ “Buen vivir” is explicitly understood as a non-Western concept, i.e., as a way of thinking originating and evolving in Abya Yala –the non-western continent– (Estermann, 2009: 130; Vásquez, 2012).

⁸ See Gudynas (2011; 2004), Houtard (2011), Larrea Maldonado (2011).

into the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions in 2008 and 2009,⁹ respectively, and was thus included in political discourse as an indigenous alternative to colonialist political thought (Irigaray *et al.*, 2016: 209). Xavier Albó (2010), defines the Bolivian concept of “Buen vivir” (*suma qumamaña*) as a holistic way of life that consists in living in harmony with nature and with the community: Albó claims that a good life and life in general requires and presupposes living together or co-living (with the other and with nature) (see also Gudynas, 2011: 106). “Buen vivir” and wellbeing therefore means for Albó to secure a material as well as a social-communitarian foundation in society. Pereira da Silva breaks the core idea of “Buen vivir” down to two points:

- 1) communalism in relationships among individuals, supported by reciprocity and equality;
- 2) and a holistic conception of the relationship between man and Nature: integration instead of domination and exploration. (Pereira da Silva, 2020: 248)

Wellbeing is understood here from the point of view of being together or togetherness, which should not exclude anything –this perspective also plays an important role in Mexican existentialism and in the philosophy of liberation. Specific to “Buen vivir” is that this harmonious way of life is strongly connected with the environment: a good life is only possible in a harmonious environment and this is reflected in the common wellbeing. It seems, therefore, that “Buen vivir” is mainly directed against Western capitalism –which understands nature as a commodity–, against individualism –which fails to take into account being with others– and against a strict dualistic determinism –which characterizes nature as lifeless dimensions (Houtard, 2011: 62; Irigaray *et al.*, 2016: 210; Vásquez, 2012). Accordingly, the politics of “Buen vivir” argues for a holistic communitarianism, which is to be understood not only politically but also materialistically (Houtard, 2011: 65). More precisely, from the very beginning, humans live in a community with other people and with nature: “En concreto, el ‘Buen vivir’ significa rescatar la armonía entre la naturaleza y el hombre, entre lo material y lo espiritual, pero en el mundo actual” (Houtart, 2011: 66). Nature is thus central to the idea of “Buen vivir” both as a living entity with full rights and as a source of life in general (Houtart, 2011: 68; Gudynas, 2004: 20; Gudynas, 2011: 108). This entails that humans coexist with nature and at the same time owe their existence to nature. Therefore, the community between humans and nature is central in *sumak kawsay*. In “Buen vivir” nature is furthermore described as a priority because humans are part of nature and owe themselves to nature (Houtard, 2011: 67). In this sense, the well-being of humanity means primarily taking care of nature.

We see here a decentralization of humans and thus of humanity, which does not have to take care of itself to achieve wellbeing, but of nature. Wellbeing is no longer understood as individual interests but as communal harmony. It seems then that the basic concept of “Buen vivir” concerns the ontological basis of humans as situated living beings: humans are already in a world and therefore they understand themselves primarily as being with others –with other people as well as with their own environment. Accordingly, humans must take care of their environment in order to be able to look after their own wellbeing. This should not be understood in an instrumental way. Nature is not

⁹ For differences between the two constitutions see Gudynas (2011: 105-108). Given that the differences are mostly of juridical nature, both versions –*sumak kawsay* and *suma qumamaña*– will be treated under the same heading, namely, “Buen vivir”.

a simple means to be utilized in achieving wellbeing. “Buen vivir” states that taking care of nature is remaining in a harmonious relation to nature. Wellbeing is not a result of taking care of nature but consists in taking care of it as a harmonious way of living. The fact that “Buen vivir” can be understood as an ontological basis for wellbeing (be it political, economic or social) implies that the state, the economy, and politics are subject to the care for the environment and for the others: In this way, “Buen vivir” is not understood as a prosperous state (bienestar), but as a prosperous being (el buen ser).

At the same time, the term “Buen vivir” is not a nostalgic, romantic attempt to return to a pre-colonial or pre-capitalist state. Rather, it is a pre-colonial-inspired reaction to capitalism and to the progress-society and cultural colonization that has overshadowed indigenous cultures. This reaction consists in an ethical revision of the subject, its instantiation in the world and its relationship to the community and to others. As such a reaction, “Buen vivir” is not just a local phenomenon, but a reaction to the colonizing culture, which manifests itself in several forms all over the Global South. The next two sections attempt to situate the concept of “Buen vivir” within the broader context of Latin American philosophy and identify similar marks in the decolonial position taking of “Buen vivir” and other stances in Latin America. I first examine Mexican existentialism, which understands the essential character of the subject as a contingent “in-between” or “communitarian”.

Being in-between and the communitarian

I treat here two representatives of the Mexican school of thought *Hyperion*, namely, Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla. As members of the Hyperion school both philosophers were engaged in introducing in the Mexican philosophical discourse both classical as well as emerging European trends in philosophy, which would function as the base for the development of a Mexican philosophy proper, i.e., a philosophy emerging in Mexico and drawing inspiration from Mexican phenomena that could contribute to the general philosophical development.

To this scope Emilio Uranga (1952) speaks in his work *Análisis del ser del mexicano* of the Nahuatl term *nepantla*, which was used by the natives to describe themselves during colonization. According to Uranga, this term is first signified in colonized cultures as pure contingency, as indeterminacy between cultural identities. Uranga though sees in *nepantla* an ontological trait of inbetweenness,¹⁰ which he argues is not a characteristic of the colonized cultures alone, but an ontological structure of humanity in general that determines the contingent situatedness of the subject.¹¹ *Nepantla* is important in this context because it is understood as a pendular movement between cultural determinations. More concretely, the natives understood themselves not only as natives, but as natives in a foreign culture. In this oscillating movement, however, the opposites are suspended in a state of indeterminacy, which is further referred to as *zozobra* by Uranga: A kind of Heideggerian angst, whereby it is understood that the subject is thrown into the world, exposed to contingency. This awareness of the contingency of our existence, however, is for Uranga the basis for questioning any discourse that postulates one culture or group as superior to another and

¹⁰ G. Hurtado (1994) argues against this view that Uranga’s description applies only to a psychological meaning of contingency.

¹¹ Both Uranga and Portilla are criticized by G. Hurtado (1994) who states that they first define the essence of Mexicanity –an already problematic concept– and then transfer this description to the essence of humanity without grounding this transfer first. I will focus for this reason on Uranga’s and Portilla’s understanding of community without getting into the issue of the nature or essence of humanity.

therefore disempowers or deconstructs power structures. Contingency is then at the same time the refutation of every attempt of oppression. In this way, a communitarian unity can also be thought of without falling into the trap of dualism, because we are always inbetween and therefore no fixed determinations are assumed. This manifests itself in Uranga as responsibility towards the other: "in acts of solidarity and generosity (Sánchez, 2016: 130).

Portilla (1966) also touched on the situatedness of the subject as a reaction to Western idealism. Under the influence of Sartre, Portilla sees existentialism and its inherent contingency as the exit from idealism. More precisely, existentialism provides a narrative of situatedness, which addresses the practical issues of idealism understood by Portilla as a bourgeois ideology where the subject is responsible for the coherence and constitution of the world and therefore has an authority claim on the world. Existentialism is then the failure of this ideology, which shows the world in its contingency and the subject in its situatedness and thus challenges any claim of constitution authority of the subject. However, Portilla does not follow the path of nihilism as Sartre does, i.e., a suspension of all values, but tries to argue with Marx that the contingency of the world is not absolute. Rather, the world can be laden with meaning if the subject does not surrender to the state of *relajo*, i.e., a disinterested state, but turns to the values of the community. Contingency thus operates first as a suspension of the hierarchical structure of individualism that privileges the subject and its interests over the world, and second as an openness to a communitarian situating of the subject. Even more specifically, pure contingency as the suspension of an order instantiated by the subject forms the transition to the situated subject and the communal (cf. Sanchez, 2016: 40- 41) as constitutive openness and responsibility towards the other. This intrinsically communal mode of being is also specific to the Chiapas natives, who, according to Lenkensdorf (2011: 34), attribute ontological priority to the "we". The "I" is also constituted by the "we" among the indigenous people of Chiapas. This is what is meant here by decentralization of the subject, and what has manifested itself politically in Mexico in the Zapatista doctrine of disempowerment of the concept of a centralized, authoritative subject and its refoundation in relationality. The Zapatistas believe that the subject can only be relational-communitarian. Therefore, it cannot exercise power over others. Rather, the Zapatistas govern themselves through delegation, that is, through shared responsibility and representation (Dussel, 2008: 19-27; see also Vásquez, 2012). This would then mean that each one understands itself relationally from the other, which would indicate a suspension of the dualistic power dichotomies.

It is important to note here that although in my reading *sumak kawsay* and Mexican situatedness are based on ontological characteristics, wellbeing is not to be thought of as an a priori given, but as an ethical decision, as a historically occurring process, where it is not the progress of the individual that is important, but openness towards the other and towards the community. This idea is also present in one of the most popular philosophical and theological movements in Latin America, namely, in liberation philosophy and theology.

Historical openness

I will try to present the idea of openness in liberation philosophy and theology by the example of Ellacuría (1990). Ellacuría, under the influence of Marx and Hegel, thinks revelation itself as historical openness. The (historical) revelation is the event which opens the possibility of the new. The opening of the new is the openness to hope for Ellacuría. This opening can only come about by breaking through history to make room for the unhistorical (the new). This in turn is understood

as a process by which history is created, i.e., more history, new history, which makes the already certain indeterminate, which opens the possibility of the new. For Ellacuría, this then means that God reveals himself as God, in that God has the freedom to influence the new. Accordingly, however, not every act of history is capable of revelation, but only those that abolish (oppressive) determinations. The acts that oppress through fixed determinations are rather a negation of God and therefore also of history, since no new history can arise. What is essential here, however, is that God is not seen as an afterlife of the world from a natural perspective, but as an afterlife in history, an afterlife of fixed determinations. Furthermore, it is important to note that redemption cannot take place without people, but only in the liberating acts that are carried out by people, but in which the grace of God is at work, according to Ellacuría. In these terms grace is also understood as a continuation of openness and sin as a limitation of openness. These structural characteristics of actions are furthermore existentially determined as actions done for the sake of life and actions that are harmful to life. The good life or wellbeing is then understood as a sign of openness to hope, as a lifting of fixed determinations that allow the new to appear in history.

The possibility of change and decentralizing wellbeing

In summary, it can then be said that “Buen vivir” is part of a tradition of engagement with Western philosophy that argues against a dualism where a privileged subject understands nature/history/world as a mere object and can thus take possession of it. Mexican existentialism attempts to show the failure of this dualism and to show the subject as a mere accidental being that is already situated in the world. For Uranga, then, the subject is an in-between being that oscillates between determinations. For Portilla, this randomness forms the transition to community and to an ethically laden world. Liberation theology and philosophy accepts through Ellacuría the abolition of determinations as a possibility for the new, which creates space for change and is meant to contribute to (good) life. These thoughts –inspired by the pre-colonial and holistic understanding of the world– are also found in the concept of “Buen vivir” with a concrete political direction that sets wellbeing as the starting point and center of society, politics, economy, etc.¹² The specificity of “Buen vivir” is that it leads to a holistic world where nature is rehabilitated as an entity endowed with rights.¹³

The extended scope of this paper is however to show how the decentralized view on wellbeing found in “Buen vivir” and other Latin American schools of thought can infiltrate the mainstream discourse and assert themselves as viable options for change. In order to answer this issue, I turn to Badiou’s mathematical realism that argues for the possibility of change based on eventful expansions of sets of political and/or societal beliefs and practices (Badiou, 2006). His realism aims to answer a dilemma: how is change possible in a society that seems to have just one option of going further –capitalism and technological advancement? To make this dilemma clearer I will resort to a clear historical event.

¹² “Buen vivir” is situated in a long tradition of Latin America’s efforts to develop its own philosophy and thereby provide alternatives to the traditional western philosophy. However, this self-development unfolds in a dialogue with the philosophy, from which Latin American thinking attempts to distance itself. According to De Sousa Santos (2018), this is the essence of post-colonial thought, namely that it addresses both the occidental and the non- occidental and intends to shape a new perspective from this dialogue.

¹³ No causal relationship is set here between “Buen vivir”, Mexican existentialism and liberation theology, but it is only pointed out that “Buen vivir” is not an isolated phenomenon.

Two days after Trump's election in 2016, A. Badiou (2017) held a lecture at the University of California. He talked about Trump's election and about what made this election possible. The main culprit in his view is the monolithic nature of our society. A society so dense and so static that nothing new seems possible. A society based on accumulation and preservation of capital, he says, is only oriented on profit. This orientation furthermore defines political strategies and flattens them. It does so to the point that no real distinction can be drawn between different political strategies. He continues this thought by analyzing the image of capitalism and consumerism. They present themselves as the only possible framework. They engulf any proposition for change and argue that change is possible only within and with capitalism. Progressive politics are adapted to the logic of profit and end up being free market choices, libertarian illusions of freedom. This monolithic structure seems to translate to representations of wellbeing as well.

As S. Seubert (2004) argues, the main wellbeing conceptions of the Western world argue mostly for the self-development of the individual in hopes of achieving an autonomous wellbeing. The self-development actions of individuals are then expected to be normed or stabilized either by the state or by the free market in order to serve the development of the community as well. The self-development of the individual in this setting is however defined by the accumulation of wealth, that would eventually safeguard their freedom of choice and of exercise of individual rights, i.e., it would safeguard their wellbeing. This logic is then transferred to the wellbeing of the community understood mainly as a set of individuals who have a right for individual wellbeing. According to Seubert, there are also communitarian approaches that challenge the individualism of libertarian and republican perspectives on wellbeing by highlighting that libertarianism and republicanism are centered on the self-interest of individuals and leave fairness out of the equation. Such communitarian views (like Taylor, 2012, or Olson, 1994) argue that the development of the individual is essentially tied up to the medium of its development and that as such the interests of the individual cannot be separated from the communal interests. Such approaches might soften the blow of individualism but they remain centered on the logic of individualism: they mostly argue for fairness in achieving the interests of all actors of a given community. Thus, even though they recognize the importance of the community they still understand wellbeing as dependent on individual interests and fairness as the universalization of the right and opportunity of achieving such individual interests.

Drawing on Badiou's (2017) critique of a monolithic culture we could argue that libertarianism, republicanism, and communitarianism (understood as above) are two sides of the same coin – individualism. They might counterbalance each other but they do not lead to a real contradiction which Badiou understands as the necessary condition for change to occur. I resort again to Badiou's (2016) mathematical realism to explain.

Any set of elements must contain according to Badiou's analysis of set theory an element that borders other sets, that do not belong to the initial set. Such elements can import subsets in their own set from foreign sets. Foreign sets or elements are such that cannot be counted as part of the initial set. Furthermore, as foreign subsets they can lead to real contradiction within the initial set. A real contradiction is such that it challenges the very structure of a set and leads to its fluidization or change. Individuals bordering other sets are thus agents of change. Such agents of change can be understood in a mathematical way as elements that are present in a set – in our case the set of wellbeing understood as centralized individualism – but do not belong to that set, i.e., they do not fall under the axioms of that set and are as such not recognized as elements. Distancing ourselves from the mathematical formalism, we might say that agents of change are marginalized narratives that may behave in out-of-phase ways in regards to the system in which they are present, but not

recognized as such. Such elements have the capability of producing a real contradiction within the system that motivates change not within the elements of the system but at the axiomatic level of the system. By rewriting the axioms, i.e., the general assumptions that regulate the belonging- relation, a system can be expanded and reconstructed in such a way that essential change may occur, i.e., in such a way that individualism is decentralized.

Let's apply this logic to the decentralized views of wellbeing we found in Latin America. In contrast to libertarianism and republicanism, wellbeing is not an individual category but extends to the community (Mexican existentialism and liberation theology) and the environment ("Buen vivir"). Furthermore, in contrast to Western communitarianism, the interests of the community of the environment are not second-grade considerations that act as a balance to the individualist logic. They are instead the conditions of possibility of any individual interest. Thus, the set of wellbeing can be extended beyond the interests of individuals and acknowledge elements that were present in it before, but not recognized as belonging to the set – community and the environment. This expansion can lead to substantial change in the sense that it decentralizes the individual and its interests and rearranges the set of wellbeing around the relation of responsibility between individual, community, and environment.

This rearrangement of the set of wellbeing is not a unicentric one,¹⁴ but a polycentric one, in which individual, community, and environment co-inhabit the set as heterogenous parts that grow and evolve together, much like Deleuze's rhizomatic structures (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). A rhizome is not a series of parts growing exponentially into each other. One part does not come before the other nor does it cause any other. There is no preceding unity of elements that then specifies itself in well defined subordinates. A rhizome is a fractal organic formation in which parts are self-standing but also essentially connected to each other element. Deleuze speaks of a bee and a flower: they are distinct entities, from distinct species, that nevertheless evolve together in a rhizomatic field, i.e., a field in which heterogenous parts are interconnected and grow together, without being subdued by an overarching, superior homogenous form.

Time for a conclusion

Looking at "Buen vivir" from the context of Latin American philosophy we see that it borrows from a pre-colonial concept of wellbeing and builds on that to enforce a view according to which human subjects are defined by their situatedness in the world they live in, which in its turn is not a mere medium for human life but it is endowed with its own autonomy and rights to wellbeing. This dynamic resignification of the pre-colonial view on a good life proposes a decentralized, polycentric system in which the environment, the community, and the individuals tied into them grow and evolve together towards an open, inclusive, and omnidirectional wellbeing. We have seen with the use of Badiou's mathematical realism how such an approach can bring the individualistic approaches of Western thought to a substantial contradiction that in its turn may generate positive and essential change towards an inclusive and fair society. The ideas presented in this text are meant as an instrumentarium to enable such a thinking of change that promotes the expansion of our beliefs in a dialogue that seeks growth via the confrontation of contradictory world-views oriented towards an inclusive wellbeing.

¹⁴ I.e., one in which the individual interest acts as the main pole of the set and which determines all other elements.

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