

VIRUS

26

THE DECOLONIAL DEBATE TERRITORIES

PORTUGUÊS-ESPAÑOL | ENGLISH

REVISTA . JOURNAL

ISSN 2175-974X

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UNIVERSITY OF SAO PAULO

INSTITUT OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

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DECEMBER 2023

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THE DECOLONIAL DEBATE: TERRITORIES O DEBATE DECOLONIAL: TERRITÓRIOS

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ARTICLE SUBMITTED ON AUGUST 6, 2023

How to quote this text: Marin, P. C., Alor, A. O., Orrego-Echeverría, I. A., (2023). Toward a political ontology of urban *buen vivir*. VIRUS, 26, 40-48. Translated from Spanish by Quinn Brenneke and Tania Julieta Orrego. <http://vnomads.eastus.cloudapp.azure.com/ojs/index.php/virus/article/view/824>.

Abstract

Having *buen vivir* as a theoretical horizon developed on the Global South, this article explores the possibilities it would have for understanding the contemporary city in Abya Yala. Here, political ontologies of a relational nature are positioned as possibilities for substantiating a new type of inhabiting the city, based on the communal sense. For that, we take into consideration the tensional elements of the new social movements that have emerged in recent decades, which are the same ones that demand the right to a dignified life in cities marked by the conflictive coexistence between gentrification and urban extractivism. In this sense, in this article we propose to establish a theoretical dialogue with *buen vivir* as a philosophy from the Global South and a fundamental component of decolonial thought. We do so by having the city as the place where we situate our thinking, having in mind the profound changes it has had in recent decades. To this end, we review the fundamental principles of the philosophy of *buen vivir*, while approaching a first review of the new social movements that uphold these principles and their reach in the plurinational states that have emerged in the region.

Keywords: Urban *buen vivir*, Abya Yala, Political ontology, Urban extractivism, Communal

1 Introduction

Buen vivir, as an alternative model of a full life, is being assumed as an ethical-political horizon in different places in Latin America/Abya Yala, especially rural ones, but also in a multiplicity of coexisting social nuclei in cities. As a philosophy from the Global South that has been established as an important element in the formation of decolonial thought in Abya Yala, *buen vivir* is a creative and (re)creative power of other political horizons and a unifier of diversities in (re)existence. It is manifested in the multiple alliances built between the members of the different urban social groups, campesino organizations, movements of native, indigenous, and Afro-descendant peoples. Together, these groups have shaped a set of relationships based on solidarity, reciprocity, and trust, both in rural areas and in cities.

Therefore, just as it fuels new forms of coexistence in cities and contributes to deconstructing the dominant models present in Abya Yala since colonial times, *buen vivir* confronts the mechanisms of exclusion predominant there. The very hierarchical scheme of the colonial city — with its historical centers and extramural neighborhoods or peripheries, and with its continuity in design and organization during capitalist modernity both in its liberal and globalized phase — is now confronted by alternative community and communal expressions. These expressions, from their places of enunciation and in the horizon of relational political ontologies, have been building other ways of being and inhabiting the city.

In the midst of a new dispute over territory, the leaders of the modern city propose a policy of urban renewal based on extractivism, gentrification, and the displacement of urban-popular residents (Garcia, 2019). In response to this, the organized popular sectors transgress hegemonic forms through territory and life economies, relational ontologies, liberating spiritualities, and politics expressed in new corporalities.

This article written by several hands is part of this horizon, where we engage in dialogue with *buen vivir* from the place where we are located: urban Abya Yala. By virtue of the above, we first approach the category of *buen vivir* as a philosophy from the Global South in the terms established by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009), taking part in decolonial thought. Then, we approach the continuities between the colonial and the contemporary cities, noting the conflicts that have arisen around a process in which hierarchization, gentrification, and urban extractivism converge as constitutive elements of the colonial urban dynamics. Finally, we take up the epistemological potential of urban *buen vivir* from the perspective of relational political ontologies with consideration of the new sense of community and the communal, and we allude to trajectories of social movements and organizations rooted in other ways of being and inhabit the city (Rodríguez & Orrego, 2021, p. 124). In this case, we refer to political ontologies as the entanglements of discourses, practices, and absences that originate and occur in the territories, which become situated by “the relationality of the whole that is concretized in forms of being-becoming (or in Spanish, *estar-siendo*), forms that otherwise express

the integrality that shapes the continent's own thinking" (Idrobo & Orrego, 2021, p. 17, our translation). In summary, and by means of conclusion, we propose some ideas that can be worked on more extensively in future research.

2 *Buen vivir* as a philosophy from the Global South and the decolonial thought

We understand *buen vivir* as a decolonial philosophy from the Global South with which we seek to shape possible new ways of life in harmony between human and non-human beings, with their corresponding cultures, knowledge, and care of nature. Consequently, we see it as a historical project that questions contemporary capitalism in its notion of progress as the foundation of modernity (Prada, 2011) and its dark side, coloniality, with all those components that have shaped it: ecocidal reason, racism, and genocide.

As Juan Giusiano (2011, p. 3) explains, there are three principles of *buen vivir* that originate in the cosmovision and ontologies of the people who inhabit Abya Yala. The principles that he considers relevant, for its constitution as a philosophy from the Global South, would be: first, that of relationality, understood as the interconnection and interdependence of all "the elements that make up the universe." In correspondence to this same argument, we have the position of Ramiro Ávila, who considers that the existential foundation of relationality is supported by the very fact that the beings that inhabit nature could not live without it (Ávila, 2011, p. 211). In our case, it would be the city as the place where we live, where those visions that give meaning to community life are born.

Secondly, there is the principle of complementarity, which is the link that explains that "the opposite of a thing is not its negation but its complement and its corresponding necessity" (Giusiano, 2011, p. 3, our translation). Complementarity works with the logic of complementary opposites, one contains the other and therefore avoids confrontation. Inhabiting Abya Yala, we read the uni-multi-pluri-verse forms of life known and yet to be known. Therefore, the importance of the complementarity of opposites that, acting together, enhance each other, since they are dynamically united in the circularity of their movements (Ávila, 2011, p. 212).

Thirdly, we have the principle of reciprocity, understood as the double bond that is established "with the natural environment and the community as a whole, and the double attribute of divinity and creative mother with which people consecrate to the earth" (Giusiano, 2011, p. 3, our translation). Finally, in the philosophy of *buen vivir* there is the principle of correspondence, which involves the previous ones and manifests itself in all aspects of life, involving, above all, respect for nature (Ávila, 2011, p. 213).

Taking into account the principles we have pointed out, we recognize that the emergence of *buen vivir* could be located in a historical and intellectual trajectory that begins with the emergence of indigenous and campesino movements, their knowledge, praxis, and principles of life. In the same way, *buen vivir* is a product of the struggles and resistance carried out in the cities by organizations and social movements of various types, all of which nourish decolonial reflection in the region. Thus, *buen vivir* is constituted as a political project with local ontological support and, due to the principles that support it, it is always contingent on the diversity of special-temporalities and the historical-cultural and ecological contexts of the forms of life to inhabit, to be and exist in the territory. That is the importance of considering the ontological relational entanglements in which it is situated. The potential of *buen vivir* and its decolonial character are at play in this debate. Unlike developmental projects, which imposed a single model of life administration, the understandings and emphasis of *buen vivir* (the territories, their relationships and meanings, the plurality of origin) do not allow the application of a single model to all contexts (Gudynas & Acosta, 2011, p. 81).

Therefore, it is important to situate *buen vivir* as a proposal that encompasses elements of an epistemic, ontological, political, and economic order. Therefore, *buen vivir* questions the unilinear and hegemonic aesthetic narratives of the political, positioning an understanding of the world in which the interactions and relationships between humans and non-humans, between the rural and the city, between ethics and economy are constitutive and constituent of reality (Estermann, 2006; Orrego, 2018). Thus, *buen vivir* not only describes and qualifies certain practices and thoughts — current and active —, but also constitutes an open space in and from territories whose purpose is to rearticulate various forms and aesthetics for the care of life. Therefore, if the philosophy of *buen vivir* and relational ontologies contribute to anything, particularly urban *buen vivir*, it is precisely to the possibility of articulating diverse ontological registers (De la Cadena, 2020, p. 293), social demands, and totalities absent as well as the needs of the social realm.

If we take into account its emergence in a global/international and regional/local context, the latter seems constitutive of *buen vivir*, as Adrian Beling and Julien Vanhulst point out in their proposal for a glocal genealogy of *buen vivir*.

These contextual elements provide, in themselves, a solid basis to support the thesis that *buen vivir* results from a vector sum of converging forces at a global and local levels, with indigenous struggles being a necessary but not sufficient condition. (Beling and Vanhulst, 2016, p. 13, our translation)

In this perspective, urban *buen vivir* has its own challenges and conflicts in which its ontological force could be located to create and recreate ways of thinking about the city that would be accompanied by the vindication of territorial struggles. Ultimately, it is a different understanding of the territory that would require new actions on the urban space and its interrelationships.

3 The contemporary city: realities and conflicts

The proposal and organization of the modern city make us see a systematic process of fragmentation of both the urban space and the people who inhabit it, marked by the logic of consumerism and accumulation imposed by capitalism. In this sense, accumulation would be the foundation of a philosophy on which a segregationist system of important sectors of citizenry is based since it hinders them to access rights that are simply a product of living in the city (García, 2019).

We could say that segregationist logic and accumulation is part of an urban history that begins with the configuration of the colonial city through the emergence and consolidation of the city as we know and live in, the globalized city. In this process, the primacy has been the logic of occupation based both on the search for an income, which in many cases has been lifelong and transmitted from generation to generation, and on the logic more oriented by the accumulation and reproduction of capital in forms based on the occupation of urban territory for industrial or financial purposes. At the same time, we have also had large and highly stratified housing projects, whose implementation has been strongly conditioned by their formal-legal nature, which ignores and segregates popular urban and self-construction while considering it illegal, contributing to the formation and sustainment of a type of city based on inequality.

Currently, we are able to verify the continuity of these processes of segregation and inequality. This has tended to increase due to the displacement of campesino families in a context marked by the lack of protection of the agricultural sector of the economy, where economic openness together with extractivism, a combination considered irreplaceable, act jointly. Megaprojects for the extraction of raw materials have increased in the last three decades on the same time there is much talk about the millennium goals and sustainable development, with environmental and natural resources governance as ideological and institutional supports in this new phase of liberal globality (Olano, 2021).

The consequence of this unbridled action against nature has brought with it undeniable environmental deterioration. Climate change manifests itself in the loss of water sources, through the retreat of glaciers or the drying up of rivers and lagoons, along with the degradation of rural environments due to mining and illegal logging. Also, we must consider the unresolved social and political conflicts associated with land ownership and use. All these events should not be seen as distant from urban problems since, from a holistic and relational perspective, they are articulated. For these reasons, space is opening up for the hierarchical imaginaries of the city with its particular form of urban growth to the detriment of spaces marked by the predominance of earthly goods, that is, nature.

At the same time, taking into account the same vision with which the urban has been stratified since colonial times, this dynamic has led to certain sectors being able to enjoy the benefits that cities offer in their modern sense, while enormous population groups — majorities, being understood as inhabitants without rights — occupy the so-called neighborhood *callampas*, ranches, young towns, subnormal neighborhoods, invasive neighborhoods, or *favelas*. Here, the spaces created are, in contrast to the previously mentioned urbanization practices, in this permanent dispute for a decent place to live within the cities. During this dispute over the meaning given to the use of territories within cities, gentrification emerges as a new threat to popular urban areas and to the social fabric built for decades within neighborhoods. As it has been occurring, gentrification is a process associated with a renewed form of capital accumulation in cities, which has also come to be known as urban extractivism. For these reasons, gentrification or urban extractivism can be considered relevant aspects of this process of renewal of capitalism, which began in the mid-1970s, and which David Harvey (2005) called “accumulation by dispossession”.

Indeed, in Latin America, it is possible to find struggles for the right to decent housing in the city since the 1950s. Such struggles show us, quite early on, an appropriation and connection with urban territories in somewhat different ways in comparison to what the state was doing at that same time with its great infrastructure projects. It was also the time when the private sector dedicated itself to building housing for middle- and high-income sectors, while allocating large amounts of urban land for the construction of factories and infrastructure with the aim of adapting the city for industrial production in the era of modernizing-developmental apogee.

Unlike the proposal advocated by the planners and designers of the capitalist city, we observe a process of popular appropriation of urban territories. Popular urbanization is the result of migratory and displacement processes, plus organizational practices based on demands that not only included housing, but also public services such as drinking water, sewage, education, health, and public spaces for culture and recreation. For this reason, those within the popular neighborhoods have acquired the importance of organizational processes as well as dynamics of meeting in assemblies and the *minguera* tradition of mutual aid and reciprocity that accompany the residents from rural areas that are now installed in the city (Torres, 2007). Under the principles of urban *buen vivir*, being based on long duration, this reading allows us to understand the radically different ways in the process of inhabiting the city, since here we seek to restore the relationship between subjects, cultures, and territories, all based on the sense of place of those who inhabit the popular city.

4 The city from *buen vivir*

By virtue of the above, after having established the principles with which we have defined *buen vivir* as a decolonial philosophy from the Global South and approximated to the predominant characteristics and conflicts in the current city, we consider it important to move towards other interpretations of the city with the concept of relational political ontologies. It should be pointed out that several of these interpretations take shape from the struggles and demands of urban residents for a dignified life, which have been grouped into horizons and agendas that range from the recognition of diverse subjectivities and corporeality to environmentalist demands. In the same way that they have claimed the achievement of food sovereignty, they have also claimed the organization of economies for solidarity and life, combined with organizational practices based on care and co-care (Cuevas & Bautista, 2020), as well as the most recent experiences of liberating spiritualities.

What is in question, from the perspective of urban *buen vivir*, is not the integration of the majority into privileged urban spaces, or participation in that fragmentary logic of the territory, but rather the restoration and decolonization in the use of territorial space and their interrelationships (Delgado, 2015, p. 53). These interrelations, that translate into senses of immanence and unicity of the territory and the living beings that inhabit it, have shaped relational political ontologies that seek to be incorporated into all spheres of life. It is a constellation that cracks the hegemonic and is situated in a decolonial horizon, putting into relation other discourses, theories, and practices with which urban *buen vivir* is organized. In this regard, we must note the appropriations of institutional spaces that have occurred within the framework of social mobilizations in recent months in Colombia: demolished colonial monuments, police stations transformed into community libraries, popular neighborhood political, and academic formative spaces, such as the “University to the Neighborhood” experience in the city of Cali. Likewise, places of creation for critical memory through murals in the streets of various cities, all of which announce the emergence, not only of indignation and the fight for dignified citizen conditions, but in some way anticipate new decolonial representations and imaginaries of popular urban spaces, of collective memory, and its importance for autonomous community construction and life in urban territorial spaces.

New popular urban art of the streets among other things has led to a situated variant of the global culture of hip hop that shows peoples and bodies in resistance. These are in addition to: new muralism, rap, graffiti, dance groups, along with seed guardians¹, members of the *batukadas*², popular feminist collectives, front line protesters³, neighborhood assembly attendees, and the support

¹ The seed guardian is “who recovers, produces, conserves, researches, selects, and improves seeds in an agroecological context and shares the seeds in a supportive, responsible manner and helps to streamline the seed flow process.” (Corporación Grupo Semillas, 2016, our translation)

² *Batukadas* are part of multiple artistic interventions generally developed by feminist collectives in the midst of social mobilizations.

³ They have been formed “by young people from the most vulnerable popular sectors and whose existences are made invisible and expelled from this capitalist, racist, colonial, and heteropatriarchal system.” (Villarreal & Hernández, 2021).

for rebel puppeteer interventions⁴, This is urban *buen vivir*. In a structure less centered on material symbols and in a process of decommodification, new communities are organized in association with an ancestry present since the founding and the first organization of urban territories seventy years ago. It is a process in which we can observe ways of knowing in a coalition of heterarchical procedures, given that we know that different proposed logics and reasons are recognized from their place in the city regarding *buen vivir* (Olano, 2023). Some of them live in a non-linear time, which is the basis of a different relationship with space (Orrego, 2018); they put aside accumulation aspiration and manage their territory with the principles of becoming-being (in Spanish, *ser-estando*) and doing-being (in Spanish, *hacer-siendo*). This is a relationship that invites us to return to the notion of cycles and rhythms of life that differ from those established by Western thought, especially in those moments when modernity was built in Europe having colonialism and coloniality as its most relevant aspects. As decolonial thought in Abya Yala has very well explained, the world system of global economics and markets ended up being constituted with colonialism and coloniality, which today is lived in the phase known as neoliberal globality.

Urban *buen vivir* reconsiders the use of time and space, since living fully means leaving aside (or at least separating from) incessant productivism as an ideology that moves the ways of existing and being in the city, in order to make way for a series of new and ancient practices that do not have a predatory horizon of nature nor insatiable consumption as a form of living well. Related to the latter, the search for moderation in the way of life and social relationships based on care and co-care become principles and actions that are like those that originate in solidarity and reciprocity as seen in philosophy from the Global South. To this must be added a multiplicity of collectivized initiatives in community and neighborhood organizations that for decades have organized heterarchical dialogue with academics and critical intellectuals. This relates to an entire epistemic richness that originates in the production of meaning: the organization of alternative-changing life practices and the implementation of community exercises that feed critical memory. To a large extent, all of these are the urban antecedent of the search for systemic alternatives, which as anti-capitalist paradigms, not only seek to rethink the social relations of economic, symbolic, and spatial production, but also the relations between human beings and nature.

In this sense, it is worth specifying the transformative ontological potential that is articulated in some of the practices of the aforementioned groups, which must be added to the various systemic anti-capitalist struggles that are taking place at a global level. While urban *buen vivir* does not simply seek to make the city more livable, it proposes a complete rethinking of its function from the interactions with other living spaces, such as rural and subalternized ones. Besides it, there are the dimensions of life in community, spiritual and intercultural, which in some way expand the understanding of life imposed by the aesthetics and policies of capitalist development. An element that should be highlighted is the articulation of many practices and meanings of community action in a dimension of liberating spirituality, which is not limited to a specific religious institution or theological structure, something that is functional to the modern and liberal city model. We mention the latter because it is not enough to talk about religious tolerance as an unquestionable principle without referring to the legitimizing institutions of the uninational and monocultural order with which the liberal state has been organized in our countries. Therefore, we propose a profound and militant understanding of life in close connection with the territory and corporalities.

This dimension of spirituality should not be confused with the spiritualization of reality, but with a deep and, if you will, mystical understanding of community relations that transcend the order of the merely strategic-political and social consensus as a unifier of individualities. Animated by a variety of practices that range from inter-neighborhood community experiences around home gardening or urban gardens, where the private spaces of homes are intervened to encourage selfless association around bartering, the exchange of memories, and the search for collective healing. At the same time, the construction of new narratives of memory in which ways of knowing are related to flavors and bodies to emotions, plus the multiple forms of ritual that freely mix expressions and cosmovisions of Afro and indigenous experiences, give rise to the new urban popular. This is why these spaces are just examples of expressions that are emerging thus giving shape to another rationality of the common in the city.

In this context, spirituality can fulfill a re-binding and relational function for the collective and egalitarian imagination of urban *buen vivir*, especially if we understand that the rationality contained in the notion of modern citizenship and supported by a dualistic ontology,

⁴ The expression of “rebel puppeteers” is used to account for one of the artistic and cultural groups that, through scenic expression, was part of the mobilizations carried out in Bogotá in 2021.

is characterized for its promotion of inequality, fragmentation, and individualism. It is the same one in which it is not possible to reconcile the poles given in the duality of nature-culture, rural-urban, ethics-economics, planning-agency. Religion and relationality are evident in the understanding of territory and territoriality which has been emerging in Latin America since the 1980s. It is the same one that, enriched by a multiplicity of struggles, makes territory a theoretical-political category of special importance, where “what is relevant about the emergence of the territory is that it arises within the struggles of Afro-descendants, indigenous people, feminists, and the social movements, and precisely not exclusively from academic spaces” (Machuca & Orrego, 2020, p. 25, our translation).

In relation to the above, and in clear contrast to the perspectives of Western citizenship that seems to turn against the community, many of the meanings of the practices of urban *buen vivir* are supported by a deep understanding of communality and community. On the one hand, the idea of communality, or communal systems, disputes the interpretative space of citizenship and tends to displace the capitalist economy and liberal democracy as the only forms of social and political organization (Rodríguez and Orrego, 2021). In this sense, it leans towards communal forms of economy and agency, promoting the conditions so that cultural plurality brings with it true intercultural spaces and scenarios. Hence, the community is seen by the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar as “a deeply historical, heterogeneous entity permeated by power” (Escobar, 2017, p. 51, our translation).

In this horizon, and as Raquel Gutiérrez (2012) reminds us, there is an antagonism between the “community entanglements” and the “coalitions of transnational corporations.” It is interesting to note how the understanding of the community entanglements contain many of the elements of relational ontological order, emancipatory spirituality, and the understandings of territoriality that animate the practices and thoughts of urban *buen vivir*. Ultimately, the communal, spirituality, and territory become articulating axes of the political ontology of urban *buen vivir*, and they stage various types of struggles that do not aspire to the seizure of power but to the reconfiguration and search for other logics and forms of power, now in a decolonial way. In fact, they constitute new forms of non-state power since they advocate the reorganization of the urban territory and society based on local, regional, and global autonomies.

6 Conclusions

Reflecting on the city from the decolonial horizon of the political ontologies of urban *buen vivir* meant a prior diagnosis of the accumulation and segregationist logic, the same one that, through the processes of gentrification and extractivism, has been promoted as a unique model of organization of life in the urban centers. In this horizon, the colonial, extractivist, and gentrified model of the city, with the dualist and fragmentary political ontology that sustains it, seeks to perpetuate itself today from a diversity of devices and imaginaries of hegemonic urban development. It seeks to organize life, space-times, and ways of being of urban inhabitants, confining an immense majority of the population to cultural, spatial-territorial segregation, and in general, to life without the right to enjoy the city.

In tension with these fragmentary and hierarchical logics of the city, we have postulated an ontological understanding that — inspired by the decolonial philosophy of *buen vivir* and manifested in the multiple practices of resistance and re-existence of indigenous, neighborhood and popular movements seen in recent social mobilizations — intervenes in narratives and aesthetics, and configures new ways of inhabiting urban space-times. Within this horizon, we have wanted to highlight the creative and re-creative potential, that is, the relational ontological potential of the philosophy of urban *buen vivir*, as a binding of practices, feelings, thoughts, and other corporalities that enables new ways of inhabiting the city: in short, decolonial expressions of being and existing in and from the urban spaces of Abya Yala.

In our case, we wanted to focus the attention of our research on what we have called three creative powers, from which we observe urban *buen vivir*: firstly, spirituality as a re-binding and relational dimension that gives mystique and depth to community relations; second, the communal and community framework itself, which weaves relationships beyond the interest of corporate coalitions and segregating urban designs; and thirdly, in the territory as a vital-world space that articulates the previous ones. With these creative powers, new links are affirmed, allowing us to recreate the ways of inhabiting space-time in the city. Also, they anticipate a political ontology of urban good living and its contributions to the strengthening of decolonial thought. This delimitation, or observation of three creative powers of urban *buen vivir*, has not been fortuitous. Instead, it obeys the critical and retrospective view of the recent mobilizations in Colombia, as well as the historical manifestations and practices of social, indigenous, popular, neighborhood

movements with whom we participate in various spaces as researchers, trying to imagine and recreate the possibilities of good urban living.

The final point is not a minor thing since most of the research on *buen vivir* tends to focus on indigenous and campesino dynamics and generally on rural spaces as exemplary centers of this philosophy, so the urban space-times of the city are forgotten or simply set as contrasting and generally negative against these dynamics. For this reason, we wanted to venture to think about the city from the ontologies of urban *buen vivir*, and that meant the valuation and recognition of rhythms and practices of life that transgress the logical hegemonies of contemporary capitalism. We have proposed to reconsider the use of time and space, which does not aim to include the majority in the city of consumption and accumulation to make it more livable, but rather to rethink its function from other links and practices in the lifeworlds which aim to be a contribution to decolonial thought in Latin America.

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