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The concept of Buen Vivir: A decolonial feminist perspective

The different theoretical constructions around the *Buen Vivir* and decolonial feminism had a significant stage for debate during the Evo Morales' and Rafael Correa's governments (2006-2019 and 2007-2017, respectively). The Constituent Assemblies implemented, previous to the approvals of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutions, at the beginning of both governments framed unprecedented dialogues between women and feminists and the driving actors behind the *Buen Vivir*. The article analyses the way the *Buen Vivir* was translated to specific discourses depending on whether it was considered as an indigenous, modern or postmodern proposal and what these translations meant for women's demands specifically. This question presents a fundamental challenge because there is no one *Buen Vivir* and no one decolonial feminism, but rather different meanings are attached to them.

The Buen Vivir

The *Buen Vivir* has been explained and defined from different, and even opposite, currents of thought to the extent that it has been conceptualized as an "empty significant" (*significante vacío*) (Palacios Díaz 2018), an "omnibus concept" (Cubillo-Guevara 2016) and a "naked name" (*nombre desnudo*) (Cubillo-Guevara / Hidalgo-Capitán 2015: 305) to be filled with meaning in the discourse. By now, several authors (Palacio Díaz 2018, Hidalgo-Capitan / Cubillo-Guevara 2014; Cardozo-Ruiz et al. 2016, Le Quang / Vercoûtère 2013) have identified three main perspectives from where the *Buen Vivir* is understood, namely the indigenist, modern or socialist and post-modern. In general terms, the indigenist perspective focuses on the spiritual elements of the Andean cosmovision, passed down from generation to generation, and strongly linked to indigenous movements. The modern view of the *Buen Vivir* has been promoted by socialist governments leaving cultural and environmental concerns to a second place, and emphasizing the control of the state to promote a new socio-economic system.

The third view approaches the *Buen Vivir* as a post-modern or post-development alternative. It focuses on human's respect and harmony with nature, a proposal beyond development where there is space for indigenist, peasant, feminist, ecologists and others to build and implement a multiplicity of societies, each with its own significant (Palacios Díaz 2018; Hidalgo-Capitan / Cubillo Guevara 2014, Cardozo-Ruiz et al. 2016).

Multiple (decolonial) feminisms

As with the *Buen Vivir*, there is no one decolonial feminism, but a myriad of them. One reason is that decolonial feminism emerged from different critical currents of feminism, among them the autonomous, black, communitarian, lesbian and Marxists/socialists, currents, each of them with its own critical focus. Decolonial feminists from different currents place their central argument on the continuity of the colonial system of oppression and the need to decolonize practices, epistemologies, and subjectivities in the Latin American countries. Besides this agreement, there are also important divergences worth mentioning. One of them is whether the concept of "gender" must be dismantled (Lugones 2010), or it is the one with the potential to revealing the position of inferiority assigned by patriarchy to women (Paredes

2013). A second debate discussed in the paper is whether oppression of women is a product of the colonisation of America or it was a historical junction between patriarchal interests of pre-colonial and western societies. A third and last debate noted here is whether the deconstruction of patriarchy is the main aim or a deviation from the real objective, which would be the dismantling of the colonialist system.

The Buen Vivir from a feminist perspective

The *Buen Vivir* as indigenous proposal finds its roots not in concepts or philosophies, but in ancestral and archaic ways of life. This places the *Buen Vivir* as a different ontology than ours, because in its origin it was populated by forces and entities which are not recognized by most of us. The *chachawarmi* principle, or dual feminine-masculine complementarity, has been taken up and vindicated by indigenous intellectuals and activists (Hernandez-Castillo 2017) to contrast the patriarchal colonial heritage of male dominance. In practice, the *chachawarmi* has been used to conceal violence against women and to justify lack of action, besides been subject to interpretations of heterosexuality and hierarchical complementarity.

The *Buen Vivir* as a modern proposal was made captive by the Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments to create a horizon of harmonious relationships whose formation is no longer in the hands of women or men, but of an abstract process of decolonization and depatriarchalization led by the State.

As a post-modern concept, the *Buen Vivir* has intrinsic coincidences with decolonial and other feminist currents, but its put in practice hit sharp contradictions, particularly in light of decolonising objectives. The paper calls the attention on the risks of a discourse made up of a collage of theoretical sources and labelled as postmodern, that in practice has demobilized many women and questioned their critical tools, such as “gender”, without replacing them with new specific theoretical tools.

The paper concludes that the *Buen Vivir* understood as a powerful paradigm towards decolonization must not be a horizon that postpones women’s aspirations indefinitely, but a daily reality supported by explicit public policies and actions. For example, by revising and avoiding dualist thinking and considering the reality of hybridization, adoption and adaption of conceptions to cope with women’s daily struggles.

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Endnotes

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