

Conceptual approaches to the crisis, extractivism and its alternatives

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This article discusses in depth the conceptual and reflective elements shared by the various works that form part of this dossier of Ecuador Debate. We introduce our reflection by critiquing capitalist modernity and its relentless pursuit of unlimited economic growth. This allows us to analyse the extractivist drift produced in Latin America as part of the global capitalist reconfiguration. We conclude by discussing

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various alternative approaches - post-growth, Sumak Kawsay and food sovereignty - that are capable of guiding and inspiring transformative options for Ecuador, such as those presented here.



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The illusion of unlimited growth and the global civilisational crisis

The predominant way of life in our societies today is based on unlimited economic growth, even though it takes place in the finite sphere of planet Earth. The Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" report warned us of this paradox and its consequences for global ecosystems, the logic of unlimited growth being an intrinsic part of capitalist rationality aimed at capital accumulation (Meadows et al., 1972). Today, ample scientific information is available on the multiple environmental problems resulting from the prevailing logic of capitalist production and consumption, including climate change -which has not been reversed or even significantly slowed down despite all the efforts made since 1992.

The concept of planetary boundaries developed by Rockström et al. (2009) became an essential reference in sustainability debates, diversifying the dimensions of ecological problems beyond climate change, which dominated the international discussion in the new millennium. This group of scientists emphasise the interdependence between nine biophysical subsystems and processes, which cannot be altered beyond certain limits to guarantee a "safe space" for human societies, and warns that the predominant paradigm of social and economic development continues to ignore anthropogenic consequences on the environment at continental and planetary levels (Rockström et al., 2009).

Steffen et al. (2015: 8) warn that the transgressions that have already occurred within these limits were caused "unevenly by different human societies and different social groups" and cannot be generalised to humanity in the abstract. Brand et al. (2021), in turn, point out that it is not economic activities in the abstract that lead to the ecological crisis but rather economic activities with particular logic, especially the growth imperative of capitalist economies.

The accelerated extinction of species and loss of habitats has led to our era being described as the sixth great extinction. Added to this is the pollution and acidification of the seas, soil degradation, freshwater scarcity, and air pollution, all areas in which, according to the United Nations Environment Programme, we are not advancing at the pace required to preserve safe conditions for the human species on the planet, but making the situation even worse (UNEP, 2019).

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According to Baudron and Liégeois (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic also has its origins in the constant territorial expansion, including in sensitive ecosystems, required by a predatory agro-food model. Similarly, where once a hydroelectric dam was built, displacing a community, now multiple dams are built on the same

riverbed to satiate the infinite appetite for energy inherent in the economic growth paradigm and the corresponding capitalist/modern/Western way of life.

Under similar conditions, mining projects, unconventional hydrocarbon exploitations and land grabbing for agricultural products (not always food) are developed. At the same time, scarcity and hunger are not necessarily explained as consequences of current natural limits. In reality, while more than enough food is produced to supply the needs of the world's population, those who cannot afford the price go hungry, while food is wasted in large proportions.

In addition to the aforementioned environmental dimensions, there is a crisis of growth in much of the global economy,

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historically unprecedented rates of inequality and migratory flows, an escalation in the arms race, and growing deficiencies in the capacities of the political

system of liberal democracy to resolve this set of problems, which is expressed in a loss of legitimacy, inefficient policies and tendencies towards authoritarianism.

Consequently, our world is going through a multidimensional crisis that stems from the very foundations of civilisation, on which capitalist modernity is based: in the epistemological separation between culture and nature, in the desire to dominate and control nature - conceived as an infinite store of appropriable natural resources - through science and technology, in the assumption that well-being depends on the accumulation of material goods; in the generalisation of the ontology of homo economicus: humanity understood as globally rational, profit-maximising, competitive and individualistic; in the enshrinement of unlimited economic growth as the axis of social and economic organisation; in the forms of exploitation and casualisation of labour; and, in the tendency to commodify all aspects of life.

In this context, we share the interpretation of the current crisis as a crisis of civilisation (Lang, 2019, 2011; Ornelas, 2013) and, as such, any alternative horizon must be based on this conception since limited (one-dimensional) understandings compromise the possibilities of generating substantial long-term changes in social structures and current models of production and consumption, as well as in our ways of understanding and relating to nature.

Extractivism as a way of inserting Latin America into the global economy

Within the framework of the economic, political and cultural transformations driven by neoliberalism, the current phase of global capitalism (Duménil & Lévy, 2014; Laval & Dardot, 2013), and given the emergence of China as an economic power, a process of productive reorganisation took place in Latin America that implied new modalities of insertion of the region in the international division of labour. In order to characterise the concrete forms assumed by the process of expanded reproduction of capital, its internal logic and the axes that organise it during specific historical periods and in specific geographical and social spaces, Jaime Osorio (2014) developed the notion of the "pattern of reproduction of capital". In considering the transformations that have taken place in Latin America in recent decades, Osorio described this pattern of capital reproduction in the region as an "exporter of productive specialisation" (Osorio, 2012; 2014), in which the reproduction of capital once again takes as its main axes branches and sectors oriented towards external markets as its main space of realisation.

This has meant the specialisation of the region around economic axes that allow it to take advantage of its "natural

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advantages" vis-à-vis world markets (oil, gas, copper, iron, soya, wheat, livestock, fish and seafood, fruit, coffee, wine, etc.), benefiting from the expansion of Chinese demand and the proximity to the US market in the case of Mexico and Central America. Only in some countries has this specialisation in raw materials and foodstuffs been accompanied by the promotion of some industrial branches

under the dominance of global capital in which there is competitive capacity, as is the case of the maquiladoras in Mexico or segments of the automotive assembly industry in Brazil and Mexico (Osorio, 2014).

One of the characteristics of this pattern of reproduction is that it accentuates the region's technological dependence on the capitalist centres, for although cutting-edge technologies or technological packages may be used in some sectors, these are acquired abroad, while the very logic of reproduction of the dominant capital does not stimulate technological innovation at home. As a result, the export pattern maintains its competitiveness in international markets while increasing domestic exploitation. The predominant orientation towards external markets and domestic segments with high consumption capacity marks the configuration of an economic structure concentrated in the most dynamic branches while neglecting local consumption and the satisfaction of the needs of the working classes, which is evident in the fall in the purchasing power of wages in the region (Osorio, 2012).

The prevalence of this pattern of capital reproduction over the last decades has generated diverse consequences in the economic structure of Latin American countries. Thus, in those countries that achieved relative industrial development during the Import Substitution Industrialisation stage before the debt crisis in the 1980s (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico), there is a strong tendency towards the reprimarisation of their economies, accompanied by a process of deindustrialisation (defined as the relative loss of weight of industry in the economy), as the Brazilian case clearly illustrates (Filgueiras, 2013). In other countries such as Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela, the tendencies

of economies centred on exporting primary products are reaffirmed as specific forms of participation in international markets.

Consequently, the reconfiguration of production in the region as a whole, resulting from the pattern of capital reproduction, helps to explain the extractivist drift assumed by the processes of capitalist development in Latin America. The Ecuadorian experience confirms this tendency, given its location on the periphery of the capitalist world system. Since its conquest, Ecuador has been the supplier of raw materials or foodstuffs in the international division of labour and nature, be it rubber, cocoa, bananas or oil, thus contributing to value-generation processes outside its borders. However, after the exhaustion of the economic boom cycle experienced in the region, resulting from the trend of falling commodity prices in international markets since 2014, including the consequent economic slowdown and deterioration of social conditions, the conceptual discussion on extractivism and its economic, social and environmental consequences has resurfaced, with the debates explored in the following section gaining special relevance in Latin America.

Extractivism as a dominant economic model and as a pattern of power: theoretical-conceptual debates

Uruguayan ecologist Eduardo Gudynas defines extractivism as:

[A]n extraction of natural resources, in high volume or high intensity, which are essentially oriented to be exported as raw materials in unprocessed form or with minimal processing. [...] Export orientation prevails when at least 50% of the extracted resource is destined for foreign trade. (Gudynas, 2015: 13).

In particular, the definition of extractivism proposed by Gudynas encompasses activities other than mining and oil exploitation. The most evident case occurs with export monocultures, which are also intensive, cover vast territories with high environmental impacts, and add up to enormous volumes that are exported unprocessed or with minimal processing. An example of this is currently seen with soya monocultures, which cover huge areas in the Southern Cone and are destined almost exclusively for export (either as soya beans, pellets, and, to a lesser extent, meal or oil). "Similarly, crops such as sugar cane, cocoa, bananas or African palm for biofuels represent other types of extractivism in some countries" (Gudynas, 2015: 17). The latter are important export products in Ecuadorian history and today.

By considering as extractive, practically any activity in the primary sector of the economy that is primarily oriented towards external markets, Gudynas' notion of extractivism remains at a general descriptive level while losing analytical and explanatory capacity by not characterising the specificities nor establishing differences between activities that may be due to diverse economic and social processes. This is particularly relevant in the case of export-oriented agricultural activities. While it can be argued that all of them involve processes of "extraction" of nutrients from the soil, some of them involve processes of ecosystem destruction and biodiversity loss on a much larger scale than others, for example, in the case of the conversion of tropical rainforest areas to monoculture oil palm plantations or in forestry plantations dedicated to pulp production. Similarly, in different export-oriented agricultural activities, we can find various types of agriculture (from large capitalist companies to peasant agriculture) differently articulated in the production and external trade chains of these products.

This is exemplified in some of Ecuador's traditional export product chains, such as coffee, bananas and cocoa, given the heterogeneity characterising Ecuadorian agrarian capitalism (Martínez, 2014). From our point of view, the characterisation of some agricultural sectors as extractivist is relevant to the extent that the criteria that justify it are

defined with greater precision and allow for an understanding of the main agrarian transformations that have taken place in the region as a result of the processes of capitalist expansion and development in the countryside.

In their analysis of soybean expansion in Argentina, Norma Giarracca and Miguel Teubal (2013) offer a more precise

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characterisation of agrarian extractivism, which makes it possible to equate soybean production with mining and oil as part of the "extractive model". For Giarracca and Teubal, the extractive model obeys the dynamics of "accumulation by dispossession" (in the perspective proposed by Harvey), as one of its constituent elements, given that it is

highly demanding of the extraction of natural resources, is capital intensive, generates relatively little employment, is driven by large transnational companies which dominate "key sectors of production and commercialisation", and involves the application of "cutting-edge technologies" controlled by these companies (2013: 20-21). About this last point, in the case of the expansion of soya production in Argentina and several Latin American countries, it involves GM soya and its associated technological package, controlled by Monsanto (now Bayer after the recent merger).

Among the main characteristics of extractive activities, Giarracca and Teubal also underline an acute environmental degradation and negative impacts on the health of local populations, the alteration of local economic dynamics and food production, large-scale extraction or production causing the displacement of several pre-existing economic activities; the massive displacement of population contingents (rural workers, peasants, local populations, located in the surrounding territories); they imply a high consumption of "non-reproducible natural elements" (water, fertility, biodiversity); they are export-oriented without contributing to the satisfaction of domestic needs; and, despite their high profitability resulting from the generation of high exchange values, extractive activities have very little use value for the community (2013: 23-24).

One of the central elements in Giarracca and Teubal's characterisation of the extractive model in general, and soy production in particular, refers to the appropriation of large extraordinary rents (overprofits), which increase the profits of the companies involved. These rents result from fertile land or territorial concessions for the exploitation of resources, as well as the appropriation of patents in relation to the technology used. This last type of rent can be defined, following Bolívar Echeverría (2011), as a technological rent.

Regarding the political effects of extractivism, Gudynas (2017) mentions the reinterpretation of certain rights, the decline

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of democracy, illegalities and non-legalities, the impact on the structure and function of the state, and corruption. The author notes a structural symbiosis between extractivism and corruption since colonial times, regardless of the political tendency of the government in power or the ownership regime (state/public or

private/corporate) of the extractive enterprises (Gudynas, 2017).

Lang et al. also underline the political dimension of the concept of extractivism. Extractivist regimes" in "peripheral-dependent social formations" imply "a political regime, a territorial ordering, a specific class structure and even a collective imaginary (which is generally imposed as 'national culture'); they are a way of life, a form of social organisation" (2019: 356).

Gudynas situates the beginnings of extractivism in the colonial period and, for some authors such as the Argentinian Horacio Machado Aráoz, this historical dimension had a structural and systemic weight. For Horacio Machado, extractivism is intrinsically related to the formation of the capitalist world system following the conquest of America more than 500 years ago. He characterises it as a product of the foundational territorial ordering of modern world geography and emphasises the historical co-constitution of colonialism, capitalism and extractivism. The modern capitalist world system [d]elimits and establishes, on the one hand, the zone of plunder and, on the other, that of accumulation. Extractivism is the economic-political and cultural practice that 'links' both zones, the mode through which one relates to the other [...]. Extractivism institutes the separation between the metropolises and their satellites; it establishes the centre and its peripheries; it delineates the geography of extraction as a subordinate, dependent, supplier geography, structured by and for the supply of the geography of the centre, that of consumption and accumulation (Machado Aráoz, 2015: 15).

For Machado Aráoz, therefore, extractivism is not only a mode of resource appropriation with collateral effects, nor is it the historical form of insertion of countries such as Ecuador into the global economy that persists to this day, but it constitutes a specific pattern of power, a device that produces "development in the centre (i.e. concentration and accumulation of the means of power and consumption) and underdevelopment in 'its' peripheries" (2015:16). At the same time, we must not lose sight of the fact that the economies of the peripheries also have their centres of consumption and accumulation, just as there are certain territories of sacrifice in the geopolitical North, and that in both the North and the South, a constant increase in inequalities can be observed.

However, as the Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa notes, the history of extractivism in the region has not been linear:

[I]t appears traversed by successive economic cycles, dependent on the demands of the global market, as well as by the processes of consolidation of the national state, especially in the mid-twentieth century, which allowed for a specific control of extraordinary income, both from mining and oil (Svampa, 2019:16).

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by the so-called super-cycle or commodity boom, a phase in which "neo-extractivism strongly reinstated the developmentalist illusion, expressed in the idea that, thanks to the opportunities offered by the new commodity boom and even more so to the active role of the state, it would be possible to achieve development" (Svampa, 2019: 17).

Brand et al. show how the stabilisation of neo-extractivist practices in this cycle was based on specific state actions, such as the establishment of specific legal frameworks or the provision of infrastructure, flanked by a legitimising discourse and actions such as the redistribution of a proportion of the rent. At the same time, the period was marked by strong socio-environmental conflicts, not only over access to natural goods as the material basis for the production and reproduction of society or the rent obtained from extraction. Political procedures and concepts of order, divergent notions of prosperity, different cosmovisions and understandings of nature, and respect for cultural identity and territorial self-determination were also in dispute. These disputes confirm that extractivism 'must be seen as a central expression of political domination, in which material, cultural and socio-political dimensions and conflicts converge' (Brand et al., 2016: 150).

Consequently, we consider extractivism to be a pattern of power and a socio-political and socio-technical formation characteristic of peripheral-dependent countries such as Ecuador. We understand it in parallel as an axis of the current global environmental and multidimensional crisis in terms of the constant expansion of the extractive frontier and the deepening of forms of extractivist violence (Svampa, 2019). Therefore, we believe that the country must consider the search for alternative non-extractivist strategies that, at the same time, consider the severity of the global climate crisis, promoting options that contribute to the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, the conservation of biodiversity and resilience to climate change. The following section assesses several paradigms that inspire alternative horizons aligned with our understanding of the problem.

Alternative horizons and paradigms for overcoming extractivism

Critical of the option of "getting out of extractivism with more extractivism", we consider it necessary to maintain a dialogue with various currents of debate that mark alternative horizons to evaluate options aimed at diversifying and reorganising the economy under conditions of equity, sustainability, interculturality, generating sources of decent employment and improving the living conditions of the majority of the population, while preserving the integrity of the remaining ecosystems and biodiversity. Among them, Sumak Kawsay and food sovereignty are relevant, and we propose to explore the debate around post-growth as a possible source of inspiration from the Global North for a country like Ecuador.

Post-growth in Dialogue with Debates in the Global South

The notion of degrowth first appeared in the mid-1970s. In those years, the Fordist model encountered certain limits, which led some intellectuals to criticise the unilateral orientation of 'development' towards economic growth. The Club of Rome report was published, the oil crisis broke out, and the Trilateral Commission devised the neo-liberal strategy. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and André Gorz, forerunners of ecological economics and political ecology, formulated the idea of degrowth, even questioning the compatibility of the capitalist system with the planet's balance (D'Alisa et al., 2015). After being displaced by debates about neoliberalism, the discussion around degrowth was reactivated in activist

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and academic circles at the beginning of the new millennium. It received new impetus from the alter-globalisation movement and ecological economics, political ecology and political philosophy. It re-emerged in opposition to the notions of sustainable development and later green growth, which seek to 'harmonise' economic growth with

social welfare and environmental protection - a claim that, in light of the huge current imbalances, is paradoxical. Proponents of post-growth societies emphasise the contradiction between sustainability and economic growth. Interest in post-growth or degrowth first spread across Europe before it reached other parts of the Global North. It became both a research paradigm and a political movement, making it one of the relevant alternative systemic transformation horizons.

Discussions around post-growth or degrowth encompass multiple dimensions of social organisation:

Degrowth hints at a society with a lower metabolism, but more importantly, a society that has a metabolism with a different structure and that serves new functions. Degrowth does not aspire to do less of the same. [In a degrowth society, everything would be different: different activities, different forms and uses of energy, different relationships, different gender roles, different distribution of time for paid and unpaid work, and different relationships with the non-human world (D'Alisa et al., 2015: 40).

This means that, in this discursive field, the term degrowth is loaded with other meanings, different from what neoclassical economics suggests, which associates it with a generalised economic recession. It is not proposed to abandon the idea of growth in all sectors of the economy but to de-prioritise economic growth in the abstract as the primary goal of state action (Koch, 2019). This translates into a strict scrutiny of which productive or reproductive activities should necessarily grow in each context to strengthen sustainability and the well-being of the population and

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which should be reduced and disappear in the medium term in order to achieve ways of life compatible with ecological limits and with horizons of equality and justice. To explore the potential of these discussions and proposals for a dependent country in the Global South, such as Ecuador, we have chosen to adopt the term post-growth, emphasising that in the transformation horizons we outline for Ecuador, it will undoubtedly be necessary to expand a

series of productive and reproductive activities, as well as infrastructures and public services, and not only to reduce others.

Degrowth and post-growth constitute a diverse discursive field, encompassing clearly anti-capitalist currents but also other, more liberal ones, oriented, for example, towards a voluntary change in individual consumption behaviour or even coming from conservative environmentalism. Here we are particularly interested in the intersectional anti-systemic currents within this field. Some of the proposals emanating from the lively debate under the post-growth umbrella are: transforming more dimensions of life into "commons" rather than commodifying and privatising them, implying collective or community ownership and self-regulation regimes, giving greater weight and recognition to the reproductive and care activities that have always subsidised production; promoting low-impact lifestyles and notions of happiness associated with sufficiency and balance, rather than accumulation, control and competition. Accordingly, it aims to build a society where "ordinary people work, produce and consume less, share more, enjoy more leisure time and live with dignity and joy" (Kallis et al., 2020: 65).

A 'non-reformist reform' (Gorz) or 'revolutionary realpolitik' (Luxemburg) perspective is often adopted to reach this horizon. It aims to generate social infrastructures and public policies for unconditional basic income and free services, promote the commons, reduce working hours, and establish a public finance system that supports all of the above, taking into account the particularities of each context rather than seeking standardisation (Kallis et al., 2020).

Although much of the literature on post-growth or degrowth is presented as a perspective from and for countries in the

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geopolitical North, it is relevant to the Global South, certainly not as a universal recipe for transformation. Several degrowth advocates reject the idea of a single universal path of transformation. On the contrary, degrowth in high-income countries is said to be necessary to 'increase ecological space' or 'free up conceptual space' so that countries on the periphery of the capitalist world system can 'set their own trajectories towards what they define as a good life' (D'Alisa et al., 2015:42).

This brings harsh criticisms, such as Huber's (2021) characterisation of "degrowth as a preoccupation of middle-class environmentalists in the Global North who feel 'anxiety' about overconsumption" (quoted in Hickel, 2021:1). The main argument is that the poorer countries of the Global South still need to grow to meet people's basic necessities. Common

sense is expressed here, which often leads to a spontaneous rejection of the term 'degrowth' concerning the Global South as if it were a proposal to impoverish the poor further.

Mainstream economics suggests that economic growth is a powerful force for poverty reduction. High and sustained economic growth would increase labour demand and wages, reducing poverty; in practice, things are much more complex. GDP growth, even per capita GDP growth as an average figure, should not be confused with the idea that each citizen effectively has more material resources at their disposal, in the sense that this figure does not account for existing inequality. In Ecuador, for example, during the recent economic growth phase under Rafael Correa's government (2007-2017), although poverty was temporarily reduced, the most significant economic groups benefited most from this

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growth. It contributed to a process of concentration and centralisation of capital despite progressive government rhetoric that suggested promoting the redistribution of wealth and income (Fierro, 2019). This structural element allowed poverty to increase rapidly again in more recent years. Therefore, to meet the basic

necessities of the most disadvantaged populations in both the Global North and the Global South, rather than pursuing abstract GDP growth, policies to decrease inequality within and between countries should be prioritised, as many proponents of degrowth insist. This redistribution or restitution should be thought of in terms of monetary wealth and land, access to fresh water, energy, seeds, etc. (Lang, 2017).

As we pointed out previously, the last phase of strong Latin American regional GDP growth between 2000 and 2006 (with an average growth of 3.2%) and from 2007 to 2013 (with an average growth of 3.5%) coincided with an intensification of extractivism, with severe consequences for well-being. "This dynamic of capital introduces the phenomena of recolonisation of nature and dispossession, visible in the process of land grabbing, the destruction of territories and the displacement of populations" (Svampa, 2019a, p. 8). Added to this are the traps of rentier economies:

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they generate inequality and poverty through the concentration of benefits in a small elite, weaken democracy and institutionality, lead to instability due to their dependence on international commodity prices, foster corruption and clientelism, affect indigenous peoples and peasants, their ways of life and cosmovisions, and strengthen

patriarchal relations. In most regions of the Global South, growth induced by global markets, under the logic of infrastructure or extractivist megaprojects, has generated very few decent formal jobs; on the contrary, it has pushed hundreds of millions of people into the informal sectors, leading to what we know as "impoverishing growth" (Acosta, 2009).

In addition, when it is claimed that "the South" needs to grow, the stereotype of the "rich North" and the "poor South" is reinforced, emphasising the profound inequalities that characterise the societies of our time, as well as the historical and

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structural heterogeneities and complexities that differentiate them from one another. Latin America is known as one of the most unequal regions in the world. At the same time, we know that "inequality increases status competition and undermines well-being in society" (Gough, 2020, p. 214). Driven by hegemonic imaginaries of success, the middle classes in the countries of the

Global South tend to replicate, sometimes caricatured, the unsustainable 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen,

2020). A way of life that, by systematically externalising its social and economic costs onto other regions of the world or other, often racialised, social groups, is not generalisable as the promise of development suggests. The challenge we face is a profound and global cultural shift. We must collectively redefine new imaginaries of a dignified, fulfilling, sustainable life while shaping new subjectivities guided by notions of sufficiency, balance and quality relationships.

However, there is little prospect of this happening unless the dense web of rules that structure international relations around trade, investment, debt and intellectual property are challenged and transformed to reverse unequal (ecological) exchange dynamics. Current logics of global governance not only normalise the pursuit of economic growth as an evident and unquestioned goal, undermining sustainability horizons but also cementing historically asymmetrical relations of unequal exchange between the Global North and the Global South. This has been evidenced in recent research on material flows in the ecological economy, which quantifies the effective transfer of value and the size of the plunder (Infante-Amate et al., 2020; Hickel et al., 2022). The literature on degrowth is very explicit: Reducing social metabolism in high-income countries would leave room for countries in the Global South to reorient their extractive economies towards more endogenous goals by reducing actual demand for raw materials.

Global change requires global alliances. To what extent can the post-growth movement be an exciting trend for Latin

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America? Undoubtedly, a differentiated approach to the reduction of social metabolism, as proposed by the authors of degrowth, is just as crucial for countries in the Global South as it is for those in the North. On the other hand, several authors have explicitly explored the potential convergences and

complementarities of post-growth with Latin American currents of thought, such as post-development, post-extractivism or buen vivir, or with the environmental justice perspective present in the Global South (Unceta, 2014; Escobar, 2015; Acosta & Brand, 2017; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). However, it is problematic that proponents of degrowth think of their policy proposals primarily 'from and for the Global North' without engaging more actively with the interrelationships in our modern-colonial globalised world. For fear of imposing a degrowth agenda on the Global South, there is a tendency towards Eurocentrism to not sufficiently conceptualise the interdependencies in eco-social transformation nor the need for structural reforms of the global political economy (Trettel, 2022, p. 380).

Sumak Kawsay: Beyond the appropriation of a transformative paradigm

Sumak Kawsay is an understanding of well-being that emanates from indigenous peoples' ways of life. Similar conceptions exist in most indigenous societies in the Americas. Sumak Kawsay differs fundamentally from the notion of well-being promoted by the notion of capitalist development, as it is not part of an expansive or cumulative logic of progress and infinite growth but rather seeks fulfilment in balance and sufficiency.

Several studies locate the origins of Sumak Kawsay in the Ecuadorian Amazon in the 1990s (Hidalgo & Cubillo, 2014). According to Kichwa researcher Inuca Lechón, it would have acquired historical significance prior to the 1990s in a "confrontation of knowledge" (yachay tinkuy in Kichwa) around the struggles for education of the Kichwa Kayambi people in the Cayambe area in the northern Ecuadorian Andes in the 1930s and 1940s (Inuca Lechón, 2017, p. 155). This confrontation of knowledge around Sumak Kawsay has not ceased since then, generating different levels of epistemic violence.

After the introduction of buen vivir in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, Ecuadorian government officials quickly appropriated the notion of buen vivir, using it as a synonym for "development" in the management of public affairs

(Lang, 2017) and emptying it of its economic, cultural and symbolic contents linked to the reproduction of life and its communitarian matrix. Thus, it was inserted into the logic of development plans, with their goals and indicators, and the eagerness to contribute to Westernist metrics. Pro-government progressive intellectuals even used the concept of buen

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vivir to propose 21st-century socialism and legitimise government action. Other scholars (Hidalgo et al., 2019) proposed constructing universal Good Living Goals instead of Sustainable Development Goals, thus forcing the universalist perspective on Good Living, which is eminently plural and context-specific. These approaches ignore the radical difference between Good Living and the universal episteme of growth, development and progress.

Here we seek to recover the potential of buen vivir as a transformative paradigm from the territorial epistemologies and practices that underlie it. Although these discursive appropriations of buen vivir, from different angles of the Western/modern epistemology and related governmental practices, have disillusioned many about the truly transformative potential of Sumak Kawsay, in Ecuador, a series of socio-political-territorial processes - primarily rural, with some degree of indigenous participation - continued to organise certain aspects of the reproduction of life according to the principles of Sumak Kawsay, now using only the term in Kichwa, to distinguish it from neo-developmental approaches to "good living".

These processes are rooted in the long history of indigenous resistance against the expansion of capitalist modes of living, as well as in community organisational practices, and understand Sumak Kawsay as an ethical-civilisational

Community lifestyles anchored in Sumak Kawsay are "dysfunctional" to the capitalist logics of accumulation... In Marxist language, community life revolves around use value rather than exchange value.

perspective rooted in the historical memory of local communities. On these bases, it is enacted as a contemporary political project (Simbaña, 2011: 220). Some of these territorial processes, mainly in the Amazon, take place within legalised collective territories, and others through local governments elected with candidates belonging to Pachakutik, the political arm of the Confederation of

Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the largest national organisation of indigenous peoples.

Community lifestyles anchored in Sumak Kawsay or Alli Kawsay are "dysfunctional" to the capitalist logics of accumulation from their daily practice by inserting the notion of quality of life, or good coexistence, in the quality of relationships between human beings, with non-human living beings and also with things. These relationships must be reciprocal and supportive to provide shelter in challenging times (Churuchumbi, 2014).

Translated into Marxist language, one could say that community life revolves around use value rather than exchange value and relationality rather than accumulation (Lang, 2021). In this sense, Sumak Kawsay consists of a set of guiding principles around which the organisation of collective life has evolved in practice in many diverse indigenous societies in the Americas and which are often in tension with values introduced from colonial/modern intrusion.

Instead of unlimited material accumulation, Sumak Kawsay [...] proposes balance and harmony as the highest values of coexistence. Instead of being pursued as a goal, the accumulation of material wealth or individual power is seen as a threat to the community, and its possibilities are systematically defused through mechanisms of redistribution, reciprocity and rotation of positions. Instead of competition (for resources, status, etc.), Sumak Kawsay proposes collaboration. Instead of the capitalist homo economicus, an individual always rationally

interested in getting the best for himself, it proposes being in community, in the awareness of our deep interdependencies with other human and non-human beings. Instead of separating life into realms of, for example, the social, the political and the economic, it conceives of life as a whole, as a web of complex relationships. Instead of defining nature as a set of "resources" external to human society and prone to exploitation by it, it depicts human life as a part of all forms of life. Significantly, community life evolves according to the needs of all in situated historical processes, actively shaped by collective deliberation (Lang, 2021: 78).

In this orienting and practical, but not ideological, sense, Sumak Kawsay constitutes today an alternative paradigm to predatory capitalism. Among other things, it is committed to food sovereignty, a proposal that we discuss below.

Food sovereignty as a political proposal for the transformation of agri-food systems

The food sovereignty approach, central to contemporary agrarian debates, was born out of the struggles of Mexican

For the World Forum on Food Sovereignty promoted by Via Campesina International, food sovereignty is considered as "the right of peoples to nutritious and culturally adequate, accessible, sustainably and ecologically produced food, and their right to decide their own food and production system".

peasant organisations in response to the impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), especially for maize producers. Initially, food sovereignty was seen as the right of states to define their own agricultural and food policies outside of free trade agreements. This concept prevailed in Via Campesina's proposal at the 1996 Food Summit until the World Forum on Food Sovereignty in

Havana in 2001. Subsequently, the concept broadened towards a less state-centric perspective, maturing into a concept oriented towards transforming agri-food systems with multiple dimensions at different scales and levels.

Thus, for the World Forum on Food Sovereignty promoted by Via Campesina International, food sovereignty is considered as "the right of peoples to nutritious and culturally adequate, accessible, sustainably and ecologically produced food, and their right to decide their own food and production system". This concept emphasises ecological and sustainable forms of food production; it gives states, peoples and communities the right to decide on food and agricultural policies "above the demands of international markets and corporate enterprises"; and it places local food producers and consumers as the primary managers of food systems, with the ability to decide what food is produced and consumed, how it is produced and prepared (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007).

Consequently, food sovereignty emerges as a politically-positioned proposal against the dominant global agri-food system, increasingly structured under the control of a few multinational corporations that concentrate ever larger segments of the agri-food market (seeds, agrochemical inputs, agricultural machinery, veterinary pharmaceuticals, meat products, world trade in basic grains, global supermarket chains). It is a notion that aims to strengthen the role of peasant agriculture in food systems against the dominant trends of capitalist agriculture. At the same time, it radically questions the organisation of food systems that consider food as a mere commodity in order to favour the processes of capitalist accumulation in the countryside, which lead to the concentration of productive resources, the casualisation of rural labour and the deterioration of the environment.

The notion of food sovereignty, put in these terms, contemplates several central dimensions (Windfuhr & Jonsén, 2005; Nyéléni Declaration, 2007), which can be synthesised around five axes: first, the human right to food and its constitutional recognition by states, which guarantees that all people should have access to sufficient, healthy, nutritious and culturally appropriate food to ensure a healthy life. Second, access to and control of productive and natural

resources, including land and territories, water, seeds, animals, biodiversity, and fishing grounds, by small-scale producers, peasants, indigenous peoples, artisanal fisherfolk, traditional communities, landless workers, etc., by women and men. This aspect involves the struggle for comprehensive agrarian reforms and the defence of the genetic heritage of seeds and animal species of the communities in order to guarantee agrobiodiversity. Thirdly, the development of diversified and agroecological production systems. This line addresses the care of the planet and "working with nature" through agroecological production to improve resilience and adaptation to climate change. Fourth, food sovereignty localises food systems in the territories, bringing producers and consumers closer together, promoting short circuits for marketing, and contributing to the dynamisation of local economies; and fifth, the defence of local food cultures, which implies not only the production of culturally-appropriate foods but also their forms of preparation.

Consequently, in its various dimensions, food sovereignty constitutes a proposal that brings together the main demands and experiences of peasant organisations at local, national and international levels, including the struggle for land and water, the defence of agro-biodiversity and peasant seeds, agro-ecological production experiences and access to local or alternative markets for peasant products.

Final reflections

How do we translate these transformative approaches into viable transitional alternatives towards a sustainable and

We carried out a collective exercise of exhaustive scrutiny of the productive and reproductive activities existing in Ecuador, differentiating those that sustain life and improve well-being from those that are harmful, preserving the priority of the search for sustainability and the reduction of inequalities.

equitable Ecuadorian society? Guided by Sumak Kawsay's inherent critique of capitalism and its obsession with accumulation and unlimited growth, the conversion of nature into natural resources, individualism and the devaluation of the communal, and the compartmentalisation of the social, political, the ecological and the economic, the authors of this central theme set out to think pragmatically about options that overcome these limitations. Thus, together with a critical view

of the debate on post-growth, we carried out a collective exercise of exhaustive scrutiny of the productive and reproductive activities existing in Ecuador, differentiating those that sustain life and improve well-being from those that are harmful, preserving the priority of the search for sustainability and the reduction of inequalities. We also argue that the proposal of food sovereignty is particularly relevant in Ecuador given the quantitative weight of peasant production units oriented towards food production for the domestic market, their importance in terms of rural employment generation, the possibilities of boosting local economies by promoting localised food systems with the direct involvement of producers and consumers, its potential to promote redistributive policies of productive resources in agriculture and, fundamentally, the possibility of converting agricultural systems into diversified agro-ecological systems, linked to the care of the land and agro-ecosystems for the production of healthy food.

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