

Deep Ecologies in the Highlands and Rainforests Finding Naess in the Neotropics

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Abstract

In the Andean and Amazonian regions of South America new environmental ethics have emerged that postulate intrinsic values in the non-human. These biocentrisms do not derive directly from the deep ecology of Arne Naess, presenting several differences, but there are also important similarities, which are briefly noted. Southern biocentrism recognizes the rights of Nature but does so in an intercultural perspective, is much more politicized, and is part of 'ontological openings' to alternatives of ecological community that go beyond modernity.

Keywords

nature's rights – biocentrism – buen vivir – deep ecology

Introduction

The last two decades have seen an impressive number of innovative ethical, moral and political perspectives in South America. Some features of those processes have been well publicized (particularly in the political arena with the so-called progressive governments), but other components are not so well known. Among them are new approaches to environmental ethics, including nature's rights.

Such an idea immediately evokes Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and his deep ecology platform. While the South American innovations are largely independent of his ideas and publications, it is worthwhile to study similarities and differences. It could be argued that, although Arne Naess' thought remains a clear inspiration for Latin American biocentric thinkers, there has been an almost independent genesis of a deep ecology movement in the Neotropical highlands and rainforests of South America.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it offers an overview of main similarities and differences between Naess' ideas and the Andean and Amazonian debates on environmental ethics and policies. Secondly, it provides an introduction to some of the most salient South American ideas, many of which are available only in Spanish and usually in non-academic realms.

Rights of Nature in the Andean Political Shifts

In the Andean and Amazonian regions of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, different efforts were being made to articulate alternative views of nature. These were promoted by a heterogeneous group of environmentalists, heterodox scholars, civil society activists, and leaders of indigenous groups. What these different strains of ecological ideas and modes of action had in common was a critique of Western modernity (particularly the concept of 'development'). They were also inspired by indigenous traditions, such as the Andean Aymara, Quechua and Kichwa, and the Amazonian Shuar, Achuar, and Ashaninka. These heterogeneous Andean and Amazonian actors and their bodies of ideas—both indigenous and non-indigenous—share the view that humans ought to be decentered as the only source of value in the biosphere and develop their own, non-Eurocentric epistemologies, such as the notion that various types of knowledge are farmed in intimate relationships with the land, and moving beyond subaltern identities to new forms of political activism.

In Peru, during the late 1990s, political and economic instability led these explorations into a dead-end. But in Ecuador and Bolivia, many of the actors that were engaged in those efforts have played

important roles in the political turn from conservative to New Left, progressivist governments. Beginning with the early 2000s, there were a number of important Ecuadorian and Bolivian contributions to the debates on how to conceive of nature's values, as well as on defining the role that traditional cosmovisions can play in today's context. Those themes became important components of major public discussions on key issues like the idea of the state, or the role of natural resources in development.¹

In Ecuador, these ideas were so successful that they ultimately found expression in a new Ecuadorian Constitution. Ratified in 2008, the Constitution was arguably the most significant and most concrete outcome of biocentric thinking in the region, in that it recognized nature's intrinsic rights.² The constitutional text included three noteworthy components: First, the category of 'rights' was extended to the non-human and referred to subjects that produce and fulfill life. Second, the subjects of these rights were conceived from an intercultural perspective and were placed both in 'nature' (following western knowledge) and in 'Pacha Mama' (following the Andean indigenous concept of a natural-social landscape). Third, the Ecuadorian Constitution presented an additional innovation: that of 'ecological restoration', defined as a right in itself. These rights of nature were presented in parallel (and partly overlapped) with the traditional right to a high quality of life or the right to a healthy environment anchored in conventional anthropocentric perspectives. This new Ecuadorian Constitution was supported by 75% of the voters in a national referendum. In classical terms, we could say that the new social contract—endorsed by a large majority—recognized nature as a 'subject of rights'.

The situation has been different in Bolivia. Although there are also many public debates about nature's rights in the Bolivian public sphere, there is no explicit recognition of these rights in the new Constitution, approved in 2009.³ In this text, only classical anthropocentric values and rights are present (e.g. as part of the third generation of human rights referring to the quality of the environment). After the constitutional process, there was a long debate in Bolivia on the need to give legal recognition to these rights. The debate ended in the so-called 'Framework Law of Mother Earth'.⁴

Another important feature is that in the Andean and Amazonian region, where ideas about nature's rights constitute a key component of a more broad concept, *Buen Vivir*. There is no easy translation of *Buen Vivir* to English as it cannot be reduced to 'wellbeing' or 'welfare' as in western usages. *Buen Vivir* refers to a radical critique of current development ideas and other modern concepts, such as 'linearity of history' or the 'nature-society divide', plus alternatives for a good life in expanded human and non-human communities.⁵

Comparing Andean-Amazonian Biocentrism and Deep Ecology

A preliminary look at Andean-Amazonian perspectives—particularly those that recognize nature's rights in the Ecuadorian Constitution—shows similarities with some of Naess' ideas for a deep ecology movement.⁶ Nonetheless, the Andean-Amazonian process should be considered as an independent development, as there are causal links with Naess' ideas. As indicated above, the process I here describe has been the result of contributions of a diverse set of actors.

¹ An example of the explorations in Peru is the pioneer work of Grimaldo Rengifo Vazquez and Eduardo Grillo Fernandez (some of their texts in English are found in Apffel-Marglin, 1998); early discussion for Ecuador edited by Acosta and Martínez (2009), and an overview of the region is found in Gudynas, 2014.

² Constitución de la República del Ecuador, approved in 2008; English version at the Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.

³ Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, approved in 2009; Spanish version at the Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Bolivia/bolivia09.html>

⁴ Ley marco de la Madre Tierra y desarrollo integral para el Buen Vivir, Law 300, October 15th, 2012, Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional, La Paz.

⁵ Buen Vivir is a plural concept, still under construction, derived from a non-essentialist perspective as it is relative to historical, social and environmental contexts (see Gudynas, 2011). Buen Vivir is intercultural as it expresses a confluence of knowledges, rationalities and sensibilities from critiques within or at the margins of modernity, plus others from some indigenous peoples, particularly Andean. It also reclaims ideas such as Pacha Mama, described in this paper.

⁶ The similarities I here observe relate to deep ecology's earliest version (Naess, 1973), to the revised platform principles (Naess, 1985), and also to his later comments.

And while some of them were indeed familiar with Naess' work or the deep ecology movement, Andean-Amazonian biocentrism springs from a variety of native sources.

The various Andean-Amazonian perspectives share some basic components, but nonetheless there are specific features to each country, each region, and to the diverse interactions and dialogues between indigenous and nonindigenous positions. But they are all 'deep' in Naess' sense, as they are a critique of shallow ecologies and western-based anthropocentrism. Like deep ecology, they too could be described as biocentric. Naess frequently criticized species loss, animal suffering, or consumerist lifestyles, while the Andean-Amazonian perspective similarly perceives nature's destruction as the result of the consumption needs of national and international elites, as well as utilitarian positions highlighting economic value as the best indicator of what nature essentially *is*.

Both Naessian and Andean perspectives recognize intrinsic values in the non-human world. But in the South, this recognition is part of larger and more complex ethical and political debate. The Andean-Amazonian perspective has what we could call a dual approach to ethics: On the one hand, it acknowledges the multiplicity of human values (e.g. aesthetic, religious, ecological, or historical). On the other hand, it understands that the non-human world has value in itself. The first position explains a strong rejection of any reductionism tied to any one specific value (usually economic) as the best indicator or essence of forests, animals, lakes, soils, etc. It instead involves repudiation of policy options that are based on ideas of perfect commensurabilities between those values (as in a cost-benefit analysis). This dual approach used to be a part of debates over the components and dynamics of environmental and economic policies, like those based on economic value in decision making. These discussions have never been purely axiological in Latin America; they have been political at heart.

There are a number of interpretations of intrinsic values, which, after O'Neill (1992), could be divided into at least three positions: (1) Intrinsic value for noninstrumental value for humans (as in Naess); (2) value resting solely in virtues of intrinsic properties and excluding non-relational properties; and (3) intrinsic value as objective value that is independent of the valuations of the valuers, excluding subjectivist views. The Andean-Amazonian valuing is very similar to the first type, and in part to the second one.

Different groups arrive to the recognition of intrinsic values departing from different positions, in a process that resembles Naess' 'apron diagram' (1984). Some are rooted in a western environmental critique similar to deep ecology. But the most original contribution originates in non-western cosmovisions that do not recognize a duality between nature and society.⁷ The best-known example is Pacha Mama, the Andean concept of Mother Earth.

Pacha Mama is a complex idea—and it should decidedly not be understood as a synonym of nature or wilderness. Pacha Mama refers to landscapes with intense human presence; mosaics of different land uses, including crops, cattle, villages, resting areas, water reservoirs, etc. It always involves anthropic environments, a situation that is considered as 'order' or 'orderly'—a valuable condition in the Andean cosmovision. In contrast, wilderness is an expression of 'disorder' or 'chaos', which may be dangerous for those communities. Furthermore, another feature is that Pacha Mama is always attached to specific territories, making it a plural concept, hence there are as many 'Pacha Mamas' as there are different geographical locations.

At the same time, community too has that certain quality of being composed both by the human and the non-human, the social and the ecological. In some cases, as in the Aymara cosmovision, communities are rooted inside specific locations. Territories are, then, an essential component in these perceptions. It follows that from the point of view of Pacha Mama cosmovision. Intrinsic values refer to communities which are at once social and ecological. In this, the Andean perspective also resembles the first sustained of a Western non-anthropocentric ethic, Aldo Leopold's famed Land Ethic (1949), which expanded community to water, land, etc. But Amazonian and Andean communities move even beyond Leopold's Land Ethic, because within the Pacha Mama cosmovision, some non-human members of the community hold personhood. Just like human members of the

⁷ An introduction to the Andean philosophies can be found in Estermann, 1998.

community, they too might possess agency, humor, personalities, etc. Their intrinsic values and rights are a consequence of that condition, of being (non-human) persons.

Whether we follow the concept of Pacha Mama or the notion of nature (and related concepts such as ecosystems, species, or populations), we see that intrinsic values are recognized in collective sets, while Naess chooses to place them in individual beings. He rejects the idea that classes, such as species or families, might be the main subjects of values, although this creates evident tensions with another assertion of his, namely that diversity is a value in itself (e.g. Naess, 1993). But surely, Naess was open to the relevance of a collective dimension, and to the interconnectivity of all living beings, which, as he also argued, have both intrinsic and instrumental values (e.g. Naess, 1993). In the deep ecology platform, he stated that interdependence contributes to the flourishing of humans and non-humans, moving in the direction of a biocentric egalitarianism which was particularly favored by such authors as Devall and Sessions (1985), and which has been criticized by other more recent environmental ethicists.

According to Andean-Amazonian perspectives, although Pacha Mama is a collective category holding intrinsic value, the morality derived thereof is patently unlike that of 'wilderness' or a protected environment. Those people to whom Pacha Mama is a vital presence in their cosmivision hunt, cultivate the land, or raise other living beings. Nevertheless, intrinsic values encounter other traditional values in the process generating moralities with limiting, compensatory, and reciprocal mandates that would help keep those living social-ecological assemblages viable over long periods of time.

Furthermore, the perspective outlined above allows for coupling those rights with policy and management options derived from conventional humanbased, environmental quality rights. What we see in the case of Andean-Amazonian communities is a fruitful blend of traditional ways of valuing and regulating the land, water and biodiversity, and of conventional, managementbased western epistemologies.

At first glance, these Andean-Amazonian concepts of human and nonhuman communities seem to resemble deep ecology's idea and support of mixed communities, as in the case of Naess' community of humans, bears, sheep, and wolves (1979). Nevertheless, Naess focusses on such communities as a condition for Self-realization, a perspective we do not find, at least not couched in those terms, in the Andean-Amazonian case. Here, the main goal is to be a 'complete' human; individuals who are not adequately engaged within their families, communities and landscapes are considered 'incomplete' beings. This means that within the Pacha Mama cosmivision, both social and ecological integrity are essential conditions for being a complete person.

Andean-Amazonian biocentrism express even more profound reaches. They are clearly a result of intercultural dialogue, particularly in their relationship with the category of Buen Vivir. Buen Vivir could not be adequately described in terms of religion, myth, or even culture. It refers to a deeper condition, one which is commonly labeled as a cosmivision of the world, universe, etc. The concept of ontology, in its recent anthropological understanding, fits this situation.⁸ The present day is dominated by the ontology of modernity, while Buen Vivir is recognized as a result of *ontological openings* (in the sense of De la Cadena, 2014⁹). In these other cosmivisions, intrinsic values are inevitable consequences of recognizing personhood in some nonhumans. These might be large animals such as jaguars or tapirs, or they might be certain trees, mountains, lakes, or even the spirits of dead relatives or local leaders. There are differences among the indigenous peoples in the region on this recognition, but they all

⁸ Ontology in this sense refers to the understandings and assumptions about the world, how it is conceived, knowledged and sensed, to the performative outcomes of practices, and to the stories narrated, embodied and enacted (Blaser 2009).

⁹ Modernity is the basis of current understandings of many broad categories, such as progress, justice, etc. However, if interpreted as an ontology, modernity may be seen as diversified, but it is still self-contained and conceals its limits, accepting options only within itself, predetermining which beings can articulate, engage in and conduct politics or express our interpretations of nature. An ontological opening refers to acceptance that there are limits, and alternatives are possible beyond those limits. Even to explore other ontologies, in which, as commented in this paper, there are other non-human political actors which engage in political interactions in a different sense, because they also involve valuing and feelings. These openings make clear that our modern politics, and hence modern conventional ethics, are only one singularity in a multiplicity of possibilities.

share a sense of communalism that extends fluidly and dynamically from humans and beyond to other beings, mountains, lakes or spirits.

This explains that, while deep ecology may be conceived as a normative platform, the Andean-Amazonian ethical perspective is found not only in a deeper level (the ultimate premises level in Naess' terminology), but even *beyond* it, in a 'deep questioning', as Naess himself might have put it, of the very ontology of modernity, and the exploration of alternative ontologies. The various biocentrims in the South express different radical attempts to question modernity, in the process exposing its various limits and exploring viable alternatives beyond it.

It may be relevant to add that none of these alternative ontologies reject modernity as a whole; they certainly do endorse *some* of its concepts (e.g. human rights, citizenship, democracy, etc.), reframing them but also introducing new ones. However, they all share an essential component, which is a value shift from utilitarian anthropocentrism to multiplicity and biocentrism.

Political Biocentrism

Since the very beginning, the Andean-Amazonian biocentrims have been political in every sense. As an example, the approval of Ecuador's new Constitution recognizing nature's rights did not end with the political disputes about the use of natural resources.¹⁰ While biocentric ethics do not cancel those disputes, it is noteworthy that the content and quality of political debates have changed drastically. It becomes possible, for example, to legally claim the preservation of species or places for their own sake without having to obsess over the need to 'translate' inherent values into economic value, so that other people might realize the relevance. We are seeing the first steps of a new order of ecological justice which is grounded in nature's rights.

Particularly since 2010, the different environmental ethics components have been more intensively mixed and linked with statements in politics, economics, etc., in debates that reach the core elements of basic categories such as 'development' or 'justice'. Such ethics have been promoted by several actors— notably, environmentalists and indigenous leaders—who are still today engaged in disputes with other social movements, traditional scholars, political groups, governments, and companies. To illustrate this situation let me refer to some examples.

During recent years, Latin American governments have considerably increased the extraction of natural resources, which are then exported to global markets as commodities. Examples of these extractivist strategies are openpit mining in the Andean region, oil drilling in Amazonia, or the expansion of soybean monoculture in subtropical areas (Gudynas, 2015). The social and environmental impacts of such operations are very intense, ranging from local pollution to the large-scale loss of natural areas. The governments of Ecuador and Bolivia have been trapped in an acute contradiction, because these intensive extractivist strategies are clearly against nature's rights and the perspective of Buen Vivir, and also at odds with the governments' call for a 21st-century socialism. Nevertheless, those administrations decided to follow extractivist strategies and engage in global markets. They deployed a series of policy decisions that would, on the one hand, deprive nature of its rights, while on the other hand re-define nature's rights or Pacha Mama in ways that they would become compatible with developmentalism.

The Ecuadorian government approved oil extraction in a number of key Amazonian areas, which is a blatant contradiction to the biocentric constitutional imperative. To enact it, the government introduced a two-level hierarchy in rights. Human rights are placed first, and nature's rights are secondary, labeled as 'supposed rights', and subordinate to economic growth. In Bolivia, while Buen Vivir remains a true alternative and lasting challenge to all current development paradigms, the government has drafted a new definition, inverting the relationship and stating that a specific variety of development (such as 'integral development', which includes economic growth) is needed to reach Buen Vivir in a distant future. These examples reveal the debates in which environmental ethics face politics and development at large.

¹⁰ The enforcement of nature's rights has been limited in Ecuador; Kauffman and Martin, 2017; see also Gallegos-Anda and Fernández, 2011 for other legal implications.

Furthermore, the Evo Morales administration in Bolivia, which is depicted as rooted in indigenous traditions, introduced a radical environmental discourse based on Mother Earth or Pacha Mama, but its domestic development policies have also involved intensive extraction of oil, minerals, and agricultural resources, with severe environmental impacts. The government's solution to these contradictions has been to rescale the rights of Mother Earth from the local to the planetary and redefine them as 'biospheric'. This permitted the power holders to uphold their strong environmental discourses in the international climate change negotiations (receiving support from many environmental groups in the North), while at the same time allowing extraction within their own country. Such a shift of Mother Earth from local to global would be impossible in the original Andean perspective, because, as we have already seen, the different Pacha Mamas are always local; they have 'addresses'; they are rooted in specific human and more-than-human communities. The idea of a planetary Pacha Mama simply makes no sense to the Andean cosmivision. This case shows that biocentric perspectives are also part of those debates involving the role of indigenous cosmivisions, international trade regimes, global climate change and globalization.

Development strategies of such governments as Ecuador's or Bolivia's are part of the so-called 21st century socialism, a political vision supported by socialist and Marxist scholars. In their view, the predominant problem of our time is capitalism rather than development—which is an important distinction. Capitalism, they argue, results inherently in the dominance of exchange values, as in financialized capitalism. The alternative they propose is to focus more strongly on reducing those *exchange values*, and on strengthening so-called *use values*.¹¹ But from the point of view of Andean-Amazonian biocentrism, this socialist critique is still trapped in an anthropocentric perspective and thereby unable to recognize intrinsic values that may reside inside rivers, mountains, forests, animals, or plants. Southern biocentrists criticize the classical or revised Marxist labor value approach on two grounds: First, they argue that it has serious limitations in its ability to deal with certain environmental ethics, and second, they point out that it is essentially unable to embrace nonwestern, indigenous ontologies. In other words, a Marxist environmental ethics will always be constrained by modernity, while a response to the current crisis needs to move beyond its boundaries. In these debates, southern biocentrists claim that substantive alternatives will need to be both post-capitalist *and* post-socialist.

The final example refers to a very different realm, although, in some sense, it too is political: the new ecologies. Andean-Amazonian biocentrism is very critical of the so-called 'new conservation biology' promoted by large, transnational conservation ngos, arguing that it leaves no place for intrinsic values.¹² More recently, some western-based ecology approaches consider that it is impossible to stop extinction, so the task of conservation should be to decide which species will disappear and which will be preserved; an ecological euthanasia. Furthermore, some 'functional ecologists' argue that the focus should be on ecological processes rather than on species. But this would mean that if there were an ecological redundancy, one or more species could be abandoned to its extinction. Andean-Amazonian biocentrists are engaged in diverse debates with such recent ecological positions. In their views, conservation biology and any other environmental science interested in protecting biodiversity is incomplete if the intrinsic value in Nature is not acknowledged.

The intensity of these debates here in the South is very different from the way similar debates play out in the global North. It is quite common here to have direct debates between an environmentalist defending Mother Earth and a minister on afternoon news programs. In Ecuador, social activists were able to collect over 750,000 signatures to force a referendum to protect an Amazonian locality based

¹¹ The emphasis on alternatives based on exchange / use values is supported in South America by several intellectuals, political actors and important persons in the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia. Furthermore, they follow some scholars that visit South American countries supporting progressivist governments (like David Harvey in Ecuador and Bolivia, e.g. Harvey, 2014), or that are engaged with local political debates (a good example is Michael Lowy, 2011). Some actors in this position openly reject the idea of Nature's rights and the only alternatives are extractivisms in the hands of the State.

¹² The new conservation biology proposals are market-friendly, seek to couple conservation with world trade and global markets, use economic-value based policy tools, etc.; see Kareiva and Marvier, 2012. There is no room for a biocentric position in these new approaches. This is a drastic change compared with the initial steps of conservation biology in the 1980s, as it includes the intrinsic value of Nature as one of its fundamental principles (see Naess, 1986).

on nature's rights.¹³ In Bolivia, thousands supported the most recent indigenous march to protect their lowland forests. Biocentric criticism is so intense and so politically potent that even the president of Ecuador or the vice president of Bolivia are forced to react.¹⁴ This is ethics in flesh and blood.

Germinating New Deep Ecologies

There have been a number of premature statements about the end or exhaustion of the perspective deep ecology offers, particularly in Northern academic realms. We even find traces of such exhaustion here in this special issue of *Worldviews*. Contrary to this perception, the Andean and Amazonian experiences show how other biocentrism could germinate, grow, and be defended against pessimistic critics. They are not direct descendants of Naess' deep ecology, but Andean-Amazonian societies surely express his spirit, his knack for deep questioning, his exploration of the relationship between feelings and wisdom, and his commitment to nature and to specific locales. From the point of view of the Buen Vivir, we can say that Naess' spirit is talking to many of us, in the mountains as much as in the forests.

This is a process still in motion. Some experiments succeed, others fail. We are learning through trial and error, and we adapt our strategies to the political realities in which we find ourselves. I have argued here that the Andean-Amazonian environmental ethic cannot be separated from their deep political engagement. In that sense, they are more complex and have a more extensive range than Western deep ecology which, initially, tried to be a political movement but never quite succeeded in that. Southern forms of biocentrism are the living, breathing struggle of ideas, feelings, and insights held by diverse social movements. It has become one of the major critical forces now rallying against development and modernity, and, not surprisingly, the reactions against it are also more intense. All this leads to the conviction that any alternative to the present social and environmental crisis is not possible without the incorporation of the Andean-Amazonian biocentrism.

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¹³ Beginning with its first term, the Rafael Correa's administration has pursued a plan to keep oil under ground in the biodiversity hotspot, Yasuni, following early proposals by civil society groups, and framed by Nature's rights in the new Constitution. That innovative plan was cancelled in 2013, introducing the idea that Nature's rights are "supposed" rights. As a reaction, a social movement, highly heterogeneous, mainly urban but with indigenous support, and adopting the ideas of Buen Vivir and Nature's rights, challenged that decision calling for a national referendum (collecting over 757,623 signatures). Eventually, the referendum was blocked by the government (see Coryat and Lavinás Picq, 2016 for a review of this case).

¹⁴ In Bolivia, there is a tradition of long indigenous marches that gather crowds from distant locations to the capital. The process started in 1990 with the First Indigenous March for territories and dignity; the most recent one, the Ninth March, took place in 2012, with the main objective of halting the construction of a highway inside the national park and indigenous territory, Isiboro Sécuré (known as tipnis for its Spanish acronyms), in the lowlands, but also in recognition of indigenous identities, its territories and Mother Earth. After two months, the march reached La Paz, ending in a large rally, which successfully forced the government to pass a new law with more strict protection regulations for the tipnis area (see Hope, 2016). Similar national marches took place in Ecuador (the most recent one in 2016) and in Peru (the latest in 2014), all of them aiming to protect the lands, water and Mother Earth.

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