



A graffitied wall in El Alto, Bolivia reading: Evo Defender of Pachamama (Mother Earth). Political statements sprayed on walls are common in this urban landscape.

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Development Alternatives in Bolivia: The Impulse, the Resistance, and the Restoration

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WHEN EVO MORALES'S MOVEMENT TOWARD Socialism (MAS) gained control of Bolivia's government, it unleashed expectations of structural changes on several fronts, from the reform of the state to a new constitution, from new economic regulations to the direct political participation of indigenous and campesino organizations. The notable initial changes and the debates over the rights

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of Mother Earth and *vivir bien*—expanded conceptions and feelings of a good life, both in communitarian and ecological senses—reinforced the idea that substantial alternatives to Western conceptions of development were in the offing.

Many of the analyses have looked at these changes within classical frameworks, as political options clashing with the role of social or indigenous movements. Although each of these positions have some validity, in Bolivia a much broader political and cultural exercise took place that explored what should be understood as “alternatives to development.”

New issues, like *vivir bien* or rights of nature, represent examples of such alternatives, which should be differentiated from “development alternatives.”¹ The

latter are distinct varieties of development within modernity, focused on economic growth, technocratic and dualistic, as society and nature are clearly separated. In contrast, alternatives to development are positions that seek to transcend those basic ideas and go beyond Western modernity.

The resistance to that impulse of change, especially in the areas of the environment and extractivism, resulted in the restoration of classical development ideas, blocking the search for alternatives. The first Morales administration, beginning in January 2006, presented itself as a promoter of a “process of change,” not only dismantling neoliberalism but also building a new state and incorporating indigenous people and peasants into political life. It made substantial changes, such as achieving direct control of oil exploitation, reforming the state, stabilizing macroeconomic indicators, and improving several social indicators, notably a reduction of extreme poverty from 37.1% of the population in 2002 to 22.4% in 2009, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America.² Indigenous people and campesinos entered the government, and a new constitution was drawn up that succeeded in overcoming internal opposition. The government also headed off attempts at political destabilization and maintained economic stability. These transformations, compared with the status quo of previous governments with a neoliberal orientation, were dramatic.³

In this context, widespread discussions and academic reviews addressed questions like plurinationality, decolonization, and the rights of nature in the framework of conceptions of Pachamama (Mother Earth). At the same time, these and other components expressed a substantive critique of conventional development ideas and a search for alternatives that were presented under the heading of *vivir bien*. This is a complex conceptual field that includes different perspectives that simultaneously present a radical critique of current development approaches and endorse alternatives based on the rights of nature, expanded conceptions of the community, rejection of the linearity of history, and so on. It is a plural field, in which key components are derived from indigenous cosmovisions (particularly Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní in the Bolivian case) but that also incorporates Western critiques of modernity.⁴ In a short, perhaps schematic description, *vivir bien* seeks alternatives to development that are beyond modernity. In the Bolivian case, the frontiers of rupture tilted against at least four key questions: gender, nature’s rights, plurinationality, and indigenous cosmovisions.

The MAS administration—with its base in distinct

social movements and its outstanding activists and intellectuals—promoted this impulse toward alternatives to development. Morales himself pointed in this direction, for example, with speeches calling for “respect for Mother Earth” (September 2007), his “10 commandments to save the planet, starting with a call to end capitalism” (October 2008), and his interventions in the summits on climate change. Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca also argued for drastic actions when confronting climate change and defended the idea of *vivir bien* based on Andean cosmovisions as an alternative to the Western conceptions of development. Vice President Álvaro García Linera defends the government by offering detailed critiques of capitalism from a Marxist perspective.

These positions, and especially the environmental ones focused on climate change, generated widespread support. For example, personalities as diverse as Naomi Klein, Antonio Negri, and Ernesto Laclau congratulated Morales. Many went a step further, arguing that the Bolivian process represented a cultural decolonization. Walter Mignolo, for example, argued that Morales’s election, in fact, did not represent a political left turn so much as a “decolonial turn.”⁵ The Bolivian process, he argued, was under an indigenous leadership that no longer needed Marx or Lenin as inspiration for its liberation.

THE INITIAL IMPULSE TOWARD THE ALTERNATIVES to development began to confront resistance, especially in Morales’s second term, which began in 2010. The most evident resistance originated among social and political actors in the opposition who continued to defend neoliberal positions. These are not analyzed in detail here, but it suffices to note that they were relegated to a political minority. On the other hand, resistance that originated from left and progressive groups, both inside and outside the government, escalated in intensity and came to dominate the scene as they pointed out the contradictions between the declarations of change and the definite actions of the Morales administration.

In effect, the government deepened so-called extractivism—the extraction of resources such as minerals, gas, oil, and, increasingly, new resources like iron and lithium, as well as agricultural monocultures like soy, all of them destined for export. In 2012, Bolivia reached a new export record of over \$11 billion, about 90% of which was accounted for by oil and gas, minerals, and soy.

Similar trends have been observed in other countries

in the region with left-wing governments and have been referred to as the “new progressive extractivism.”⁶ The goal of augmenting exports is maintained to assure economic growth, though as opposed to previous conservative or neoliberal governments, the state has a greater role (for example, increasing royalties and taxes or acting through state companies). After the Morales administration, the proportion of natural-resources in total exports grew from almost 90% in 2006 to more than 92% in 2010, according to the databases of the Economic Commission for Latin America.

Another key characteristic of this neo-extractivism is a discursive defense of the massive extraction of natural-resources as necessary—directly or indirectly—to finance social-welfare programs, most of which are the so-called cash transfers to the poorest sectors and those at risk. This link is very clear in Bolivia, considering the high percentage of the population that receives some form of financial assistance (17% in 2010).⁷

The consequences of extractivism include serious territorial, environmental, and social impacts that conflict with the rights of Mother Earth. At the same time, future extractive projects have been announced with even greater risks. The government position was to minimize or deny these problems. García Linera has repeatedly maintained that he would not be a “forest ranger” (*guardabosques*) to protect these resources for the North and that they ought to be used. In this way, the idea of nature’s rights, a central element of the initial impulse to find alternatives to development, remained wrapped in contradictions. The possibilities of overcoming this resistance were limited once the new constitution of 2009 neglected to approve the rights of nature as such, but instead included environmental issues among the so-called cultural and economic rights. There also appeared contradictions around the 2006–11 national plan of development, called “Bolivia Dignified, Sovereign, Productive and Democratic to Vivir Bien.”

At the international level, and especially in the negotiations over climate change, the national plan claimed to assure the rights of Mother Earth, but the original idea shifted significantly over time. It was understood that these rights should extend to a planetary scale, focused on the biosphere, but not necessarily on the local level, so it didn’t generate any substantive changes within Bolivia. This disassociation was seen clearly in the summit on climate change convoked by the Morales government in Tiquipaya in 2010. While individual governmental authorities criticized (correctly) the industrialized countries and defended the importance of

Pachamama within “vivir bien,” the Morales administration refused to discuss the environmental situation within the country.

The tensions and contradictions did not stop growing, and social protests began to burst onto the scene. The sharpest protest exploded in 2011 in opposition to the government’s plans to build a highway through the Isoboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS). Indigenous groups of the region organized a national march to the city of La Paz in 2011 and 2012, with broad popular backing but under government harassment. Marches of this kind have a strong symbolic effect in Bolivia for their past role in confronting neoliberal governments. At the same time, other contradictions surfaced, like women’s rights and agrarian reform. The so-called Unity Pact, in which social movements and organizations supported the MAS government, fell apart, in part as a consequence of these disputes.

These and other examples show that even though the government repeatedly stated the benefits of *vivir bien* and also criticized capitalism, many of its measures ended up perpetuating the old condition of Bolivia as a global supplier of raw materials. The Morales administration decidedly supports this extractivism. For example, in the 2012 budget, of all state investment, 23.4% is destined for hydrocarbons and mining, while education is assigned 6.9%, and health 2.6%.⁸ Without a doubt, other aspects of governmental administration have been innovative, and plans for reducing poverty have been successful. But the pursuit of extractivism implies loosening environmental rules, conditioning popular consultation and participation, and even attacking certain civic organizations. The defense of Pachamama can be applied under these conditions only with great difficulty, and the broad field of social justice is reduced to economic redistribution.

WITH THE HALTING OF *VIVIR BIEN* IN ITS original versions and the reversal of the break with conventional development, it was necessary to present new concepts and definitions to fit the present context. Although this is an ongoing process, at least two recent, closely related events should be pointed out. The first is the publication in 2012 of García Linera’s book *Geopolítica de la Amazonia*.⁹ The vice president recognizes that Bolivia’s mode of production and its dependency on exports of raw materials have not fundamentally changed, but he justifies this for several reasons, including the limited room for maneuver of a “small country” like Bolivia. Although he offers many critiques of capitalism, García Linera’s

ideal of “development” is that of a society of industry and knowledge that can be achieved only through extractivism. With this, he distances himself from the concepts of *vivir bien* and from his older ideas, such as “communitarian socialism.” The critiques of the development strategies followed by the Bolivian government, in García Linera’s judgment, only represent attempts at a “conservative restoration,” and from that perspective he launches a sharp critique of citizen organizations, especially indigenous ones.

Beyond the agreements or disagreements with his diagnosis, several elements should be highlighted. He discusses distinct “types” of development, which, if critical of capitalism, leave us with no options when confronting extractivism in particular and results in no alternatives to the central ideas of development in general. Thus, in García Linera’s analysis, there are no alternatives to development, and we have the possibility of only a few alternatives regarding its organization and management.

The second case is found in the final discussion of a framing law for the rights of nature and *vivir bien*. A number of organizations and social movements promoted a law of this type in the hope of imposing conditions on the development strategies of the government, in other words, returning to the channeling of the strategies toward *vivir bien*.

Finally, in October 2012, a framing law was approved that addressed Mother Earth and comprehensive development for *vivir bien*. Several positive elements are found in the law, like indications for environmental management, the restoration of degraded environments, and a framework for territorial arrangement. However, the law looks more like a declaration of principles than a precise legal instrument, so that the possibilities of concrete applications are limited. For example, the law calls for living in “complementarity, in harmony, and in equilibrium with Mother Earth,” an aspiration that we all share, but it doesn’t spell out how to get there.

Furthermore, the new law includes other components of enormous impact: It restores the idea of development, legitimating it in a political norm and placing it as a necessary element for *vivir bien*. In other words, among the varieties of development, the law selects one, “integral development,” and then places it as a necessary measure for achieving the *vivir bien* of the future. This turnaround should not be understated, because it minimizes *vivir bien* and robs it of its vocation as a radical break with development and the transcendence of modernity. Not only this, but now a certain type of

development is necessary to achieve *vivir bien*.

This restoration of the idea of development closes a chapter in the Bolivian process. Now it is possible to promote extractivism and defend it as a necessary form of integral development without falling into contradictions.

ONE OF THE MOST ORIGINAL ASPECTS OF BOLIVIA’S process of change can be found in the early debates and proposals inspired by *vivir bien*. In its initial impulse, it was a field of discussion and construction that contained, on the one hand, a radical critique of the conceptual bases of modern development, and on the other hand, the exploration of alternatives, with the key support of indigenous sensibilities and values. Within this framework, results were achieved in areas such as the nationalization of natural-resources, the creation of a plurinational state, discussion of cultural decolonization, and the rights of nature.

Nevertheless, while seeming to advance toward alternatives to development in some moments, in others Bolivia fell into an extractivism belonging to conventional development. These brakes on the search for alternatives not only originated within key actors of the governmental team but also received support from some social movements. For this reason, the usual analyses, like those that point to two camps within the government (one more indigenist, represented especially by Choquehuanca, the other pro-Western and technocratic, led by García Linera), are simplifications. The extractivist positions, especially in mining, have the support of diverse social groups, as much urban as campesino, and some indigenous actors. Factors like these, associated with an international moment of high commodity prices and demand, along with available foreign investment, ends in the proliferation of extractivist endeavors, and a halted process of change. The promotion of alternatives to development remained in the hands of groups and actors who, for the most part, were no longer in the government.

The restoration of the idea of development, which occurred in 2012, generated a new context. Present-day government attempts are focused on how to manage development, the role of the state, or the distribution of the surplus. Radical components of the concept of *vivir bien* are lost when legitimating the idea of “integral development.”

For many, this new redefinition is welcome, and they believe the MAS government represents the best alternative possible. This is understandable for those thousands of Bolivians who have bettered their living

conditions. From this point of view, the demand for *vivir bien* appears to be a question of folklore typical of indigenous peoples, an invention of New Age intellectuals, or even a weapon of political destabilization. But for others, the legitimation of “integral development” is a movement toward a variety of benevolent capitalism, and they feel let down by the MAS and its allies.

In this restoration of development, the support of certain intellectuals, especially García Linera, cannot be minimized. His harsh criticisms, and even the rhetoric with which these are presented (with quotes from Marx and Lenin), offer a radical anti-capitalist stance that many people like. He criticizes capitalism but ends up legitimating a benevolent version of it in which extractivism is used as a buffer against its most negative effects. His book on the Amazon begins with a quote from Lenin about revolutions that generate counterrevolutions each time stronger, more united, and more effective, but this invocation is used to characterize as counterrevolutionary the indigenous peoples of tropical areas who defend in their own way the rights of nature.

So it is not that we are confronting a lack of interest in discussing alternatives to development, but that the question is no longer accepted. The debate over measures to assure economic growth is tolerated, along with discussions over how the state can redistribute the surplus, but one cannot criticize the governmental development strategies under way. The original idea of *vivir bien* no longer fits in the debate, as its horizon of change is simultaneously post-capitalist and post-socialist. As if that were not enough, indigenous peoples now have to accept this type of modernizing development.

These particularities make the positions in the Bolivian debates difficult to capture, especially from other cultural contexts. It’s as if we are witnessing disputes on different planes; some are over different varieties of development, and some question all positions

equally, attempting to transcend them.

In this first realm, it should be clear that, on the one hand, there have been substantial changes in Bolivia, many of which have been quite positive, but we are not dealing with a socialist alternative, neither in its classical versions or in its new Latin American of multicultural versions. The MAS administration does not represent a return to neoliberal policies, and some recent arguments to this effect are exaggerated. Nonetheless, in its deeds it has abandoned the construction of *vivir bien*.

The discussion in the second realm is substantially distinct, insofar as it attacks the basic ideas of development, as much in its capitalist as its socialist expression, and the alternative is to transcend it, especially within an intercultural context. This horizon of change is difficult to grasp for analysts like Negri or Laclau since it implies certain ruptures with the modernity in which they are inserted.

Without doubt, these two discussion levels are linked to one another, particularly where they coincide in their denunciations of capitalism. But *vivir bien* teaches that not all the denunciations of capitalism are sufficient to construct an alternative to development, that many other components are necessary. Among them, the dissolution of the duality between society and nature, the recognition of intrinsic value in the non humans, or the rejection of the myth of progress are essential components of *vivir bien*, but are also outside the programs of “modernity.”

The present restoration of the idea of development does not mean that the Bolivian experiences have failed. Everything considered, the national terms of debate have been modified, and the impulse for alternatives to development has not been extinguished, as it remains present in many social movements. Bolivia continues to exhibit energy and originality in its mobilizations and political debates that can’t be found anywhere else. ■

1. For the distinction between the two, see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1995).

2. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), *Panorama social de América Latina 2012* (Santiago, Chile: CEPAL, 2013), 86.

3. Karin Monasterios, Pablo Stefanoni, and Hervé do Alto, eds., *Reinventando la nación en Bolivia. Movimientos sociales, Estado y poscolonialidad* (La Paz: CLACSO y Plural, 2007); John Crabtree, George Gray Molina, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Tensiones irresueltas. Bolivia, pasado y presente* (La Paz: PNUD y Plural, 2009); Jeffery R. Webber, *From*

Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia: Class Struggle, Indigenous Liberation and the Politics of Evo Morales (Haymarket Books, 2011).

4. For a review of current positions, see Eduardo Gudynas, “Buen Vivir: Today’s Tomorrow,” *Development* 54, no. 4 (2011): 441–47.

5. Walter D. Mignolo, “Evo Morales en Bolivia: ¿giro a la izquierda o giro decolonial?,” in *Democracias en desconfianza. Ensayos en sociedad civil y política en América Latina*, ed. Joachim Becker and José da Cruz (Montevideo: Coscoroba, 2006), 93–106.

6. Eduardo Gudynas, “Diez tesis urgentes sobre el nuevo extractivismo. Contextos y demandas

bajo el progresismo sudamericano actual,” in *Extractivismo, política y sociedad* (Quito: CAAP and CLAES, 2009), 187–225.

7. The figure of 17% is given in Simone Cecchini and Aldo Madariaga, *Programas de transferencias condicionadas* (Santiago, Chile: CEPAL and Asdi, 2011), 108.

8. Marco Gandarillas, “La orientación extractivista de la inversión pública,” *PetroPress* 28 (2012): 4–6.

9. Álvaro García Linera, *Geopolítica de la Amazonía. Poder hacendal-patrimonial y acumulación capitalista* (La Paz: Vicepresidencia del Estado, 2012).