



Value, Growth, Development: South American Lessons for a New Ecopolitics

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ABSTRACT

Current debates on politics and ecology in South America offer a number of lessons on the controversy concerning ecosocialism and degrowth. Some recent experiments on the South American left show a strong emphasis on socialism while deploying conventional developmentalism including decisive social and environmental impacts. In this dispute the different conceptions of value are very clear. Original perspectives on *Buen Vivir* as a radical critique of development point to alternatives that are at the same time post-capitalist and post-socialist, alternatives in which the recognition of the intrinsic value of the non-human is a core component.

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In the face of the current social and environmental crisis, there are recurrent calls for alternatives of socialist inspiration. Among these is the ecological Marxism of Foster (2015) which, through the analysis of the “metabolic rift,” proposes a steady-state economy. In turn, Giorgos Kallis (this issue) warns that socialism does not necessarily imply a steady-state economy and that therefore a “genuine” socialism should orient itself toward degrowth. Observing these debates from the South, in my case from South America, I see the relevance of some comparisons arise immediately, because the recent experiments on the South American left offer many lessons as to the central elements of this controversy. Here I examine only a few of them, related to forms of valuation and conceptions of development.

Values and Natures

The interpretations of Marxian value theory and its relevance to political ecologies are hotly debated, despite Foster’s (2016) and Burkett’s (2014) contributions to the matter. This is clear in South America in light of recent debates on environment and development.

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Most Marxist traditions claim that only humans are subjects of value and that only humans themselves assign value. It is human labor on nature generates value, and the environment constitutes a large set of objects or processes devoid of intrinsic value. This position is in turn associated with different types of dualisms between humans and the environment. In some cases, where Nature is considered external to society (Castree 2000), this is very clear. In other cases, although the social production of nature is defended (David Harvey or Neil Smith; see Castree 2000), the duality between humans and non-humans persists beyond what is articulated by capital.

Following different routes, these positions end up with some version of assignment of values dependent on human interests, focused on use values and exchange values. Capitalism takes this to an extreme in its commodification of Nature and in the hypertrophy of a financialized economy, but the shadow of utilitarianism also reaches versions of socialism that focus on use value.

In contrast, in South America there are other positions that have become very important. The defense of a plurality of valuations concerning what Western knowledge defines as environment, and which includes aesthetic, cultural, religious, historical and ecological values, is very prominent. While these values are granted by humans, they are not necessarily linked to human utility, benefit or needs. At the same time, some recognize values that pertain specifically to the non-human, intrinsic values that are independent of the presence of humans (Gudynas 2014). This range of valuations breaks both with utilitarian perspectives and with any attempt to seek a substantive commensurability by means of exchange values or use values.

At the same time, what is usually understood as “society” or “nature” in analyses framed within modernity is different from the way some South American actors would understand these categories. In some cases the social world is ecologized, and in others Nature is social. Overlaps are broad and complex. There are positions in which what is understood by “community” includes humans but also other, non-human beings that can be animals, plants, mountains or even spirits. In turn, following Wallerstein (1995) and the perspective of “coloniality” (e.g. Quijano 2007), I understand modernity as a global process cogenerated simultaneously in Europe (and the “North”) and in the “South.”

In the South American case these ideas about Nature always have a local or regional accent, with clear references to land, with its landscapes, plants and animals (see e.g. the contributions in Montenegro 2011). This linkage with a living ecology is rare in ecosocialism since its debates end in high levels of abstraction and in planetary scales, with a clear predilection for subjects like climate change (several articles by Foster are an example).

The references to locally grounded complex human–non-human assemblages are not folkloric expressions or anthropological rarities. They are

defended by diverse social actors that question capitalist development and that have important power to mobilize social movements. Such positions reached their greatest political effect in the mid-2000s, ensuring the recognition of the “rights of Nature” in Ecuador’s Constitution (approved in 2008) and resulting in similar attempts in Bolivia. In these political dynamics social actors strongly questioned the primacy of exchange values and the utilitarianism of capitalism, as well as perpetual growth as a goal. Here there are several convergences with critiques like those of Foster’s, James O’Connor’s, Elmar Altvater’s or David Harvey’s, to name a few. Yet, there are also substantial differences, since the starting point of those social actors is a diversity of human valuations and the recognition of values intrinsic to Nature, as well as the incommensurability among different valuations and among conceptions of society or community, or environment and Nature.

The South American 21st Century Socialisms

These new approaches to environmental issues were present in the important political changes known as the “left turn” since the early 2000s. As a result of diverse political struggles and citizen movements, governments were installed that rejected market reductionisms and strongly criticized neoliberal capitalism (Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Uruguay), and in some cases there was also a strong environmental component to these developments (in Bolivia and Ecuador, as indicated above).

Beyond their diversity, these governments identified as “socialists of the twenty-first century,” “national popular,” “communitarian socialism” or “protosocialists.” It could be assumed that these varieties of socialism would attempt other types of development, delinking from the goal of growth and lessening its environmental impacts or conflicts with the impacted communities, especially peasants or indigenous people. Or that at least the invocations of socialism would allow these governments to move in the direction of Foster’s (2015) “ecodemocratic revolution.”

However, that has not happened. Over time, these governments abandoned their original left-wing programs and became what is now known as *progressismos* (“progressivisms”; see, for example, the essays in *Entre Pueblos* 2016). This position, among other things, defends development based on economic growth, without considering social, territorial and environmental impacts. It seeks to ensure the increase of both consumption and aggregate economic indicators (such as GDP). For instance, Bolivia’s “new economic, social, communitarian and productive model” affirms that the State must promote economic growth in order to initiate a transition to a socialist mode of production (MEFP 2011). As for South American progressivism Kallis’s (this issue) warning is correct, since these new socialisms do not ensure a steady-state economy, nor do they necessarily reduce the transformation of Nature.

They actively have sought economic growth and fed it through expansive extractivism (mining and oil exploitation, and monoculture) which multiplied its socio-environmental impacts (Gudynas 2015). They took advantage of external conditions (high prices and demand for commodities) and domestic conditions (macroeconomic stability, expansion of consumption, etc.), although this reinforced the subordinate role of the continent as a global supplier of natural resources.

For the purposes of this commentary, it is important to note of at least three features of this recent situation. The first is that, in countries like Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, this extractivist developmentalism was justified under different versions of heterodox economics that rejected some components of neoclassical theory and used arguments typical of socialism in general and Marxism in particular. Yet, they all defended economic growth, attracting investment and increasing exports. Their pursuit of growth implied focusing on both use values and exchange values, and therefore violated the rights of Nature. Development means growth and the environment is conceived as a basket of resources to fuel that growth.

Second, in all progressive governments, extractivism was justified as indispensable to obtaining money for poverty reduction programs. This was presented as a goal for the majority, and therefore environmental and social impacts were to be tolerated as affecting only local communities, that is, minorities. This generated strange debates, with calls for social justice, often within a socialist discourse, but which at the same time rejected environmental and ecological justice goals as well as minority rights.¹ For example, in order to justify the opening of oil exploitation in the Yasuní region, Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, maintained that the rights of Nature in his own constitution were "supposed rights." On the other hand, although space constrains do not allow discussing the subject in detail, there are now independent studies showing that extractivism did not necessarily contribute to poverty reduction.²

Third, these heterodox South American models, including 21st-century socialism, are distinct from neoliberal-inspired strategies, but end up defending development anyway. Administrations as well as many intellectuals argue that the problem is not development but capitalism, and therefore a "better," more benevolent, socialist type of development can be achieved. Yet, this goal has ended up strengthening the central components of the idea of "development," including growth and utilitarianism.

¹Environmental justice is centered on human beings, including, for example, the impacts of pollution on quality of life or health. Ecological justice is based on the rights of Nature and is therefore focused on non-human living species and the physical support that allows for their survival, regardless of the possible involvement of humans. These two fields of justice are complementary (Gudynas 2014).

²There are a number of factors and fiscal instruments linked to extractivism with diverse results, and furthermore, a more detailed examination of government expenditures shows significant perverse subsidies to extractivist projects (e.g. Gandarillas González 2016; NRG 2016; Jubileo 2017).

All these show that in these concrete South American cases we are faced with the self-limitation of looking for alternatives within development, or, in other words, we are constrained by conceptions proper to modernity. Foster's ecological Marxism, with its call for equitable and sustainable development, is an example of this, as it criticizes capitalism but seeks to build another type of development, again within the boundaries of modernity.

It can be debated whether these progressive South American governments were truly loyal to socialism, in a manner similar to discussions around "real socialism." I also acknowledge that in his texts Foster makes very clear his rejection of the obsession with growth and points to a steady-state economy. But this does not change the fact that very broad sectors in South America, inspired by different versions of socialism and Marxism, defend growth, development, and some very limited forms of valuation.

Beyond the Idea of Development

In light of this obsession with development and growth, there are several positions of South American social and political activists in defense of nature and social justice that demand a rupture with the concept of development in all its expressions. Among them, in the South American case, the concept of *Buen Vivir* stands out.

This is a difficult term to translate into English, since its meanings are very different from those of "welfare" or "wellbeing." In its original formulations, launched from Bolivia and Ecuador, *Buen Vivir* is a non-essentialist position, which not only rejects growth as an end in itself, but also disregards the idea of development in any of its expressions. It does not seek to join the linearity of a Western history. It accepts the plurality of valuations and recognizes the values intrinsic in Nature. Therefore, its perspectives on values are very different from those of modernity. In *Buen Vivir* the duality between society and environment dissolves in a multitude of different relations. It is also an intercultural position resulting from an articulation between some components of indigenous knowledge and ideas critical of modernity. This category achieved constitutional status in Bolivia, and particularly in Ecuador, and is supported today by various social movements (see e.g. Acosta 2012).

It is clear that the perspective of *Buen Vivir* would have forced progressive administrations to initiate transitions away from contemporary development—reducing extractivism, for example. However, as explained above, these governments chose to deepen their developmentalist strategies based on massive appropriation of natural resources. Although they were not conservative or neoliberal administrations, their adherence to this basic nucleus resulted in alternative ways of pursuing growth and organizing surplus distribution, generating all kinds of contradictions and conflicts in the field of social, environmental and ecological justice.

Such an obsession with growth and developmentalism with high social and environmental impacts generated all kinds of criticism from the perspective of *Buen Vivir*. Faced with these criticisms, progressive governments, along with political activists and several academics (from both the South and the North), launched a theoretical offensive to redefine *Buen Vivir* as a variety of socialism, to make it functional to development and growth. In other words, for some of these 21st-century socialisms adherence to growth and development was so powerful that multiple valuations of the environment and the rights of Nature became unacceptable. For instance, this led Correa to ask where in the *Communist Manifesto* or in socialism mining is rejected, in order to defend extractivism against the environmentalists (Cabienes 2012). Similarly, Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera repeatedly defended mining and oil extraction in indigenous and peasant lands and in areas of high biodiversity, invoking Marx and Lenin. The most recent instance was his defense of foreign investment and extractivism while invoking the ideas of Marx's "universal brotherhood" and Lenin's conception of technology (ANF 2016). Thus arise positions such as the "biosocialism" of *Buen Vivir* (Ecuador) or "integral development" for *Vivir Bien* (Bolivia) (examples are Ramirez 2010; LeQuang 2013).

In this way, progressive governments and their support bases chose to align themselves with pro-growth developmentalism. Many intellectuals supported this stance and generated theoretical arguments to explain it. Only a few political actors are reconsidering these positions. For instance, faced with the problem of the social and environmental impacts of mining in Argentina, the (Trotskyist) Socialist Workers Party (PTS) began to abandon the old stance that the only solution was workers' control over extraction and to recognize that the alternative is to abandon extractivism.

One might argue that all these problems are restricted to political practices and do not reflect the theoretical proposals of ecosocialism. If we take as an example the contributions of James O'Connor or Michael Lowy, arguably the most influential authors in Latin America, it becomes clear that they understand ecosocialism to be above all a subordination of exchange value to use value, and a reorganization of production according to human needs and the protection of nature (e.g. Lowy 2011). Yet, their theory of value does not break with utilitarianism or anthropocentrism. They undoubtedly criticize the excesses of developmentalism, but their questioning is mainly against capitalism, and from there they open the doors to visualizing alternative forms of development (exemplifying another theoretical weakness, since "development" and "capitalism" are not exactly the same). My point is that it is precisely these weaknesses in the theory that allow for the subsequent drift toward the political practices of developmentalism.

These debates reach enormous intensity in several countries, involving many actors, and can generate such powerful pressures that criticisms must

be answered directly by the presidents or vice presidents themselves. The defense of *Buen Vivir* is undoubtedly in the spirit of the left, since it is informed by social, environmental and ecological justice considerations. Moreover, many of its components are quite similar to Foster's questioning of capitalist development. Despite this, progressive governments qualify it as an "infantile left" (in a clear allusion to Lenin) or a "diet left" (in the words of the vice president of Bolivia). However, in countries under conservative governments, such as Colombia or Peru, these same environmental positions are denounced as "radical left" or "communist." This is because *Buen Vivir*, in its original sense, is a new expression, and while it was inspired by the Western left, it aims to break with the limits of modernity. It is therefore a post-capitalist and post-socialist alternative.

Alternatives Departing From the Left

This brief and cursory review of some South American processes shows that attempts to generate a socialism of the 21st century, which in its beginning had strong environmental components, have not been able to break away from growth, development and utilitarian valuations. Debates about what values are and how they are assigned run through all these issues.

Advocates of progressivism, including theorists of 21st-century socialism, believe that a variety of non-capitalist, just development can be realized. They are close, in this sense, to the proposals of Foster (2015) of a development that is "equitable," "human" and "sustainable." Yet, in theory as well as in practice, this adherence to development makes them fall back into a growth-aligned, and therefore anti-environmental, developmentalism. In practice it is impossible for development of any kind to be both equitable and sustainable, human and ecological, all at the same time. *Buen Vivir* criticizes precisely this position, and for this reason, it is closer to degrowth than to ecosocialism. But that convergence is also in part due to the fact that today degrowth is a more diffuse set of proposals than ecosocialism (see Demaria et al. 2013).

However, from a South American reading focused on the issues discussed in this text, it must be recognized that degrowth also suffers from a lack of theory of value, and it does not take into account such central issues as the society–nature dualism or interculturality. In this aspect it departs substantially from *Buen Vivir* in its original meaning.

Three different approaches to degrowth illustrate these problems. First, with a strong academic emphasis, a recent review by Demaria et al. (2013) understands that degrowth is a "social movement" that integrates various critiques of the myth of growth, and yet, it does not include any discussion about values or alternative ethics (even though the review is published in *Environmental Values*). For example, even though justice is one of the concerns of degrowth, changes in valuations that may promote it are not analyzed.

Second, from another perspective, with a more direct relationship with grass-roots civic organizations, the Spanish political scientist Taibo (2014) defends economic downsizing. But when it comes to values, what he actually defends is a moral change (invoking sobriety, simplicity and the like). For instance, he mentions *Buen Vivir*, but there is also no analysis of values, and he only discusses it in relation to the idea of the common good. Finally, in case of the well-known Latouche (2007), it is very clear that degrowth is above all a radical critique of unlimited growth, yet, as in other currents, there is no theory of value here. In the eight “R” he proposes as an alternative—such as “reuse,” “redistribute,” etc.—“revaluing” comes close to considering valuations. Latouche acknowledges the plurality of worldviews on society and nature, and even mentions the rights of Nature, but he immediately rejects what he calls “animistic sacralization.” Again, the emphasis is still placed above all on promoting alternative morals (based, for example, on truth, altruism, justice, etc.).

In degrowth a discussion about alternative morals prevails. The perspective of *Buen Vivir* is very different, since one of its starting points is a conception of value that displaces the centrality of humans; it positions itself before morals. The recognition of plural valuations, including intrinsic values in non-humans, is an openness to other sensitivities and practices that generate different moral mandates, public policies, understandings of justice, etc. Therefore, *Buen Vivir* is not against degrowth, but—on this account—the latter would be a consequence of the former, which is especially applicable to some social actors and economic sectors.

The South American experience shows that ways out of the current crises cannot come from the political right. They must emerge from the left, given its commitments to justice. However, the positions of the traditional left are insufficient, since alternatives to development cannot only focus on dismantling the primacy of exchange value in order to strengthen use value, as eco-socialism postulates. This generates all kinds of limitations that render the permanence of growth possible.

Incorporating social and environmental justice requires changing valuation perspectives, breaking with the myth of a “good” development, and at the same time modifying our understandings of society and Nature. Precisely for all these reasons, a left of the 21st century must also break with Western modernity.

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