

## Conference proceedings

# Pachakuti: Indigenous Perspectives and Degrowth

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## Abstract

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In addition to the considerable literature on degrowth coming from Europe and on steady state economics from North America, the indigenous peoples of Latin America are moving forward with similar analysis and proposals for a post-industrial or post-development world from their own unique perspective – even including it as objectives in the new Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, and, in the case of Bolivia, are beginning to incorporate them into National Development Plans.

Discussions about “living well, but not better”, *suma qamaña* in Aymara and *sumak kawsay* in Ecuadorian Quechua, took place at the May 2008 *Enlazando Alternativas* conference in Lima and at an international seminar in November 2009 in La Paz and a number of academics and civil society groups are taking it up. The potential for synthesis and learning between northern “voluntary simplicity” approaches and indigenous approaches would seem to be ripe for dialogue and eventual global campaigns which respect global differences, while recognizing and building on common understandings and causes.

This paper summarizes a number of these discussions and writings, and presents an annotated bibliography of materials available online at:

[http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/Decroissance\\_Index.html](http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/Decroissance_Index.html)

The author argues that a synthesis of indigenous and western paradigms is necessary and presents the key elements of the Andean (Quechua and Aymara) paradigm of “living well but not better” as a contribution to this dialogue.

# 1 Introduction

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To the extent that the nascent international degrowth movement wishes to exert some political influence on solutions to the current world financial and climate crises, it should seek ways to synthesize the western degrowth discourse with a growing Latin American indigenous discourse that is making exciting progress, albeit in fits and starts, toward an international charter for the protection of the planet, Mother Earth, and all forms of life on it.

Put less academically, we have to talk to, learn from and support the indigenous movements which have inserted degrowth like concepts into the formal constitutions of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian states and have convened a “Peoples World Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth’s Rights” to be held in Cochabamba, Bolivia from April 19-22, 2010.

To enter this dialogue with respect, we need an introduction to this movement, which some call the “Pachakuti”, a term taken from the Quechua “pacha”, meaning time and space or the world, and “kuti”, meaning upheaval or revolution. Put together, Pachakuti can be interpreted to symbolize a re-balancing of the world through a tumultuous turn of events that could be a catastrophe or a renovation.<sup>1</sup> The main form that this indigenous perspective seems to be taking is the presentation of a “model” called “Live well, but not better”, Vivir Bien in Spanish, Sumak Kawsay in Quechua or Suma Qamaña in Aymara.

The following necessarily sketchy overview of indigenous perspectives on degrowth is my modest contribution to this dialogue.

Pre-colonial indigenous societies were in part organized with relationships of reciprocity and complementarity, and a respect for plurality, coexistence and equality. To be sure, there were and still are elements of inter and intra ethnic conflict, conquest and differences over tactics, and it would be dangerous to romanticize the “noble savage” and some forms of indigenous fundamentalism<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, indigenous societies offer us much to learn from, as they contain elements central to the degrowth movement's call for a new economic, cultural, environmental and political paradigm.

Following a distinct historical path from “modern” anti-capitalist struggles, indigenous anti-colonial rebellions and victories managed to achieve certain degrees of legal, land tenure and cultural rights and autonomy in the face of exceptionally brutal colonial conquest and latterly capitalist exploitation.

The “Black Jacobins” of Haiti took inspiration from the philosophical values of the Enlightenment to defeat Napoleon, and were subsequently betrayed by western colonial powers which hypocritically ignored those values. Andean and other amerindian indigenous peoples have navigated a complex historic path as both subjects and objects, a path in which both negotiations and armed rebellion have played a role.<sup>3</sup> Their still incomplete and inadequate victories have nevertheless preserved a historical “memory” which could nourish the struggles for a new equilibrium in Bolivia and elsewhere today.<sup>4</sup>

Racist western ideas, including those of parts of the “traditional” left, have portrayed indigenous cultures and sophisticated cyclical appreciations of time, as “turning back the clock” or even barbaric. Yet the time has come when humanity and the planet, to survive, clearly must return to a balance based on current

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<sup>1</sup> See Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's excellent article “Pachakuti: The historical horizons of internal colonialism”, which NACLA published as “[Aymara Past, Aymara Future](#)” in December 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See Francois Houtart, “For a general well being of humanity”, [ALAI March 2010](#) for a discussion of “Living Well” or “Buen Vivir” or “Sumaq Kamaña”

<sup>3</sup> For those of you who remember the movie “The Mission”, the escape of the Guarani children into the Iguazu jungle with their violin is an apt metaphor.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Smith in the same December 1991 NACLA issue, cites Mayan resistance as the root of this historical “memory”.

solar energy flows, now that millions of years of accumulated solar energy stocks in the form of fossil fuels are nearing depletion.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous culture and knowledge of and respect for those flows and cycles will be crucial to our survival. This does not mean a return to the cave as some have argued. Democratically negotiated syntheses with elements of western knowledge and science can complement indigenous knowledge in new pluralist paradigms which stop destructive western overconsumption and accumulation while redistributing sustainable “income” to the heretofore exploited global south.

The western discourses on degrowth, steady-state economics, deep ecology, eco-socialism, climate change and others, based on an analysis of energy, entropy and economics, and to a lesser degree on their social and cultural manifestations, has generated a large volume of scientific work on historical energy flows in the development of modern capitalism and globalization which is crucial to understanding the old paradigm. Appendix B to this paper provides a sample of work which clearly shows that the past several hundred years of homo industrialis, but a blip in our 200,000 year sojourn on the planet, has brought us to the brink of an environmental precipice.

However, convincing northern consumers of the need for a new paradigm and new lifestyles, given the impossibility of endless growth on a limited planet, will not be an easy task.<sup>6</sup> A synthesis, of elements of sometimes overly holistic indigenous wisdom and of excessively compartmentalized western science, seems to me the a fruitful combination to provide guidance for a way out of the current crises which threaten the planet, our Mother Earth.

Appendix A provides a sample of references to indigenous perspectives on degrowth. Below are a few examples of these contributions.

Xavier Albó, Catalan-Bolivian Jesuit and founder of CIPCA, a peasant research and education centre, looks at the Aymara roots of Good Living (Suma Qamaña) in order to help us understand it's full meaning and potential to guide us to “the good life”.<sup>7</sup> Living well but not better (than others), now a central element of Bolivia's national development plan,<sup>8</sup> outlines the virtues the new Bolivia should have - respect, equality between all, solidarity, harmony, fairness, etc. - and concludes: “where the search for living well predominates”. Albó's review of the Aymara semantic origins of “Suma Qamaña” parallels the degrowth movement's debate over the terms “decroissance” vs “degrowth” as to their adequacy in describing the new paradigm we seek.

Ecuadorian economist Pablo Davalos<sup>9</sup> provides a brief survey of the evolution of dependency, Marxist, world system and neo-liberal classical economics to show how we have arrived at a state of economic autism. He concludes that “Of the alternative concepts that have been proposed, the one that presents more options within its theoretical and epistemological framework to replace the old notions of development and economic growth, is Sumak Kawsay, good living.”

Bolivian historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui notes that, what a western linear perception of history condemns as a “turning back of the clock”, is viewed in the Andes as the redemption of the future, a past that can yet turn the tables.<sup>10</sup> Analysing the history of indigenous rebellions and struggles over the paternalistic yet protective colonial Leyes de Indias, as well as conflicts with the traditional left earlier this

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<sup>5</sup> The current controversy over an [International Energy Agency cover-up of peak oil](#) is a timely reminder of this. Even convincing sympathetic colleagues in the progressive “development” discourse is proving difficult based on [one response](#) to a January 2010 London UK public meeting.

<sup>7</sup> Xavier Albó: “[To Live Well = To Coexist Well](#)”, CIPCA [Notas 217](#), 10 February 2008

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of External Affairs of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, “[Manual de construcción del Vivir Bien](#)” pp.202

<sup>9</sup> Pablo Davalos: [Reflections on Sumak Kawsay \(good living\) and theories of development](#) ALAI, 5 August 2008

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, NACLA December 1991

century, Cusicanqui shows how indigenous autonomy is the starting point for building a new egalitarian, multi-ethnic nation. She asks: "In a complex, multi-ethnic 'nation' composed of diverse societies, who should constitute the umbrella authority that would link its many segments?" and speculates on whether the coming Pachacuti will lead to catastrophe or renovation.

Ecuadorian ex-legislator Monica Chuji<sup>11</sup> contrasts the trillions of dollars allocated last year to save the world banking system to the "mere" \$100 billion that would be needed to meet the UN's millenium development goals to overcome world-wide poverty, to highlight the distance between the speeches and the realities of power. She notes how the discourse on globalization has been constructed in a way which has narrowed the horizon of human possibilities to the coordination of markets and economic agents and points to Sumak Kawsay as the alternative to progress, development, modernity - a notion that wants to recover the harmonious relation between human beings and their surroundings, between humanity and its fellows.

Ediciones MASAS provides us with a Marxist [Trotskyite?] critique of indigenous post-modernism in Bolivia's ruling party, the MAS (Movement toward Socialism).<sup>12</sup> MASAS claims that post-modern proponents downplay capitalist exploitation as the central configuration of society and pose "an infinite number of identities with no socio-economic structure" over the working class and other "standard" Marxist class identities, thus weakening the class struggle (and challenging left-wing leadership of that struggle).

The Chavez and ALBA proposal for a Fifth International<sup>13</sup> has been presented as an effort to bring together a wider spectrum of traditional left political parties and social movements, including indigenous movements. Miguel D'Escoto, former Sandinista Foreign Minister and President of the UN General Assembly in 2008-2009, and Brazilian liberation theologian Leonard Boff, appear to support this call, thus relating it to their own proposal for a Universal Declaration on the Common Good of the Earth and Humanity<sup>14</sup> following the UN General Assembly's acceptance of Bolivia's resolution on the declaration of April 22 as International Mother Earth Day.<sup>15</sup>

The Zapatista "model" has had successes and difficulties. The creation of "autonomous" zones of power in Chiapas, with parallel institutions of governance are said to have brought significant political transformation, but some say they have not yet created a viable model of economic autonomy for poor peasants.<sup>16</sup> Others cite civil - military tensions in the Juntas of Good Governance as reducing local autonomy.<sup>17</sup> Some feel that internal political organization has taken priority over social and economic improvements and weakened earlier efforts to reform the broader Mexican state and guarantee indigenous rights of self-determination.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Zapatista carcoles are models of governance which include many elements implicit in the degrowth paradigm and research on these experiences is sorely needed.

It is difficult however, to find evaluations of the Zapatista's impact on health, agriculture, education and nutrition in Chiapas fifteen years after their January 1994 rebellion. Bolivia's 200 page guide to Vivir Bien

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11 Monica Chuji G.: "[Modernity, development, interculturality and Sumak Kawsay, or Living Well but not Better](#)", Presentation to the International forum on Interculturality & Development, Uribia, Colombia, 23 May 2009

12 Ediciones MASAS: "[El Postmodernismo Indigenista del MAS: Una crítica marxista](#)", October 2009

13 <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/4946>

14 <http://servicioskoinonia.org/logos/articulo.php?num=118e>

15 <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10823.doc.htm>

16 See for example the report of an April 2009 conference "[Fifteen Years After the Zapatistas](#)"

17 <http://www.counterpunch.org/ross07312006.html>

18 [The Zapatistas Break Their Silence](#), January 2003

contains little more than exhortations as to the urgency of action.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the Vivir Bien “model” is not unlike the degrowth “model”. Much has been written about the need to downshift in the face of the economic and environmental crises, and even about how to change relations of production from capitalist modes to collectivism, reciprocity and complementarity, or how to measure gross domestic happiness or define genuine progress indicators.

Little however has been offered to-date on what and how to produce, or what a new dynamic equilibrium would look like. Without more concrete examples and basic research or macro-economic models, it remains a laudable and even logical goal, but with still inadequate road maps on how to get there.<sup>20</sup>

Recent New Economics Foundation books on “Growth Isn't Possible” and “The Great Transition” are laudable western beginnings to this task.<sup>21</sup> Serge Latouche points briefly to a starting place in his recommendations to reduce or eliminate negative externalities of growth such as excessive transport, obsolescence, advertising, energy conservation, drugs, disposable gadgets, his 8 Rs, etc.<sup>22</sup> But the degrowth movement, as well as the proponents of Vivir Bien, still have much work to do to show how our new paradigm would work.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://alainet.org/active/34032&lang=es>

<sup>20</sup> See [Degrowth: Is it useful or feasible?](#) a provocative blog review of a January 2010 [public degrowth meeting](#) in London

<sup>21</sup> NEF, “[The Great Transition](#)” and “[Growth Isn't Possible](#)”

<sup>22</sup> Journal of Cleaner Production, April 2010, “[Growth, Recession or Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity?](#)”

## Appendix A

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In Latin America, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, a new perspective on energy, culture and “development” is coming alive, even in the form of a proposal for a UN Charter of Rights for Mother Earth, led by indigenous peoples.

Xavier Albó: "To Live Well = To Coexist Well", CIPCA Notas 217, 10 February 2008

Leonardo Boff: "The Rights of Mother Earth", IPS, Rio de Janeiro, 1 March 2010

Bolivian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Living Well as a response to the Global Crisis: A manual for building the good life for our communities in the face of global crisis and probable collapse of western development models.”, pp.202 (Spanish only)

Monica Chuji G.: ““Modernity, development, interculturality and Sumak Kawsay or Living Well but not Better”, Uribia, Colombia, 23 of May 2009

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: “Pachakuti: The historical horizons of internal colonialism”, which NACLA published as “Aymara Past, Aymara Future” NACLA Vol 25 No 3, December 1991

Pablo Davalos: “Reflections on Sumak Kawsay (good living) and theories of development” ALAI, 5 August 2008

François Houtart: "Interview with François Houtart: For a general well being of humanity", Sally Burch, ALAI, February 2010.

Ediciones MASAS: "El Postmodernismo Indigenista del MAS: Una crítica marxista", October 2009

"The Indigenous Postmodernism of Bolivia's MAS: A Marxist Critique"

Mignolo, Walter: "The Communal and the Decolonial", Turbulence, No. 5, December 2009& "Indigenous De-Colonial Movement in Latin America" Wikipedia

See the bibliography at [http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/degrowth/draft\\_degrowth\\_bibliography.html](http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/degrowth/draft_degrowth_bibliography.html) for links to these references

## Appendix B

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The energy/entropy history of the planet and Homo Sapiens' impact on it are the subject of a number of new and not so new western studies and reviews:

Frederick Soddy, "Cartesian Economics: The Bearing of Physical Science upon State Stewardship", 1921

Ester Boserup: "The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressure" 1965

Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen: "The Entropy Law and the Economic Process" 1971

Meadows, Randers and Behren: "The Limits to Growth" 1972

Herman Daly, "Steady-State Economics" 1977

Jeremy Rifkin: "Entropy: A New World View" 1980

François Partant: "L'économie-monde en question", Genève - 1984

Jared Diamond: "Guns, Germs & Steel: The Fates of Human Societies" 1997

Serge Latouche: "In the Wake of the Affluent Society: An Exploration of Post-Development", Zed Books, London, 1993

Lester Brown: "Plan B: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress & a Civilization in Trouble" 2003

James Lovelock: "The Revenge of Gaia" 2006

Thomas Homer-Dixon: "The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity & the Renewal of Civilization" 2007

Alan Weisman: "The World Without Us" 2007

Herman Daly: "A Steady State Economy" 2008

Peter Victor: "Managing without Growth: Slower by Design, Not Disaster" 2008

See the bibliography at [http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/degrowth/draft\\_degrowth\\_bibliography.html](http://www.web.ca/~bthomson/degrowth/draft_degrowth_bibliography.html) for links to these references



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