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## Editorial: Buen Vivir: a new toolbox for an alternative to neo-liberal dominance?

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Interest in the cosmovisions of the Andean indigenous peoples, which are collectively referred to as *buen vivir*, has given origin in recent years to a lively debate on their implications in terms of social, political and economic models. These debates have generated arguments in the context of the so-called 'turn to left' of Latino American politics and have contributed to building up an understanding of society that is opposed to the neo-liberal mainstream. The cornerstones of this perspective are the processes through which (ethno-linguistic) communities seek their full recognition and where the rights of 'mother earth' (*pacha mama*) can be put at the basis of a renewed approach to natural resources management and exploitation: all this is part of a reconfiguration of political spaces, implying new opportunities for social groups that had long been marginalised. Based on a heated critique of the neo-liberal global order and mainstream development paradigms, *buen vivir* has thus become a powerful call for social movements in search of alternatives to current mainstream approaches, as well as the basis for processes of constitutionalisation and institutionalisation, namely in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia, and has been further translated into attempts to create a new 'plurinational' state model. Concrete policies have also been inspired by the same principles and have substantiated in a sort of 'buen vivir-based' state and development. The space between the cultural roots of the different forms of indigenous cosmovisions (in which many different Andean indigenous peoples can be recognised) deserves to be understood and questioned: how are the ideological foundations of the political programme based on (or recalling) *buen vivir* actually based on their claimed roots? To what extent can this translation be seen as a sort of 'betrayal' of those roots? To what extent have the concrete policies that claim that origin been able to retain their principles (community, rights of 'mother earth', harmonic coexistence of all living beings in nature)?

The context in which the debate on *buen vivir* has flourished has been undergoing rapid changes over the last two years. Recent elections in Argentina and Venezuela have

marked a turning point for some of the governments which had been at the forefront of the search for an alternative to neo-liberal models; in some other countries, such as Ecuador, recent developments seem to show increased tensions with the social alliance that had been instrumental in the constitutional experiments where *buen vivir* was incorporated in the national setup. However, interest in this debate should, in our view, still be kept alive. Interest in *buen vivir* does not arise as interest in a 'model' that is supposed to be made available for export tout court in other areas of the planet. Both mainstream and heterodox approaches are challenged by a fast-changing world, and they all need to undergo continuous scrutiny of their ability to explain social facts and show viable perspectives for action. Exploring different ways of looking at things and counterchecking the ways alternative principles have been translated into practice is part of this effort. Looking for alternative perspectives helps to not take for granted predictions of outcomes (and prescriptions for action) done on the basis of apparently unquestionable theories and views. In this, *buen vivir* still offers (and will offer in the future) a wide range of suggestions that go well beyond short term developments and retain their value in terms of targets for analysis and in showing the possibility of setting different priorities in values, different ways of pursuing them and different ways of looking at the world.

From this perspective, *buen vivir* does not represent a ready-to-use toolbox that can be adopted to counter neo-liberal domination. In a world where it is sometimes assumed that an all encompassing theory can be used to explain social facts with the same effectiveness anywhere in the world, it is healthy to discover that different societies can set their priorities in a different manner and that, while some constraints are transversally present throughout the planet (as is rather obvious in today's globalised environment), policy planning can be targeted towards different objectives. The principles of *buen vivir* escape from an overtight identification with a specific political project and deriving from them a consistent ideological view does not seem possible. These principles demonstrate the possibility of alternative views on critical aspects of associated life and on the relation between that and nature, far removed from an organic form of theory or ideology. This openness, and to some extent fuzziness, is what probably appeals to the interest of scholars, policy makers and social movements who have made of *buen vivir* in some cases a sort of 'alternative buzzword' or a 'buzzword for an alternative'. This is precisely why the effort of looking at the different ideas, experiences and praxis that are related to the principles of *buen vivir* is worthwhile and deserve to be pursued.

This special issue is structured in four chapters. Monni and Pallottino focus on analysing to what extent *buen vivir* ('good life'), Latin America's new concept for collective well-being, can be considered as a way forward beyond current paradigms related to economic growth, development, ideology and state building or just a new version of political discourse. Silvia Bagni's contribution looks at how the debate on alternative and sustainable development introduced by the concept of *buen vivir* is beginning to produce discussions in the juridical field, and namely in the area of constitutional comparative studies. Ecuador and Bolivia have constitutionalised this concept since the constitutional reforms of 2008 and 2009; a view that takes into account examples from other countries suggests the possibility of reading them as the germinal phase of a new form of state, the caring state. Santiago García Álvarez analyses the environmental policies implemented in Ecuador in the period from 2007 to 2013. Gaia Calligaris and Roberto Trevini Bellini focus their attention on the Yasuní case study which illustrates an attempt to make *buen vivir* a basis for concrete policies. Ecuadorian

civil society decided not to exploit oil in the Yasuní National Park, thus aiming to preserve the Amazon's biodiversity and ancestral cultures, reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and respecting indigenous peoples' rights.

All the papers in this special issue come from a special session on 'Buen Vivir: exploring alternatives to go beyond the crisis' organised within the Research Area N (Human Development and Institutions) at the 25th Annual EAEPE Conference held at Université Paris Nord (Paris 13) from 7 to 9 November 2013. Special thanks to EAEPE for hosting our meeting and giving us the opportunity to develop this work.