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**Buen Vivir**: Praise, instrumentalization, and reproductive pathways of good living in Ecuador

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**ABSTRACT**
In this article, we trace the avatars of the official concept of Buen Vivir (Good Living), and its understanding and translation as Sumak Kausay in the new Constitution of Ecuador, where it was converted from a subaltern concept that emerged in the 1990s to the country’s trademark. Our main hypothesis is that although Buen Vivir may be described as a social phenomenon in some specific social contexts (such as among Amazonian Sarayaku indigenous communities), it mostly represents an invented tradition. As a subordinate hypothesis, we argue that Buen Vivir, which originally appeared at the margins of the State and political power, later became an empty signifier, allowing for its instrumentalization and co-optation by the Citizens’ Revolution and generating an opening for future prospects in the way of operationalization and internationalization that converged with efforts to promote alternative measures and notions of development to the GDP.

**KEYWORDS**
Buen Vivir; alternative development; Citizens’ Revolution; invented tradition; empty signifier; Ecuador

**Introduction**
In this article, we trace the avatars of the official term *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), and its understanding and translation as *Sumak Kausay* in the new Constitution of Ecuador, where it was converted from a subaltern concept that emerged in 1990s to the country’s trademark under the presidency of Rafel Correa and the government-sponsored Citizens’ Revolution. In June 2013, the *Secretaría Nacional del Buen Vivir* (National Secretariat for Good Living)\(^1\) was created specifically to manage its promotion. Our main hypothesis is that, although *Buen Vivir* may be described as a social phenomenon in some specific social contexts (such as the Amazonian Sarayaku indigenous communities) (Cubilllo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán 2015, 3), it mostly represents an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1983). Following Hobsbawm (1983), an “Invented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices … which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ that needs not to be precisely in terms of time or content (1–2). Moreover, ‘the use of ancient materials to
construct invented traditions … is accumulated in the past of any society, and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available’ (9), thereafter ‘all invented traditions … use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion’ (12).

As a subordinate hypothesis, we argue that Buen Vivir, which originally appeared at the margins of the State and political power (Radcliffe 2012, 245) as a ‘simbolic insurgency’ (Ortiz-T 2005, 33), later became an ‘empty signifier’ (Lacau 2005; Lacau 2006), allowing for its instrumentalization and co-optation by the Citizens’ Revolution. Following Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freud, which states that fullness is unachievable, we suggest that Buen Vivir has been replaced by ‘partial objects’ that embody its ‘retrospective illusion’ or ‘impossible totality’ (Lacau 2006, 651). These partial objects are the ‘empty signifiers’. An empty signifier is a ‘pure name that does not belong to the conceptual order’ or, more precisely, ‘a figural term that is catachrestical [rhetorical] because it names and, thus, gives discursive presence to an essential void within the signifying structure’ (Lacau 2006, 653).

Empty signifiers act as ‘objects of political identification’ through a ‘constitutive exclusion’, which totalizes ‘a system of differences’ (Lacau 2006, 652, 656). Specifically, the ‘social production of empty signifiers’ is a ‘hegemonic operation’ that ‘arises from the need to name an object which is both impossible and necessary’ (Lacau 2005, 72, 98), and whose purpose is to construct ‘the people as a collective actor’ starting off a ‘contingent aggregation of heterogeneous elements’ (Lacau 2006, 664, 667).

From this pluralist theoretical framework, we adopt a methodology based on the critical revision of the emerging – and unceasing – literature on Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay (Table 1). Both terms, rarely used until 2007, became well known after they appeared in the new Ecuadorean Constitution in 2008 (preamble, title II, second chapter entitled ‘Rights of Good Living’, title IV, ‘Development Regime’, and title V ‘Good Living Regime’), reaching a peak in 2011 and again in 2014, after a short decline.

Through examination of the substantial number of publications on the topic, we can distinguish three moments of Buen Vivir, which will be used to organize this essay. The first moment (analyzed in section one) describes the phase in which it appeared in the title of four texts (Santi (2003 2014); UIAW (Universidad Intercultural Amawtay Wasi) 2004; Vacacela 2007; Viteri 2003) and received significant praise. Subsequently, during the constitutional debate (2006–2008), the term Buen Vivir and its common sense
translation into Sumak Kawsay spread widely and resulted in a hybrid of the three meanings that were then attributed to it: (i) the pluralist (the utopian Buen Vivir of the ecologist movement or post-developmental stream); (ii) the particularist (the Sumak Kawsay of the indigenous movement or pachamamista/cultural stream); (iii) and the universalist (the official Buen Vivir of the socialist government, or state-centric/ecomarxist stream) (Le Quang and Vercoutère 2013, 19–48; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2014; Cubillo-Guevara, Hidalgo-Capitán, and Domínguez 2014, 32–37; Vanhulst 2015).

The second moment (section two) accounts for Buen Vivir’s instrumentalization and co-optation by the government, expressed with particular clarity in the second National Development Plan/National Plan for Good Living (2013–17). Both processes (instrumentalization and co-optation) were strengthened by the decision to suspend the moratorium on oil extraction in the Yasuni National Park in 2013, which was accompanied by an outpouring of critique from epistemic, political economy, and feminist perspectives.

The third moment (section three) analyzes the three evolutionary pathways followed by Buen Vivir over time: (i) the historization of the concept for academic purposes (genealogical strategy); (ii) its operationalization for public policies (official strategy of Buen Vivir’s measurement in the GDP-and-beyond style); and (iii) its internationalization, through two forked strategies, namely a utopian one (in dialogue with other alternative views) and a governmental one (through the use of the emerging concept, once operationalized, as a country trademark).

In the last section, we conclude by suggesting that, due to its vagueness, the constitutional meaning of Buen Vivir (and its translation as Sumak Kawsay) has failed to become a feasible alternative to the concept of development. Nevertheless, it has been pretty successful in challenging and inspiring many Westerners to reconsider their unsustainable and consumptionist lifestyle, as well as their understanding of quality of life and happiness.

The moment of praise, dazzle, and hybridization

The hypothesis that Buen Vivir is an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1983) appears in the emerging literature on the concept. For some anthropologists, Buen Vivir represents a strategy for political mobilization that seeks legitimacy through an imagined continuity with a fictional mythical past (Bretón 2013, 87; Sánchez-Parga 2011, 37; Viola 2011, 259; Viola 2014, 64). This argument rests on the fact that the phrase doesn’t appear in anthropological literature before 2000. Nevertheless, a recent inquiry into the origins of the term carried out by Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán (2015, 3) found a mention of Buen Vivir in a book by Descola written in 1986 on the Achuar people (jivaroan). Specifically, Hidalgo-Capitán, Arias, and Ávila (2014, 35), as well as Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán (2015, 11), suggest that Sumak Kawsay was ‘enacted’ as a concept by the leaders of Sarayaku community (Amazonian kichwas) in the 1990s. In particular, indigenous intellectual Carlos Viteri Gualinga (Viteri 2005; Viteri 2003) was responsible for the dissemination of the term that had previously appeared as ground for indigenous organization claims since de 1940s (Iñuca in this issue).

The conception of Buen Vivir as social practice of the good life lacks consistency for at least three reasons, which reconfirm the invented tradition hypothesis. First, Achuar’s Buen or Bien Vivir (Shiir Waras) in Descola’s writings (Descola 1986), far from referring to
an idyllic society, describes the individual equilibrium between ‘the external environment constantly traversed by very serious social tensions . . . a society where relationship with the other is mainly mediated by war’ and ‘domestic peace’, reached through the polygamic prescription of marrying women who are sisters to one another, as ‘the best means of obtaining peace at home; the affection between the co-wives prevents them to compete for the favors of their husband’ (415). Descola argues that Buen Vivir ‘is a kind of normative horizon of domestic life, an optimal goal that is neither desired nor reached by all Achuars’, because ‘in certain houses . . . wives are regularly beaten by their husbands, sometimes to death’, and ‘female suicide is not exceptional and is a weapon of dramatic protest against repeated abuse’ (416). Of course, this praxis is inconsistent with the ‘harmonious life’ (Viteri 1993, 148) and with the three harmonies – with oneself, with others, and with/in nature – that Acosta (2008, 38, 47; 2010c, 100), Coraggio (2011, 330), Correa and Falconi (2012, 267), Santi ([2003] 2014, 3–4), and Unceta (2013, 204–205; 2014a, 131–133; 2014b, 72–75); characterize as the foundation of constitutional Buen Vivir, unless we accept that harmony with others and with/in nature can be achieved through positive malthusian checks (female suicide and war to maintain sustainable population density).

Buen Vivir is often linked to the Kichwa terms Ally Kausay and Sumak Kawsay in reference to Sarayakuruna’s (people of Sarayaku) struggles to defend their territory against the oil company Texaco in the Amazonian region. Although the terms were popularized by local intellectual Carlos Viteri (1993),6 they are at the same time a product of an intense process of his own acculturation in the international cooperation industry. This is the second reason why the term of Buen Vivir as social practice fails, which also confirms the invented tradition argument. Indeed, Viteri is the key figure in the creation of the myth of Buen Vivir (and its later instrumentalization by the government). Born in Sarayaku community in 1962, Viteri is the self-appointed translator of Buen Vivir as Sumak Kawsay and its equivalence of a ‘harmonious life’ (Viteri 1993, 148), defined as ‘living in abundance, wisdom and dignity’.7 But, like any other intellectual, Viteri’s knowledge is situated: He worked as a consultant at UNICEF (1997–2001), ILDIS-Friedrich Ebert Foundation8 (1997–2002) and was the first indigenous person appointed as an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) official in Washington (2002–09).9 Lastly, Viteri was the director of ECORAE, the Amazonic Institute of Ecodevelopment (2009–2013), and in 2013 became deputy of PAIS Alliance (Patria Altiav y Soberana, Proud and Sovereign Homeland, the political party-movement of Citizens’ Revolution).10 As President of the Biodiversity Commission at the National Assembly, Viteri led the Assembly debate to suspend the moratorium on oil drilling at Yasuni National Park in 2014.11

Finally, there is a third institutional factor that confirms the invented tradition argument. While among the Sarayaku Kichwas, the communitarian aspect of Sumak Kawsay is highly emphasized (Viteri [2002] 2005, 26), Descola (1986, 440) describes the Achuar as ‘deeply horrified by the idea of collective life in village communities’.12 An example is the absence of communal work, or minga, common in the Andes, in their organizational structure.13 Also, while it can be affirmed that the Achuar have a very intimate relationship with nature – different from the Western conception – that doesn’t mean their practices of natural resources management are sustainable. On the contrary, now that population increase is no longer constrained by continuous war and high infant mortality, the demand for scarce resources is causing an accelerated deterioration of the forest around community establishments. Therefore, the notion is a collage of traditions
that includes what fits within the utopia (the three harmonies) and leaves aside those that don’t (patriarchal structures and natural resource depredation). Alberto Acosta himself, one of the main representatives of an utopian *Buen Vivir*, admits that, at the beginning of the discussion about possible alternatives to neoliberalism at ILDIS, ‘We began to investigate whether these alternatives to neoliberalism could be found in the indigenous world’ (interview with Acosta, in Fernández, Pardo, and Salamanca 2014, 103). The Otavalo communities were ruled out, given their propensity toward capitalism, and Acosta and his collaborators turned their attention to the Kichwas of the Pastaza Amazonic Province.14

Extracted from its origins in subaltern thought (Iñuca in this issue; Radcliffe 2012, 245), in the defense of territory and culture laid out by Carlos Viteri (1993; [2002] 2005; 2003), and in the proposals of the indigenous movement (Leonardo Viteri 2005; Santi (2003 2014), *Buen Vivir* evolved to become the motto of the Alianza PAIS program in the constitutional debate, and finally emerged as one of the pillars of the new Constitution of Montecristi in 2008. The common understanding of *Buen Vivir* (and its official translation as *Sumak Kawasy*) in the Constitution, could be defined as follows: *the effective enjoyment of the rights of individuals, communities, peoples and nationalities, and the exercise of their responsibilities within a framework of peaceful coexistence—*which includes interculturalism, respect for diversities, and respect for personal and collective dignity—*and harmonious coexistence with nature that promotes democracy and puts the common good and public interest over private interests.* After the Constitution’s approval and further academic celebration, a new phase began, that of hybridization among the three approaches or meanings of the term (Le Quang and Vercoutère 2013, 19–48; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2014; Vanhulst 2015).

The first approach was pluralist (the utopian *Buen Vivir* of the ecologist movement or post-developmental stream), whose best known defenders are Acosta and Gudynas (see below for comments on their works). The second consisted of a particularist view (the *Sumak Kawsay* of the indigenous movement or *pachamamista/cultural stream*), represented by the organic intellectual of Pachakutik Mouvement, Dávalos (2008b) 2014, Dávalos (2008b) 2014, Dávalos (2011 2014), a mestizo economist and Associate Professor of PUCE (Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador) in Quito. The third approach was universalist (the official *Buen Vivir* of the socialist government or state-centric/eco-Marxist stream), widely espoused by organic intellectual and government official Ramírez (2008; 2010a; 2010b; 2012a; 2012b) and by the Minister of Culture and Heritage Guillaume Long (2015) in an acrimonious public debate with Immanuel Wallerstein (2015). These three understandings share consensus about the multidimensional harmonies contained in *Buen Vivir*: with oneself, with others, and with/in nature. They also share the theoretical possibility of a convergence, which is very unlikely in real terms due to the strong opposition of utopian and indigenous streams to the government of Rafael Correa. Finally, they also agree on the principles of sustainability (ecologists), identity (*pachamamistas*), and equity (pro-governmental) (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2015). Nevertheless, each approach maintains its own specificities with regards to its organizing principles, the definition of means/ends, and the conception of individual/social life: The utopian approach prioritizes the ecological dimension; the indigenous approach, the identity dimension; and the official approach, the social dimension (Table 2).
The constitutional originality and the proliferation of local publications on *Buen Vivir*, which reached a peak in 2011 – both terms were included into the *Glossary of Social Sciences and Indigenous Peoples* (see Cid 2010, 239–245) – were the cause of the astonishing success of the concept among European and North American academics, the orphans of inspiring utopias.¹⁵ Who could reject Good Living when it is defined as a world in which ‘everyone goes together, no one is left behind, there is enough for everyone, and no one lacks anything’?¹⁶

### The moment of instrumentalization, co-optation, and criticism

*Buen Vivir* unites the overlapping types of invented tradition described by Hobsbawm (1983): ‘those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities; those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority; and those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior’. All these overlapping functions indicate that the concept – undetermined, vague, and elusive – was a perfect candidate for the instrumentalization and co-optation strategy of the government, which was the opposite of the very ethos of *Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay* (Acosta 2011a, 52; Beling and Vanhulst 2014, 35; Peters 2014, 147; Vanhulst and Beling 2014, 60; Waldmüller 2014, 24; Walsh 2010, 20). Indeed, the first definitions of *Buen Vivir* by indigenous peoples and ecologists met the description of Laclau’s ‘empty signifiers’ as an ideological artifact for social mobilization (our subordinated hypothesis).

From this perspective, *Buen Vivir* is an empty signifier that unifies and gives coherence to diverse social movements’ demands confronting neoliberalism (the term for constitutive exclusion). Because of this, it is not surprising that a term, which functioned as an invented tradition to support the political mobilization of a heterogeneous coalition of groups, was later co-opted by the government and given the function of an empty signifier to link the opposition to neoliberal policies (Caria and Domínguez 2014, 148, 154; Manosalvas 2014, 102, 115, 117; Viola 2014, 68). In that role, the conceptual weakness of *Buen Vivir*, so persistently pointed out by the literature,¹⁷ facilitated the government’s task. For the chief of Sarayaku, *Sumak Kawsay* joins ‘harmony with oneself and with nature’, and serves a conception of hard sustainability for the ‘life of fullness’ (Santi (2003 2014), 79–80, 87), or a ‘limpid and abundant life’, in the words of Leonardo Viteri (*2005), leader of Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). These thoughts can constantly be found in indigenous thinking on...
Sumak Kawsay and such self-referential and metaphorical expressions reflect the claim for territorial autonomy and cultural respect (Altmann 2013, 285; Altmann 2014a, 11).

Before these incantations, the definition of Buen Vivir allowed it to serve as an umbrella for very heterogeneous demands, thus serving to effectively mobilize disparate political forces. Thus, in the 1940s, the term of ali causai [sic], translated as ‘good life’, was used to articulate indigenous claims by CONACNIE (Ecuadorean National Coordination Council for Indigenous Peoples) and other indigenous organizations connected to the Communist Party of Ecuador (Inuca in this issue). Later, in 2003, for Development Council of Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (CODENPE)\(^\text{19}\) Buen Vivir corresponded to ‘personal, family, communitarian an collective wellbeing’ (cited in Maldonado 2006, 14), a definition coherent with pénker pujustin or Good Living as ‘well-being’ or ‘good life’ (in the sense ‘everything is secured’) to Achuar and Shuar peoples (Mader 1999, 166, 169, 185). The Alianza PAIS electoral program of 2006 promoted ‘Buen vivir in harmony with nature, under a unrestricted respect of human rights’ (cited in Altmann 2013, 209; Altmann 2014a, 88), and by 2007, Buen Vivir became equivalent to ‘well-being’ in CONAIE’s proposal for the new Constitution (Altmann 2013, 294).

This represents a succession of paradoxes, taking into account that Viteri (2002 2005), 26) had already highlighted the mistake of identifying Sumak Kauwsay with welfare, and that it was probably Alberto Acosta, very influential in Alianza PAIS at the time, who introduced Buen Vivir in the constitutional debate and proposed its official translation to Sumak Kawsay. He knew and cited Viteri’s orginal work – circulated in 2000 (Viteri (2002 2005)) – as early as 2001 (Acosta 2001, 321). After Acosta resigned as the Assembly President in 2008, he undertook the task of the construction and reconstruction of an utopian Buen Vivir, understood from Viteri’s point of view, as critical of the welfarist approach to development. For Acosta, the concept ‘cannot be simplistically associated with “Western welfare”’ (Acosta 2008, 34); rather it is ‘an opportunity to collectively build a new development regime’ (38), and ‘a proposal edge underlining the concept of development as a post-developmental option to be built’ (Acosta 2010a, 6; see also; Acosta 2008, 43; Acosta 2010b; Acosta 2011b, 193; Acosta 2011c, 25–26; Gudynas and Acosta 2011a, 80; Gudynas and Acosta 2011b, 72–73; and similarly; Unceta 2014b, 71–72).

However, while Buen Vivir was still unfolding as an utopian alternative to capitalism with increasingly blurred profiles (Acosta 2015, 309–310), the Citizens’ Revolution was already reshaping the concept from its initial ‘love and be loved’ dream of biosocialism (Ramírez 2010a, 61; Ramírez 2010b, 134–135). This became particularly evident in 2013 with the government’s suspension of the moratorium on oil exploitation at Yasuní National Park, which had hitherto been emblematic of Buen Vivir and the possibility for a convergence of the three approaches to the concept.

By that time, the potential contestatory power of t Buen Vivir had been neutralized through its incorporation into processes of ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ (Bretón 2013, 77), which started the moment that the term reemerged as an alternative to sustainable development promoted by most international cooperation agencies. Indeed, Ecuador was the pilot for World Bank ethno-development programs. The most important of such programs was PRODEPINE (Development Project for the Ingenous and Black Peoples of Ecuador), which was implemented between 1998 and 2004 and was the main instrument for the epistemological, organizational, and leadership co-optation of social movements (Ortiz-T 2005, 39, 41–48; Bretón 2013, 90). In fact, by 2005, the canonical work of
Viteri (2002-2005) was already included in a publication on indigenous peoples and education sponsored by GTZ (Altmann 2013, 290), a technical development cooperation agency that played an early role in supporting intercultural education projects, including the promotion of sumac causai [sic] during the 1980s (Iñuca in these issue). It was in this context that leaders of the government-sponsored ‘Citizens’ Revolution’ proposed a moratorium on the incorporation of the word into the discussion of Buen Vivir and issued a National Development Plan (Plan Nacional para Buen Vivir 2009–2013), in which the word ‘development’ (in the sense of economic and social model or paradigm) appears three times more than ‘Buen Vivir’. Important to note is that the plan was formulated by the National Secretariat for Planning and Development (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo, or SENPLADES) (Domínguez and Cariá 2014, 42–43), which partly explains why usage of notions of development (such as growth and structural change or activity) triple, once again, mentions of ‘Buen Vivir’ in the renewed Plan (Plan Nacional para Buen Vivir 2013–2017). In his own words, Viteri (2002-2005), 26) acknowledged that the concept was ‘a category in permanent construction’, thus facilitating its reformulation by Ramírez (2010a, 61; 2010b, 139); who, as minister of SENPLADES, also noted that it was a complex concept ‘historically constructed, and therefore is in constant resignification’. While serving as Minister of Culture and Heritage in 2015, Guillaume Long provided one of the most recent official definitions of Buen Vivir as ‘a cornerstone of our policies reflecting our capacity to think in terms of both non-orthodox indicators of development … at the same time, meeting the basic material necessities of human beings (the reduction of poverty, inequality, and the prevision of service for the guaranteeing of rights)’.

The inconsistencies between utopian and official versions of the concept, together with its epistemic fragilities, have generated two main fronts of criticism. The first is partially based on epistemological critiques of the elusive and ideological character of the concept (Álvarez 2011, 109–112; Sánchez-Parga 2011) and incoherence between the rhetoric and public policies of the Citizens’ Revolution. A main focus of this literature is the inherent contradiction in the government between its environmentalist, pachamamista discourse, on the one hand, and its expansion of neoextractivist policies20 on the other, which makes Ecuador one of the ‘most paradoxical scenarios of the Commodities Consensus in Latin America’ (Svampa 2013, 38). The second front stems from feminist criticism of official and indigenous conceptions of Buen Vivir, which argues that official concept reflects a liberal approach to equal opportunity that is blind to gender bias. In particular, they suggest that indigenous Sumak Kawsay is a mystification of community organization, which is based on a patriarchal tradition of sexual divisions of labor and that denies nonheterosexual identities and processes of individuation (Vega 2014b, 357, 359–360; Pérez Prieto and Domínguez 2015, 46–47).

Thus, after 2013 the crisis of legitimacy generated by criticism subjected Buen Vivir to a dialectical process. On the one hand, the internal discourse shifted toward a statist or Rostowian orientation: Buen Vivir as utopian, performative horizon to be achieved through the replacement of sustainable development for structural change (Caria and Domínguez 2014, 152, 158, 160; Cori and Monni 2014, 3; Domínguez and Caria 2014a, 33, Domínguez and Caria 2014b, 19; Manosalvas 2014, 108; Viola 2014, 68). On the other hand, the operationalization of the concept in public policies was increasingly technocratic. Buen Vivir in this sense can be understood as a mechanism of Foucauldian...
governmentality’, ‘pastoral power’, ‘power dispositive’ or ‘political dispositive of government’ (Radcliffe 2012, 243, 248; Bretón 2013, 73; Viola 2014; Cortez 2014, 342).

The moment of reproductive pathways

This conceptual evolution leads us to the final moment in the trajectory of the concept. As its utopian horizon changed over time, Buen Vivir evolved across three different reproductive pathways: historization, operationalization, and internationalization. Historization refers to the genealogical approach of academics to reconstruct the history of the concept, in some cases also examining its lost foundations, which was initiated by Cortez (2010) and later pursued by a plethora of scholars, including Cortez (2014) himself (see also Altmann 2013; Altmann 2014a; Altmann 2014b; Hidalgo-Capitán, Arias, and Ávila 2014; Bretón 2013; Fernández Dávila and Huertas 2013; Hidalgo-Capitán, Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán 2015; Marras 2013; Ramón 2014). This body of literature rectifies the rhetorical excesses of some early works, which are a consequence of understanding the concept as an invented tradition. The point here is not to disregard the oral traditions of ancient cultures, a counter argument of some defenders of the postmodern Buen Vivir (Gudynas 2013, 186–189). Rather, it is an exhortation to retrieve a cultural heritage (Yachay Tinkuy, or wisdom, thoughts, and dialogue of the senses) that might otherwise be irreparably lost, and that also has deep roots in the political mobilization and claims of indigenous peoples since at least the 1940s (Iñuca in this issues).

The second pathway is operationalization. Although such strategy has been criticized as a form of ‘domesticating’ Buen Vivir (Gudynas 2013, 195), it can also be considered an attempt to address other critiques that stem from the challenge of implementing Buen Vivir-oriented public policies (De La Cuadra 2015, 3) and a consistent monitoring and evaluation mechanism (Arias 2011, 55; Guevara 2014; Friant and Longmore 2015; Yánez 2013). For Gudynas (2013), being operationalized like human development, ‘would be the worst that could happen to Buen Vivir … ending its days as a new buen vivir development index calculated by UNDP’. It is worth mentioning that UNDP supported the ‘Conceptual Framework of Social Indicators for Indigenous Peoples’ designed by Carlos Viteri for the Integrated Social Indicators System of Ecuador (SIISE) from 2000–2001, also publishing the book Democracia, Pobreza y exclusión social en Ecuador, which includes a chapter by Viteri (2000). Following a 2004 seminar in New York on the collection and disaggregation of data on indigenous peoples, sponsored by the initiative of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (where Viteri participated as an expert representative of the IDB), UNDP initiated a research project to measure and then generalize data (from indigenous people to all populations of the country) in Buen Vivir terms (Cabrero 2015). Furthermore, it is important to remember that the operationalization process (measurement of Buen Vivir) is the ‘cornerstone’ of Ecuadorian public policy (Long 2015).

Attempts to measure Buen Vivir can largely be divided into two approaches: a subjective approach (Alominos 2012; Guardiola 2011; Guardiola and García Quero 2014; Phélan and Guillén 2012); and an objective one, which can be based on existing indicators (Friant and Longmore 2015), or focused on the building of new ones, basically, although not exclusively, objective (Arroyo 2014; León 2015; Phélan
and Guillén 2011; Ramírez 2012a; Ramírez 2012b). The UNDP adopted the objective in its latest regional report of human development (PNUD 2016, 115–116). Overall, these proposals differ with regards to their outreach, dimensional approach, and the indicators considered, which highlights a need for a greater public deliberation on this subject.

It could be argued that the third reproductive pathway of Buen Vivir, internationalization, was an attempt to catalyze a deeper public discussion on the issues the concept evokes. However, it was actually a strategy to build political alliances. From this perspective, internationalization represents a twofold pathway of political struggle, which places the utopian approach of Buen Vivir in confrontation with the official version. On the one hand, internationalization can be seen as the result of efforts establish dialogue with other systemic alternatives to capitalist development: ranging from Zapatista to Mapuche movements in Latin America; from the South African Ubuntu to Indian ecological Swaraj; or from European sustainable degrowth movements to global ecologist feminism (Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2015; Unceta 2014b). On the other hand, official approaches to Buen Vivir have undeniably been successful in international arenas with statements such as Por un nuevo Orden Mundial para Vivir Bien (A New World Order for Good Living), which came out of the 50th anniversary of the G77 (currently conformed by 133 countries) in June 2014 in Santa Cruz Bolivia, and with the October 2015 Declaración de La Conferencia Mundial de los Pueblos sobre Cambio Climático y Defensa de La Vida (Official Statement of the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and Life Defence). In both documents, a rhetoric of rights for Pachamama (Mother Earth) is integrated with the right to development: in the first text, Buen Vivir (referred to as Vivir Bien in Bolivia) is described as a form of ‘comprehensive development which aims at meeting the material, cultural, and spiritual needs of societies, within the context of Harmony with Nature’ (Group of 77 2014, §31); in the second text, Buen Vivir is defined as ‘complementarity between the rights of peoples and the rights of Mother Earth, which implies building a relationship of equilibrium among human beings and nature to re-establish harmony with Mother Earth’ (CMPCC 2015, 2).

This process of official internationalization generated dialogue among research programs that focused on operationalizing Buen Vivir and other efforts to promote alternative definitions of development beyond GDP (Gross National Happiness, OECD’s Better Life, The Economist Intelligence Unit’s quality-of-life Index, UNDP’s Multidimensional Progress, FOESSA Index of Social Welfare in Spain). From this point of view, some authors argue that Buen Vivir ‘can offer fertile insights that help to build a renewed understanding of the theory and practice of development’, including the public policy of international development cooperation (Monni and Pallottino 2015, 50, 55). This, together with the use of Buen Vivir and its official motto – ‘Discover it: It’s inside of you’ – as Ecuador’s trademark to promote a national culture that values quality over quantity, speak to the success of this last strategy. Furthermore, similar concepts are now being applied in some European countries, such as Spain and Germany, and in several UN System documents (PNUD (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo) 2016, 115–116, 165–169; UNESCO 2015, 31–32).
Conclusions

Sutton (1989), who defined development as ‘a major ideology of our times’, spoke of its capacity to ‘inspire and frustrate’ aspirations for a better life, particularly through the ‘vagueness, imprecision, utopian exaggeration, and the many contradictions that useful ideologies commonly show’ (35). Official versions of Buen Vivir, born as an invented tradition with the vocation to be an alternative to development, ended up sharing with development much of the characteristics described by Sutton.

In this article, we have traced the avatars of the official term of Buen Vivir and its understanding and translation as Sumak Kausay in the new Constitution of Ecuador. The expansion of Buen Vivir from its emergence in subaltern thought in the 1990s to a trademark of the Correa government-sponsored Citizens’ Revolution in Ecuador confirms our main and subordinated research hypothesis. Regarding our main hypothesis, Buen Vivir and its official equivalent Sumak Kawsay turned out to be an invented tradition: available studies on indigenous peoples show no evidence of Buen Vivir as social practice of communities; the term itself is historically associated with the work of development practitioners; and the fundamentals of Buen Vivir cannot be assumed to represent universally shared values among Andean and Amazonian nationalities.

As a subordinate hypothesis, we have argued that Buen Vivir, which originally appeared at the margins of the State and political power, later became an empty signifier, allowing for its instrumentalization and co-optation by the Citizens’ Revolution and opening up future prospects in the way of operationalization and internationalization that converged with efforts to promote alternative measurements and notions of development to the GDP. While Rafael Correa’s electoral triumph permitted the inclusion of Buen Vivir in the Constitution and in Ecuador’s public policies, its social construction as an empty signifier also facilitated its instrumentalization and co-optation by the government, independently of the potential convergence among the three rival conceptions in the battle on the meanings of Buen Vivir: a pluralist position (based on utopian visions that draw from the ecologist or post-developmental movements), a particularist position (largely represented by the Sumak Kawsay of the indigenous movement or pachamamista/cultural lineage), and the universalist approach (espoused by the socialist governments of Correa and Morales as an official version of Buen Vivir based on state-centric or eco-Marxist approaches). If during the early stages of the Citizens’ Revolution (2007–2009), it seemed feasible for those three positions to converge, with the renewal of the National Development Plan for 2013–2017 and the suspension of the moratorium on oil drilling at Yasuní National Park in 2014, any possible agreement between them was broken.

From that moment on, alternative definitions of Buen Vivir proliferated in different reproductive pathways. If with the historization pathway, the concept achieved considerable academic acknowledgement, with operationalization it gained a high level of legitimacy, and became successful as a means to question unsustainable lifestyles of Western consumption as well as predominant understandings of quality of life and happiness. However, this came at the cost of losing its character as an alternative to development to become just another buzzword of alternative development (sustainable, human, participatory, or inclusive), thus converting it into mainstream thinking.
This reconstruction of the Buen Vivir’s conceptual and political uses allows a better understanding of its role as a guiding principle of public policy in Ecuador in the last decade, a period during which the country has undergone deep institutional and economic transformations. From this point of view, Buen Vivir accomplished its mission at home, whether or not it has fulfilled the social expectations of its diverse proponents. This explains why the term is currently disappearing from governmental and social movement discourses. Conversely, the term is increasingly used externally; it became one of the pillars of the new agenda for international cooperation, and has become the new empty signifier complementing and/or replacing sustainable development. Thus, Buen Vivir has just begun its mission abroad and has a long life moving forward.

Notes

1. Executive Decree no. 30 sets out the functions of the new Secretaría, which include to ‘promote the construction of a way of ethical, responsible, sustainable, and conscious living, working with all State institutions and the different actors in society, so that Good Living becomes citizen practice for the life pattern at the State, national and international level;’ see http://www.secretariabuenvivir.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Decreto30_low-2.pdf.

2. The Citizens’ Revolution was officially a project to gradually achieve a socialist society in Ecuador in the twenty-first century, under the democratic leadership of President Rafael Correa beginning in 2008 (see Errejón and Guijarro 2015, 4-11; Sousa 2014). However, some authors describe it to the contrary as a project of capitalist modernization through the domestication of civil society under Correa’s authoritarian regime (Acosta 2014a; Acosta 2014b; Acosta y Cajas 2015; Muñoz Jaramillo 2014; Ortiz Lemos 2014, 2015; Ospina et al. 2015; Unda 2013).

3. While Laclau avoids the classical use of the term ideology, his explanation resembles a mix between Marx’s false consciousness and Gramsci’s offensive weapon.


5. Our results partially coincide with the revision of the literature by Vanhulst (2015, 40) from the Google Scholar database extracted with Publish or Perish software.

6. This community was very active against the new exploration and exploitation of oil fields as a result of the tremendous spills during the previous years caused by Texaco in the rain forest region. These struggles, lead by Alfredo Viteri (2004), Carlos Viteri’s brother, were the breeding ground from which Sumak Kawsay theorizing reemerged, from its very spiritual origins as the defense of a ‘land without evil:’ without multinational incursions (‘a model of death’) on the territory; considered ‘not a resource to be exploited’ but a ‘space of life’ and ‘source of knowledges and wisdom, culture, identity, traditions, and entitlements’. See also Fontaine (2003), Lara (2009), Ortiz-T (2012, 335-344), Santi (2008), Tassi (personal communication, 5 November 2015, Quito), Yanza (2003).

7. See his official webpage at: https://carlosviterigualinga.wordpress.com/biografia/.

8. ILDIS is the Latin American Institute of Social Research, a local counterpart of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (the foundation of the German Social Democratic Party), which is financed regularly by the GTZ (now GIZ), the German Agency of Technical Cooperation.

9. Viteri was Descola’s pupil at Salesian Politechnic University and finished his BA dissertation as a prerequisite to be appointed as an IDB official. Importantly, Viteri was paired with Italian anthropologist Giovanna Tassi, who was the editor of the 1992 book Náufragos del mar verde: La resistencia de los Huaorani a una integración impuesta (Castaway of the green sea: the resistance of the Huaorani to an imposed integration). On his role, Tassi stated, ‘I
provide Carlos the aid for systematizing [Buen Vivir] inside the western concepts ... following books with lectures that question the concept of western development' (personal communication, 5 November 2015, Quito).


11. For the rise and fall of the Yasuní initiative, see Bravo (2005), Caria and Domínguez (2014, 140, 150-151), García (2014), and Vallejo et al. (2015, 181).

12. Similarly, Tassi (1992) argues that community organization is an ‘organizational concept assimilated by Kichwa and Shuar’, but not by the Huaraoni.

13. This very Andean concept has also been idealized. Martínez (2014a, De La Cuadra (2014) for the rise and fall of the Yasuní initiative, see Bravo (2005), Caria and Domínguez (2014, 140, 150-151), García (2014), and Vallejo et al. (2015, 181).

14. ‘And there we had some very interesting workshops, where old people, adults, some elderly indigenous communities had been conveying how life was in communities before the arrival of mestizos and capitalism; this is an area of permanent expansion, conquest, and colonization. They still had some memories that were collected in a few pages document written by Carlos Viteri Gualinga. He worked on this issue on behalf of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP) ... Sarayaku worked out a Life Plan, which is fundamental. So from there comes another proposal, one could say that it is another vigorous policy proposal for discussion of Buen Vivir, in addition to the official view of the indigenous movement, i.e. CONAIE. In it [the Life Plan], indigenous experiences are partly synthesized, and it is also a mixture of political and academic discussion, which would later nourish directly Alianza PAIS discussion’ (Fernández, Pardo, and Salamanca 2014, 103). Alberto Acosta, a white economist trained in Germany and with a long-standing and very closed relation to the German International Cooperation System (specifically FES-ILDIS), is an Associate Professor of Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Quito.

15. In Portugal (Sousa 2010a; Sousa 2010b), Spain (Hernández 2009; Moreno 2011; Sempere et al. 2009; Tortosa 2009; 2011; Unceta 2011), France (d’Arcier-Flores 2010), Belgium (Hourtart 2010; Hourtart 2010; Hourtart 2011a; Hourtart 2011b), Italy (De Marzo 2009; 2010), Germany (Helfrich 2011; Willer 2011), Austria (Hörtner 2010; 2011), and Canada (Thomson 2011).

16. Such is the motto of Buen Vivir reflected in the promotional video of the Secretaria Nacional del Buen Vivir, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnA2mVqlgfl& feature=youtu.be.


19. CODENPE is an organization that gathers the main social movements of Ecuador: FENOCIN (National Confederation of Indigenous and Afro-ecuadorian Peasants Organizations, Indigenous and Black Organizations), FEINE (Council of People and Evangelic Indigenous Organizations of Ecuador) and Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE); see: http://www.codenpe.gob.ec/.

21. The most representative author in this regard is Larrea (2014, 237-238), who argues that Buen Vivir is ‘a mobilizing idea, that is, a dream, a utopia that allows joint wills toward a new horizon of meaning’, or, in Eduardo Galeano’s style, ‘a long-term horizon showing which way to walk’.

22. These comments contrast to Acosta considerations about the necessity to build Buen Vivir’s own indicators (Acosta 2011d, 44-45): ‘These new indicators will provide a great opportunity not only to denounce the limitations and fallacies of the dominant systems of indicators … while discussing methodologies to calculate differently and with renewed contents other indexes of development, it will be advance in the design of new tools to try and measure how far or how close we are to building sustainable and democratic societies’.


25. In spite of its title alluding to social movements, the presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela participated in the CMPCC (Conferencia Mundial de Pueblos Sobre Cambio Climático y Defensa de la Vida) (2015); this undoubtedly influenced the final statement, where, among the Peoples’ actions to strengthen the Vivir Bien ways, ‘alternative to capitalism’ can be read: ‘to build and encourage the egalitarian harmonious productive economic model for Vivir Bien, with the horizon toward eco-socialism, based on a harmonious relationship between man and nature, that guarantees a rational, optimal, and sustainable exploitation of natural resources respectful of nature’s processes and cycles’ (CMPCC (Conferencia Mundial de Pueblos Sobre Cambio Climático y Defensa de la Vida) 2015, 12). The UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon and more than 4,800 delegates of 54 countries participated in this second Summit; see: http://www.miradasalsur.com.ar/2015/10/13/latinoamerica/declaracion-de-la-conferencia-mundial-de-los-pueblos-sobre-cambio-climatico-y-defensa-de-la-vida/.

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